Mobilized sound: Memory, inscription and vision in Irish traditional music

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This paper suggests a few ways in which sound is multiply embedded in histories, localities and figurations of identity. I compare the linguistic and performative contextualization of musical sound to the semiotic effects which ensue when sound and image are juxtaposed. In each case, multiple contexts are brought together, creating sensory chronotopes in which performers and listeners find themselves within complex 'time-spaces'.

Chronotopes

'Time, place and persons' (Agha 2007) are brought together in specific concrete ways during the course of cultural history. Bakhtin borrowed the term *chronotope* ('time-space') from physics in order to describe what he called 'the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature (Bakhtin 1981: 84). In narrative, time and space come together such that 'time becomes, in effect, palpable and visible' (ibid.: 250).

Bakhtin showed that the narrated worlds of literature take particular forms that are transformed in the course of literary history. Chronotopes 'define genre and generic distinctions'; and project stereotypic images of man: 'The chronotope as a formally constitutive category determines to a significant degree the image of man in literature as well. The image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic' (ibid.: 85). Thus, in the words of Asif Agha, a chronotope is 'a semiotic representation of time and place peopled by certain social types':

> Every chronotopic representation has two essential aspects. It links representations of time to those of locale and personhood. And it is experienced within a participation framework: The act of producing or construing a chronotopic representation itself has a chronotopic organization (of time, place and personhood) which may be transformed by that act. (Agha 2007: 321)

Literary chronotopes provide 'frames of reference for subsequent – often ideologically saturated – forms of life'. This is also true of 'any form of entextualized representation' (ibid.: 323). Since every representation, even thought, requires concrete expression, Bakhtin claimed that all signs are chronotopic to some extent:

> ... in order to enter our experience (which is social experience) they must take on the *form of a sign* that is audible and visible for us (a

hieroglyph, a mathematical formula, a verbal or linguistic expression, a sketch, etc.). Without such temporal-spatial expression, even abstract thought is impossible. Consequently, every entry into the sphere of meanings is accomplished only through the gates of the chronotope. (Bakhtin 1981: 258)

Representations are chronotopic because they always juxtapose the world they describe and the world which describes them – the narrated and the narrating worlds exist in particular relationships which are historically and generically specific. What is more, representations *circulate* through social space, over time, so that the relationships between representations are themselves chronotopic as well. We can see this in the concepts of *tradition*, in which claims are made about the relationships between representations (that they in some way belong within an encompassing space-time), and *modernity*, in which different sorts of claims are made about representations (that they in some way belong within *different* space-times).

Agha points out that, as they circulate in the discursive life of a society, chronotopes become models of and for personhood:

> representations of time ... cannot be isolated from representations of locale and personhood (and hence from *aspects* of personhood, such as models of subjectivity and social relations). And their interpersonal relevance derives from the participation frameworks in which they are experienced, and through which they are maintained or transformed. (Agha 2007: 324)

I would like to turn now to the chronotopic aspects of music – the ways that, in music, time becomes, in effect, *audible*. One way to approach this problem is to consider the relationship between sound and image, comparing that found in cinema with the very different sound-image relationship found in traditional singing.

Complex things happen when sound and image combine in cinema. Music becomes the interpretant of the visual; as Eisler and Adorno (2005) argued, music can represent (and thus intervene in) the process of representation itself. These relationships become even more complicated when song is involved, especially Irish-language song or the airs associated with it.

Sound and Image
Can we visually represent musical representation? Alternatively, should film music merely represent, or as Adorno and Eisler argued, can it represent (and thus intervene in) the process of representation itself? Another way of asking these question is: How can we musically represent memory? How can we visually represent musical memory?

Arguably all sensory perception is synæsthetic, in that the senses combine and mutually influence one another; cultural ideologies like our own which tend to separate and value vision over sound nonetheless have been forced to recognize this. As William Beeman observes, in early 'silent' cinema

> the very silence of the motion picture itself was perhaps the most distracting element of all. In an aural world, silent pictures unaccompanied by any sound whatsoever had an eerie quality to them – especially when the scenes depicted action and violence. Thus music was first introduced as a solution to these problems. (Beeman 1973: 8)

Film music had its humble origins in this need for synæsthetic experience. Even newsreels were accompanied by live and often improvising musicians with a repertoire of stock motifs. But *modern* film music, especially in popular films, plays a trick on the viewer: originating in a secondary and subservient role (crowd control), music has become the *interpretant* of the visual, creating continuity, suggesting emotional stances, encoding the hidden inner lives of both cinematic characters and audience.

