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## **The Irish Memory Studies Research Network Lectures**

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## **Emilie Pine**

### **Commemorating Abuse: Gender Politics and Making Space**

This lecture is about the role of Irish culture in the recognition and commemoration of institutional abuse. Rather than try to describe the whole field, I will go into some depth on three recent works that address this history. And through discussion of these three, I'd like to pose some questions about both the past and the present, why the abuse went so long unchallenged, and what implications that has for commemorating it.

Buildings form the central focus of the three theatre and art works I'll address in detail: Brokentaklers' *The Blue Boy*, Anu Productions' *Laundry*, and Evelyn Glynn's *Breaking the Rule of Silence*, all of which were first presented in the autumn of 2011. These works address specific, named places and invoke their particular histories: Artane Industrial School, the Sean McDermott Street Sisters of Charity Laundry, and the Limerick Good Shepherd Laundry.

Moreover, by exploring what is inside these buildings, the works also necessarily explore – or ask the audience to explore – what is outside the buildings too. So, by focussing on buildings, rather than following individual histories, these works illuminate multiple narratives as they intersect.

There are two forms of narrative that culture can follow: either a familiarizing or a de-familiarizing narrative. These three works create a liminal commemorative space, negotiated between these two types of narrative. They are familiarizing because they are based in and around known locations, but they are ultimately de-familiarizing in the ways they make spectators look anew.

#### *The Blue Boy*

Brokentaklers are a devised theatre company led by Gary Keegan and Feidlim Cannon. Keegan says 'theatre is quite an elitist closed-off art form that involves a clear separation between the artist and the audience, and we always had a problem with that.' Brokentaklers' work consistently challenges that boundary.

*The Blue Boy* is a demanding work. The theatre audience is actively engaged and required to participate in the interpretation and construction of meaning. The performance consists of two main parts, with the stage divided into two – a small forestage is divided by a transparent screen from the rest of the main stage. At the opening of the show Gary Keegan directly addresses the audience, describing how as a child he had played with his grandfather's yardstick, and that he only learned in recent years that his grandfather used it in his job as an undertaker. One of his grandfather's duties was to visit Artane Industrial School to measure any child who died, in order to make a coffin for him. Gary pauses his story at this

point and the production plays a recording of Gary's mother describing how upset this used to make her father. He 'was used to seeing adult bodies' but the children's bodies, and the bruises he saw on them, upset him. After this story, Gary walks to one side, and a projection onto the screen shows images from the 1932 Eucharistic Congress, while various recordings plays including two stories from people who had been in the schools, one male, one female. At this point the screen, opaque until now, is lit from behind so that it becomes transparent and we see seven actors in choreographed dances performing ritualised and repetitive tasks. They wear masks and in one case the mask is worn on the back of the head, so that the actor's body seems to move out of joint, against expectations.

These opening few minutes reveal the approach Brokentalkers take to this material. Gary's direct address to the audience begins with funny stories of his childhood, and the audience's laughter establishes trust immediately. This is essential because of what is about to unfold as the performance moves from innocent childhood games to the less innocent representation of the systematic abuse of children.

The wrongness of the institutionalisation of children is embodied on stage as the seven masked dancers move in repetitive, erratic and shuddering movements. No actual violence towards the 'children' is shown, nor are any religious figures represented. Instead, the dance moves imply the internalisation of violence.

Gary's narrative continues by telling the story of the ghost of the Blue Boy, seen by the locals of Artane, and assumed to be a child who had died at the school. Gary explains the varied local stories about this ghostly figure, locating Artane in a context of communal memory. The ghostly blue boy, I would argue, was a mode for the community to articulate its suspicions of the abuse occurring within the institution. By rendering it as a supernatural story, the community was able to know and not know, to articulate and yet remain silent on the issue.