Western denigrations of the aural are based on a Platonic distinction between *diegesis* (the action of a film's narrative; on-screen activity) and *mimesis* (imitation, representation by means of something similar). Plato may have preferred the mimetic, but for us it's the narrative element that rules, and thus in film, the *moving image* was given primary responsibility for this task. For Christian Metz, diegesis seems to be distinct from the aural dimension per se, being

> the narration itself, but also the fictional space and time dimensions implied in and by the narrative, and ... the characters, the landscapes, the events, and other narrative elements, in so far as they are considered in their denoted aspect. (Metz 1974: 97)

Sound poses analytical problems for film theorists, who try to maintain the distinction between diegesis and mimesis via conceptions of narrative frames as more or less impermeable. Thus, for Percheron, the image is the fundamental vehicle for diegesis, and predominates over sound; sound is either 'off' or 'on' in a film, depending on its relationship to image:

Sound 'on' is emitted from within the frame;

sound 'off' is emitted from outside the frame ... This split depends on the image, and consequently testifies to the image's primacy. It is the position of the sound source in its relation to the image which determines whether sound is 'on' or 'off'. (Percheron 1980: 16)

The combination of sound and image creates very complex relationships, which are nonetheless perceived, for the most part as a simple unity. But as Chion (1994) and Buck-Morss (1994) observe, cinema has taught us to hear as well as see differently, giving us the ability to effectively 'perceive' perception itself. Much of film theory seems to involve the fact that modern film is a multi-channel phenomenon (sound and image), but runs into difficulties if it tries to distinguish between the 'story' a film tells (identified with the image), and the act of telling itself (identified with sound). Following Bakhtin, on the other hand, we can suggest that any sign whatsoever is chronotopic – i.e., represents a relation between the 'off' and the 'on'. Combining sound and image produces a new and complex sign – a chronotope.

The linguist, Roman Jakobson, observed that any ordinary verb does the same thing, dividing utterance into an *event of speaking* and a *narrated event*.

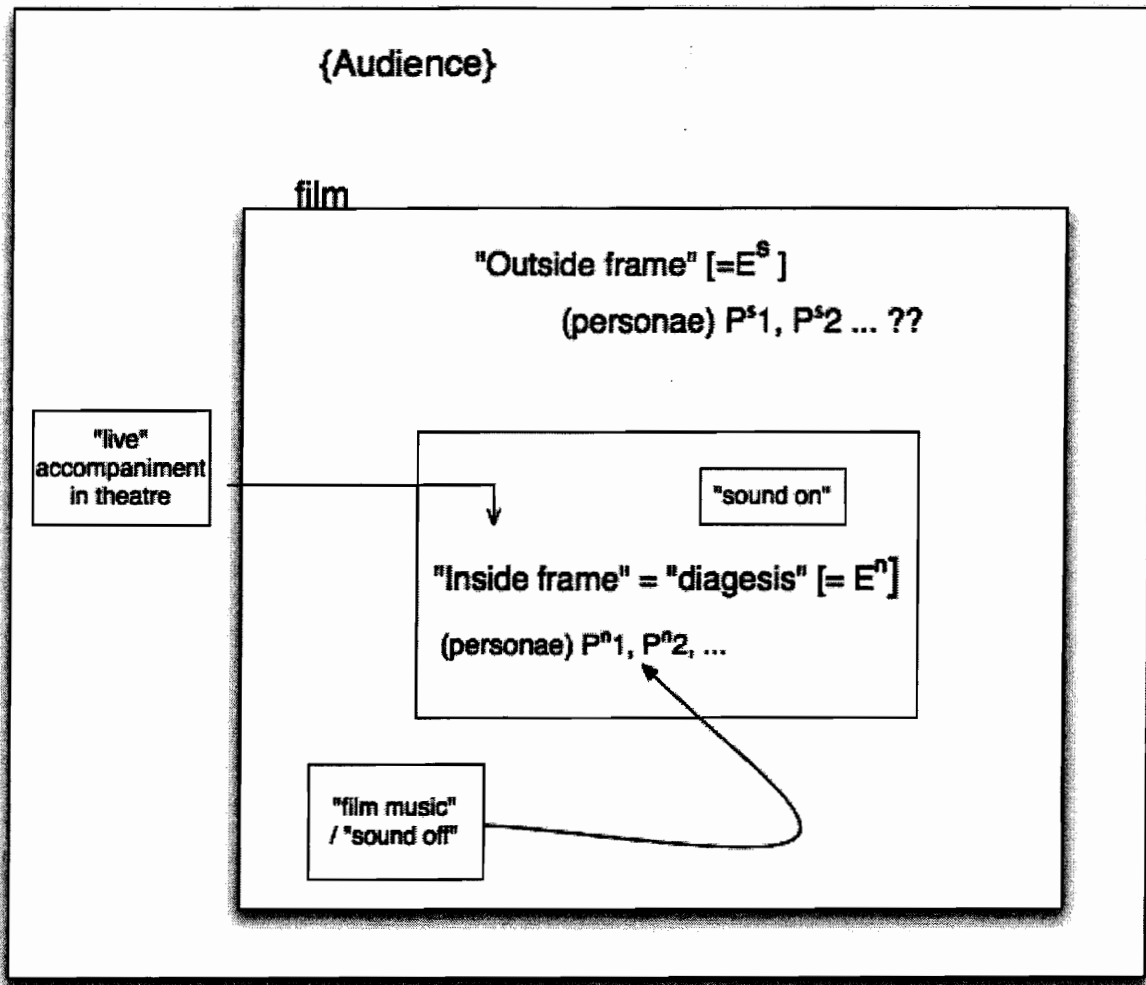> In order to classify the verbal categories two basic distinctions are to be observed:
> 1) speech itself (^{s}) and its topic, the narrated matter (^{n});
> 2) the event itself (E) and any of its participants (P) whether 'performer' or 'undergoer'.
> Consequently four items are to be distinguished: a narrated event (E^n), a speech event (E^s), a participant of the narrated event (P^n), and a participant of the speech event (P^s), whether addresser or addressee. (Jakobson 1971: 133)