As Gary says, 'Growing up in that neighbourhood we got a sense from our parents and grandparents that bad things had happened to the children in that place. As a child I didn't know the details but we knew that bad things had happened on the other side of that big grey wall.'<sup>1</sup> Gary's reference to the 'big grey wall' is signified onstage with the screen which becomes transparent when light is cast on the 'children' inside the wall. The audience's attentive *spectatorship* is the kind of scrutiny that needed to be directed behind the actual institutional walls, but wasn't.

At the end of the show, Gary reveals – again using autobiography as a way in to the history – that he was adopted at a few months' old. His mother, most likely, went through the 'care' system herself, in a mother and baby home, or a laundry.

And these are the walls which the next two projects go behind – of Magdalene laundries in Dublin and Limerick. *Laundry* by Anu Productions, and *Breaking the Rule of Silence* by Evelyn Glynn, like *The Blue Boy*, are intimately connected to a sense of place.

Both works, in fact, are site specific, occupying former laundry spaces in order to transform them from sites of forgetting into sites of memory.

### *Laundry*

*Laundry* is a theatrical experience devised by Anu Productions, and is one of a three part series of theatre works exploring the forgotten history of Dublin's north inner city. *Laundry* happens within the former convent and laundry of the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity on Sean McDermott Street in Dublin 1. The audience members encounter the piece one by one, first knocking at the door of the convent and then walking through the rooms inside, guided by a series of actors playing the women of the laundry.

Audience members encounter several scenes within, including a woman reciting names of those who had been incarcerated in the Laundry, a woman taking a cold bath, a woman mourning her lost baby, a woman who sought refuge in the Laundry at her husband's direction, and a woman frantically trying to escape. In one room, the spectator witnesses several Magdalene women beating themselves and sitting in contorted positions, reciting the statutes of human rights which the laundries operated in contravention of. In several of these scenes the spectator is requested to participate directly. In the bathing scene, the spectator helps the young woman to unwrap herself from the bandages which tie down her breasts, and then after bathing helps once more to re-wrap her. In the final scene within the building, a woman asks for help to escape. The spectator must accept a bundle of laundry herself and hurry through the building, following the woman as she makes a desperate bid to join the outside world. Once out of the building, the spectator is bundled into a waiting taxi, and the taxi driver asks 'Do you know her?' The test is, of course, as to whether you say yes or no.

The taxi drives the spectator round the local streets, and the driver delivers a narrative about the history of the local area, the Monto, and the history of the laundry within the community. The piece ends as the spectator is dropped off at a modern day launderette, asked to iron or fold sheets, while listening to an archived radio programme about the laundry system.

*Laundry* is, thus, a deeply local project as well as a national one. It gives access to many different experiences of the laundry. The experience of moving through the building, though it can never transport a spectator back to the original experience, does go some way towards making the history of the women within materially real. Moreover, this is not a restored building; rather the decay is visible in the peeling paint, the disused rooms and the sense of emptiness. This decay is suggestive of the time that has passed since the laundry's closure and, like the action of moving through the building, it helps to make visible the dual processes of history and performance making.<sup>2</sup>

Most of the performance is silent, adding to the oppressiveness of the experience, mimicking the rule of silence which was the case in the laundry, and alluding to the historic silencing of these women. As this production preceded the 2013

McAleese Report on State involvement in the Magdalene Laundries it also referenced the continuing official silence regarding them.

In *Laundry*, the blurring of the lines between performance, performer, and spectator makes visible the process of constructing a theatrical piece. And this visibility is important. In presenting a history of suffering a theatrical language is needed (or, more generally, a language of representation) that does not gloss over the acts of reconstruction integral to memory and history. *Laundry*, like *The Blue Boy*, is both invented and real, it is the role of the spectator to navigate between these two positions. And because it is a performance, it is always shifting and changing, analogous to the shifting patterns of memory.

### *Breaking the Rule of Silence*

Part of the fascination of *Laundry* is in going behind the walls, seeing into buildings which were closed off from public gaze, and navigating spaces which were, previously, highly controlled (though there is still an aspect of control, of course, in how spectators are guided from one room to another). Going behind the walls is also key in the interactive art project *Breaking the Rule of Silence* by Evelyn Glynn.

Glynn was a student in the Limerick School of Art and Design when she conceived the project that became *Breaking the Rule of Silence*; because the Limerick School of Art and Design, up until 1994, was the Convent and Laundry of the Good Shepherd order. Since the site was renovated for its new purpose, Glynn wanted to capture its history before all traces disappeared, as she says 'with every structural change that was taking place it seemed that the history of the building as a Magdalene laundry was being put further out of reach.'

*Breaking the Rule of Silence* – which is now accessible as a website ([www.magdalenelaundrylimerick.com](http://www.magdalenelaundrylimerick.com)) – is a combination of photographic and oral history. Glynn's photographs display the signs and traces of the convent, from the worn nameplate on the door, to the disused spaces of the attics and former laundry. The site also displays archival photographs of the grounds and women and children of the laundry and convent school. These photographs are accompanied by 16 oral histories, interviews which Glynn carried out with people who had connections with the convent and laundry, including women who had been put in the laundry and their relatives, the operator of the modern laundry, and a woman who ran a local Girl Guide group. As with the two theatre pieces, the project demands an active spectator, to interpret the images and to read the histories.

What is striking about these narratives is just how varied they are. The three women who had been incarcerated in the laundry – Brigid Diskin, Mary O'Rourke, and Caitriona Hayes (who was in the Laundry for 53 years) – reflect on how cruel the life and work in the laundry was and how much they were excluded from normal society. John Kennedy, manager of the laundry after it was modernised in 1976, recounts in detail the hard manual labour and the daily life of the women. His account is both harmonious, representing the laundry as one

big family, and disharmonious, acknowledging the trauma for the women of being shunned by the society. Derek McInerney, a great-nephew of one of the women, gives one of the most intimate accounts, of his very fond memories of his great-aunt Julia Kennedy, who spent her life in the Laundry from the age of fifteen until her death. He would visit Julia with his mother and grandmother (Julia's sister), and Julia in turn would be occasionally allowed to come to visit them.

The women were able, as the survivors attest, to create moments of happiness for themselves within the Laundry, but the experience of being institutionalised was, universally, an experience of suffering. Almost all of the accounts reference both physical and emotional trauma to the women. Two of the accounts also attest to the harshness of the life for the nuns, who worked alongside the women. What emerges from these narratives and the photographs of the institutional buildings is the way in which the story of this place was both known and unknown. Derek McInerney knew his aunt Julia Kennedy relatively well. His memories of her are kind and understanding and he gives a real sense of her as a person, distinct from the institution. Yet at points of his narrative he also admits to not knowing or reflecting on what happened, as when he says, 'See I have no idea what went on, on a daily basis bar the few slices of time that we had with her. Actually now that I recollect it, all I recall is a void actually.'

#### *Bridging the Void: Social Agnosia*

That term 'void' mirrors, seemingly, the general absence of knowledge, or understanding, of what happened behind the walls of these institutions; and I want to adopt Guy Beiner's term, 'social agnosia' to consider this kind of void.<sup>3</sup> Agnosia, a medical term, is a cognitive inability to recognise or understand the significance of what is being seen, a result of damage to the brain (often after a stroke). It is sometimes called 'mind-blindness'. The resulting problem of perception is not an inability to see, but to interpret what is being seen.

Because these institutions were seen. They were seen by the communities that abutted their walls, by the families who sent members to them, by the courts who sentenced children and women to them, by the government inspectors who visited them. However, as the Ryan Report states:

Until very late in the day, the contribution made by the Oireachtas or the news media towards supervision, or even education of the public, in regard to the Schools, appears to have been negligible. Pressure groups were rare and usually ineffective. The general public was often uninformed and usually uninterested. All these pools of unknowing reinforced each other.<sup>4</sup>

It was a failure of spectatorship.