In fact, when we speak, things get much more complicated, in the case of quotation, compound tenses and the like.
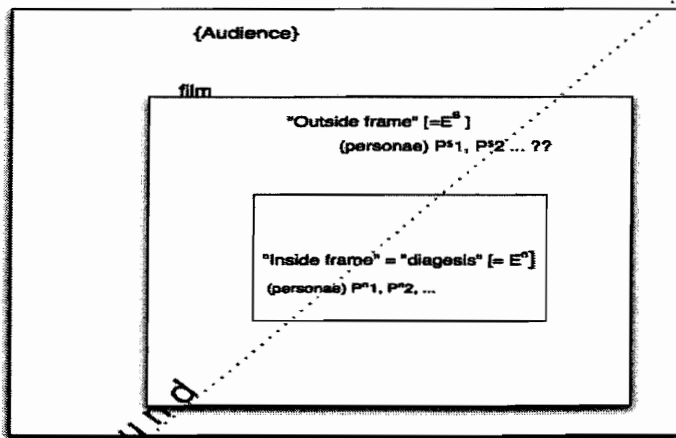
But in the case of *sound*, we trick ourselves – taking advantage of our faith that the immediate has power over the mediated, for us sound represents and interprets the visual, but this gives it the power to insinuate itself as the visual's secret soul.

{Audience}

film

"Outside frame" [=E^S]

(personae) P^{s}1, P^{s}2 ... ??

"live" accompaniment in theatre

"sound on"

"Inside frame" = "diagesis" [= E^n]

(personae) P^{n}1, P^{n}2, ...

"film music" / "sound off"

Music is non-dimensional (Zuckerkandl 1973) and sometimes we grant it the power to be achronic, or pan-temporal, as well. We can see this in performers' attempts to describe their own art, to represent musical meaning.