It is helpful to reflect on how this agnosia took root in Ireland because that is part of remembering – not merely to apologise for the abuse, but to understand the system that resulted in that abuse.

And unless commemoration practices reflect this understanding, they risk misreading the history to the point that it becomes another form of agnosia.

*Ritual Sacrifice: Class and Gender*

The purpose and effect of the institutional system was to remove individuals who were designated as 'distinct' from the rest of the community according to religious and social classification.<sup>5</sup> In the early years of the State, a religious and moral discourse of crisis maintained that without these acts of sacrifice, the national community would be engulfed by chaos. Removing allegedly discordant individuals – an extreme form of social censorship – promoted a perception of social cohesion in the newly cleansed community (as well as ensuring good behaviour from that community). Social agnosia, or forgetting, is the byproduct of, and necessary companion to, that system of removal.<sup>6</sup> And this was particularly powerful in Ireland due to its postcolonial status as a newly constructed community, intensely aware of its vulnerability as a small Catholic nation.<sup>7</sup>

The signs of distinction which justified removal to institutions were declared to be moral. In the case of laundries, this manifested as the stigmatising of women's bodies as sexually transgressive.

Many girls, however, who were incarcerated in laundries, were transferred from industrial schools and orphanages. Laundries were thus a dumping ground for women on more than solely sexual grounds (indeed, in some cases it was financial motive which led families to commit daughters and sisters to these institutions). These acts of transfer between institutions not only reveal a general contempt for and control of women, but also the ways in which these institutions worked together as a system. And the defining factor here is a combination of gender and class.

Indeed, one can argue that class was the primary determinant of distinction. Children committed to industrial schools were guilty, in the main, of poverty. Instead of financially supporting impoverished families in order to enable children to remain within the family, the family was read as 'negligent' and children were removed (until the introduction of child benefit when numbers began to significantly decrease (the closure of the industrial schools in the 1960s owes as much to improved levels of child benefit as it does to Vatican II)).<sup>8</sup> There were, of course, other distinctions, such as special needs children. But in the main, it was about class.<sup>9</sup>

If we consider class as a central factor in the history of these various institutions it is possible to build a more unified history. This is not to collapse the differences between industrial schools and laundries, for example, but to develop a way of seeing this past in collective and holistic terms. The necessity for this seems evident to me by looking at the patterns of existing cultural representations of this history.

Industrial schools are represented in the following works (many of which are autobiographical): *The God Squad* by Paddy Doyle, *Nothing to Say* and *James X* by Mannix Flynn, *Dear Daughter* by Louis Lentin, *Song for a Raggy Boy* trilogy by Patrick Galvin, and the film by Aisling Walsh, *The Butcher Boy* by Pat McCabe, and the film adaptation by Neil Jordan, *No Escape* by Mary Raftery, and, of course, *The Blue Boy*.<sup>10</sup> With the exceptions of *No Escape* and *Dear Daughter* all these titles focus exclusively on boys, and *No Escape* is itself an exception in being about both boys and girls, though in separate institutions. In the media coverage of the Ryan Report, boys tended to figure more largely too – perhaps because of the horror at sexual abuse, which was prevalent in institutions for boys but not in those for girls.

In the main, if we want to consider cultural representations of girls, we need to think in terms of laundries, in *Eclipsed* by Patricia Burke Brogan, *Sinners* by Aisling Walsh, *The Magdalene Sisters* by Peter Mullan, *The Secret Scripture* by Sebastian Barry and both *Laundry* and *Breaking the Rule of Silence*.<sup>11</sup>

Challenging the gendered associations of boys with industrial schools and girls with laundries is difficult within the space of single cultural works. This is evident in *The Blue Boy*, which includes the testimony of a woman who had been committed to a different industrial school, in an attempt by Brokentalkers to include the history of girls within these institutions. But since the show's focus is on Artane, this testimony seems out of place.