Sound as "non-dimensional"

But how does *music* mean – especially forms like Irish traditional music, which are rooted in the local, in what Ernst Bloch termed 'the non-synchronous'? For Bloch, 'not all people live in the same Now ... Rather, they carry earlier things with them, things which are intricately involved' (Bloch 1932: 22). In what Ó Laoire (quoting Foley 1991) terms 'traditional referentiality', musical forms like songs, tunes, dances become linked to specific times, places, persons throughout the course of their performance history in a particular place, and carry with them multiple, contingent associations,

> invoking ... a context that is enormously larger and more echoic than the text or work itself, that brings the lifeblood of generations of poems and performances to the individual performance or text. (Foley 1991: 7, quoted in Ó Laoire 2002: 236)

Sometimes participants think of this aspect of music in terms of 'secrets' – multiple, non-explicit references and associations that are quite difficult to explain to the outsider. Irish-language lyric songs in particular are often linked to multiple narrative contexts, as in the medieval and Jacobite topos whereby, in a love song,

a female character may embody Sovereignty, speaking as, or speaking to 'Ireland' or its messianic redemptors. The emotional depth and energy of the Aisling genre derives from this element of contingency – the presence of more than one 'story', a diagesis embodied in a lyric and non-narrative surface. This multiplicity runs through the song tradition, where e.g. a chanson de jeune fille may be locally used to commemorate a sibling lost through emigration and calamity (Ó Laoire 2002).

Singers of Irish-language songs (the so-called 'sean-nós' tradition) sometimes take pains to point out that songs have 'údair' – bases, causes, occasions, authors, purposes – in other words, that they are manifestations of events. This is quite a different view of song than the typical English-language understanding of songs as being fundamentally narratives. The singer Joe Heaney (Seosamh Ó hÉinniú) from Carna, Co. Galway, maintained that songs have stories – but what he meant by this was, not that songs are narratives, but that songs relate to past events (their *údair*), and that knowledge of these events has to be separately transmitted, narrated, or simply guessed at, in order to understand the song (Coleman 1997). This might be due to the fact that Irish-language songs *don't* really 'tell' stories; they are more like dialogues from plays – they represent the voices of characters but don't spend much time *describing* what those characters are doing. Singers and audiences have to find their way back in time to an originating event; this event is usually either an encounter or the poet's solitary reflection upon some such encounter.
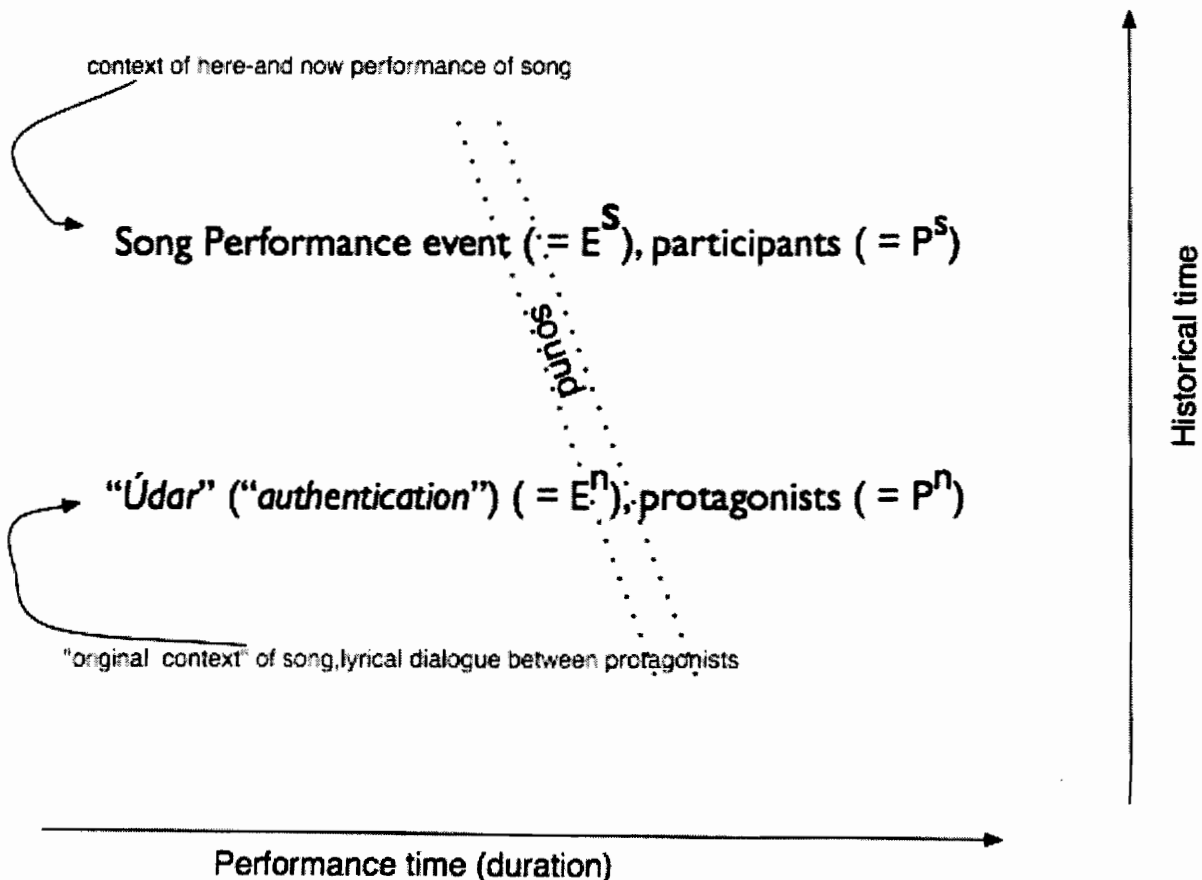
Because of this, singers and audiences may have a uniquely strong sense of being *projected into the scene* that songs represent, in what some people feel is an act of visualization:

> ... you're playing the act, you're working exactly what [he] was doing, you're going through the same thing that he was going through, before the song was ever made ... And that's exactly the picture you must follow when you're singing an old song. Especially if it's a sad one ... you've got to have the picture before you. And always have that picture and then you'll do the song properly then.

> ... they're turning back the clock, to when this time was – and each song tells a story. (Heaney 1978)

In this case does the song represent this 'picture', or does the 'picture' interpret the song? It seems that in singing, the 'picture' functions a bit like the way that sound functions in cinema – as the (less determinate) sign that signifies the emotional burden of the (more determinate) sign.

Another reason to pay so much attention to the 'údar' of a song is that as they circulate socially, songs take on multiple 'údair':

context of here-and now performance of song

Song Performance event (= E^s), participants (= P^s)

sound

"Údar" ("authentication") (= E^n), protagonists (= P^n)

"original context" of song, lyrical dialogue between protagonists

Historical time

Performance time (duration)

One family in particular made use of this atmosphere to remember and publicly acknowledge their grief for the tragedy of a lost brother, who died suddenly in America shortly after leaving Tory in 1915 … He was Pádraig Dixon and his brothers and his sister Gráinne especially, always asked for a particular song … *A Phaidí a Ghrá má d'imigh tú*, [which] mentions a character named Paidí who has gone away and whom the poet, a girl, wishes to come back home safely. A classic *Chanson de Jeune Fille*, it is interesting that it was used as a representation of fraternal love in this case. According to Séamus Ó Dubhgáin, this song was requested by his mother in the wake house on the night he was being waked in Tory, although, as I have said, there was no corpse present. (Ó Laoire 1999)

Notice that *performance history* acts like a set of additional '*údair*' – various memorable occasions when a song was performed, and for whom, and why:

Similar things happen with instrumental music, dance steps, and so on, where music and dance takes on multiple contexts through their performance histories. This level of meaning is intensely local, if not personal, and tends not to get talked about to outsiders. Like *sean-nós* songs, traditional performance forms have 'secret' stories attached to them:

> Music happens inside of you. It moves the things that are there from place to place. It can make them fly. It can bring you the past. It can bring you things that you do not know. It can bring you into the moment that is happening. It can bring you a cure. (O'Grady and Pyke 1997)