The inadvertent result of this pattern of cultural commemoration in memoir, theatre, art and film is that it translates into a gendered mythologization of the past, divided into male history and female history. The outcome of that, I would argue, is that we still think of these institutions in terms of 'bad boys' and 'bad girls'. This shows both class and gender assumptions at work – the criminalisation of working class boys, and the sexualisation of working class girls – overlooking the primary reason for both boys and girls to be committed to industrial schools – the financial inability of the family to provide for them at home.

It is, of course, absolutely necessary to have a commemorative culture which addresses specific narratives and, in the case of this history, specific institutions and groups. However, without a full overview of institutionalisation there is no context against which to read these works back into the larger narrative. The present can thus only partially remember and redress the trauma that resulted from the network of institutions which were operated in Ireland, including orphanages, industrial schools, county homes, mother and baby homes, Magdalene laundries, the Bethany home, institutions for special needs children, and psychiatric hospitals.

What we need to see is a greater public recognition of the system as a system, as a widespread, to use James Smith's term, architecture of containment.<sup>12</sup> This is not to put the weight of commemoration on to culture – the lead must be taken by the State to put in place a framework within which individual commemorations can be read.



Yet within the State's investigation of this history, we again see gender at work. The 2009 Ryan Report into institutional child abuse is a huge achievement but its glaring absence is the laundries. In turn, the McAleese Report into State involvement in the laundries is extremely limited.

This most recent report not only excludes the Protestant Bethany home (a result of reading this history solely through the lens of religion) but also does not address the issue of children adopted through this system. This is the void which still requires investigation. Again, what is being produced is a partial view, meaning that Irish society continues to see its institutional history only obliquely.

### *Conclusion*

Commemoration should not be about perennially enshrining a sense of victimhood or trauma. Rather it is a vital mode of acknowledging and making public a history of victimisation and exclusion. The relevance of commemoration to the present is shown by Anu Productions' cycle of theatre pieces, including *Laundry*, set in north inner city Dublin, which highlights not only the injustices due to poverty in the past, but the continuing poverty and social alienation of the area in the present.

What these three works individually and collectively address is the need for active spectators. These works make visible a once-hidden history, but it is up to the spectator to read these signs and interpret them fully – and to decide how to position themselves in relation to the past. The result is not only an active commemorative community, but renewed social agency through active spectatorship.

The Ghanaian artist El Anatsui says:

Walls are meant – by the people who build them – to either hide something or sequester something or to protect something. In all cases they have to block the view. And I think that when the view is blocked, the tendency is for the human imagination to take over and leap over that thing, and start imagining things at the other side of it ... I felt that really walls, rather than conceal things, were constructs which help reveal things.<sup>13</sup>

This was not true of Irish society. Walls were allowed to 'block the view'.

*The Blue Boy*, *Laundry* and *Breaking the Rule of Silence* are thus valuable for the ways in which they imaginatively explore the space on the other side of those walls, including what had been excluded from Irish cultural memory.

But, ultimately, perhaps they are most valuable, because of the ways in which they make the walls themselves visible. The site specific nature of these works, their emphasis on materiality and enclosure, of knowing and not knowing, on seeing and not seeing, make visible the processes by which we forgot.

**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Gary Keegan, 'Musings in Intermissions', interview with Chris McCormack. Available at <http://musingsinintermissions.blogspot.ie/2011/09/brokentalkers-gary-keegan-and-feidlim.html>.

<sup>1</sup> Brokentalkers, *The Blue Boy*, p.22. Unpublished script, made available to the author by Brokentalkers.

<sup>2</sup> There are similarities here with the *Prisons Memory Archive* project by Cahal McLaughlin. See [www.prisonmemoryarchive.com](http://www.prisonmemoryarchive.com) and Cahal McLaughlin's UCD Scholarcast.

<sup>3</sup> This is a concept discussed by Guy Beiner in his lecture, "On Jews and Hats: Irish Memory and Invisible Asylum Seekers", delivered Trinity College Dublin, 28 January 2013.

<sup>4</sup> As documented in the Ryan Report – failure on behalf of the State to give extensive debate on the issues, or of the media to scrutinise or follow up the occasional reports of abuse leaking out. See *The Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse* (Ryan Report), 2009, Volume IV, Chapter 3 'Society and the Schools', Part 4, 'Independent Monitoring', compiled by Professor David Gwyn Morgan. Available at: <http://www.childabusecommission.ie/rpt/04-03.php>. Also see Judith Herman: 'All the perpetrator asks is that the bystander do nothing. He appeals to the universal desire to see, hear, and speak no evil. The victim, on the contrary, asks the bystander to share the burden of pain. The victim demands action, engagement and remembering.' Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), pp.7-8, quoted in Evelyn Glynn, 'Left Holding the Baby' MA Thesis, (unpublished), Limerick School of Art and Design, available at [www.magdalenelaundrylimerick.com/left\\_holding\\_the\\_baby.pdf](http://www.magdalenelaundrylimerick.com/left_holding_the_baby.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the rationale behind these acts of 'sacrifice', see René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), particularly pp.6-8.

<sup>6</sup> A letter to *The Irish Times* on 11th May 1999, from a former reporter (and subsequently editor) of the *Evening Herald*, Brian Quinn, stated that in the 1950s the writer had: "witnessed one of the worst of the Christian Brothers break into the office of the manager and demand that a court case that mentioned Artane should not be used in the *Evening Herald*. Before the manager could lift a phone, the Manager would push open the editorial door to tell us the manager had instructed that the case be dumped.... Those requests should have alerted journalists to start inquiries into what was happening in Artane. That we did not is a heavy burden."

<sup>7</sup> So the proportion of children in care is highest in the early years of the state – in 1936 19.8% per 1000 children under 14 were in State care, as opposed to 7.2 in 1966 (and 19% in 1946), Ryan Report, Volume IV, Chapter 3.

<sup>8</sup> Disregard for the integrity of working class families is also displayed when children were transferred without any notice being given to their parents, who were unaware their child was being sent to another institution. Many children were also reported to be without known parentage – the Ryan Report comments that this is a huge factor in the insecurity of identity suffered by these children who were treated as orphans, without necessarily being so. See Volume IV, Chapter 3, 3.37.

<sup>9</sup> Numbers for the industrial schools peaked in 1943 – the year before children’s allowance was brought in, enabling families to keep children at home.

<sup>10</sup> <sup>10</sup> *Dear Daughter*, dir. Louis Lentin (Crescendo Concepts for RTÉ, 22 February 1996), Mannix Flynn, *Nothing to Say* (Dublin: Ward River Press, 1983), Paddy Doyle, *The God Squad: A Remarkable True Story* (Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1988), *James X*, Mannix Flynn (Project Arts Centre, Dublin, 2002), Patrick McCabe, *The Butcher Boy* (London: Picador, 1992), Neil Jordan, *The Butcher Boy* (Geffen Pictures, 1997); Patrick Galvin, *The Raggy Boy Trilogy* (Dublin: New Island Books, 2002); Aisling Walsh, *Song for a Raggy Boy* (Fantastic Films, 2003); *No Escape*, compiled by Mary Raftery (Abbey Theatre, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Patricia Burke Brogan, *Eclipsed* (Knockeven: Salmon Publishing, 1994); Aisling Walsh, *Sinners* (BBC Northern Ireland, 2002); Peter Mullan, *The Magdalene Sisters* (Miramax Films, 2003); Sebastian Barry, *The Secret Scripture* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> See James M. Smith, *Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries and the Nation’s Architecture of Containment* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> El Anatsui, quoted in *El Anatsui: Art and Life*, Susan Mullin Vogel (Prestel Verlag: Munich; London: New York, 2012), p.125.