Given that traditional forms have localized meanings, how do they translate to the national and international spheres?
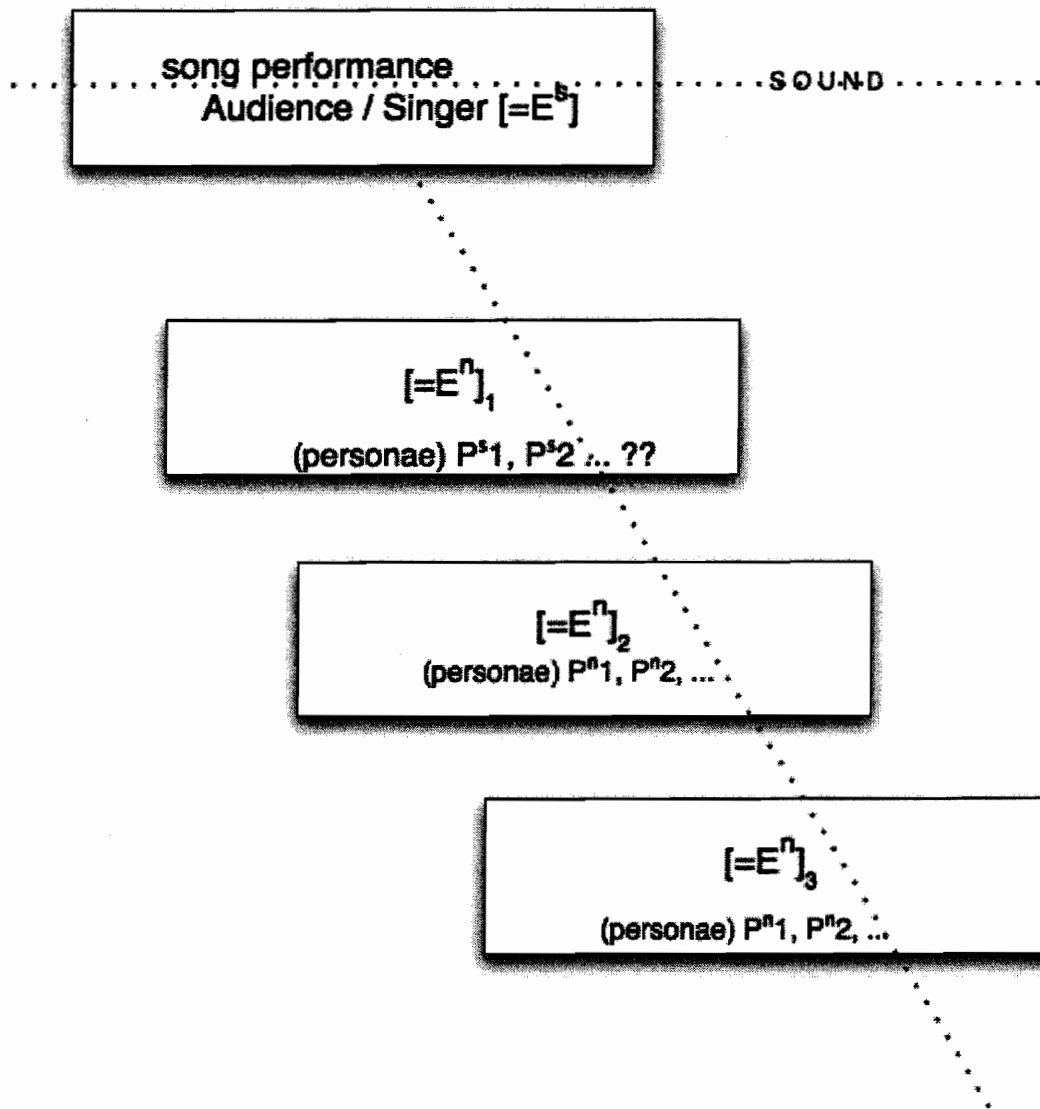
"Allegorical" use of song

Irish cultural nationalism has embraced the 'allegorical' dimension of tradition, but at the price of imposing a single narrative frame upon songs like *Róisín Dubh*, which became the model for nationalist allegory after its 'true' meaning was recovered by Hardiman:

> *Róisín Dubh*, Little Black Rose ... The allegorical meaning has been long since forgotten, and the verses are now remembered, and sung as a plaintive love ditty ... By *Róisín Dubh*, supposed to be a beloved female, is meant Ireland. The toils and sufferings of the patriot soldier, are throughout described as the cares and feelings of an anxious lover addressing the object of his affection ... The air is a good specimen of the characteristic melancholy which pervades Irish music. (Hardiman 1831)

In nationalist readings of tradition, songs like *Róisín Dubh* embody a chronotope involving the loss and recovery of an originary voice, which we hear as that of the nation itself. This risks a tremendous reduction in musical and emotional meaning as layers of contingency, of Ireland's painful, non-linear history, are stripped away: the harp new strung shall be heard again. But we lose the love song and our dark Rosaleen is just Ireland in drag.

George Morrison and Seán Ó Riada's 1960 film *Mise Éire* (I am Ireland) wove fragmentary archival footage of events surrounding the Easter Rising of 1916 into a national narrative, reclaiming Irish history to create a new national memory and re-legitimize the state. It succeeded in this task largely due to the unifying force of Ó Riada's musical score, itself woven from fragments of Irish-language song melodies. But the effectiveness of Ó Riada's score derives also from the semiotic nature of traditional music itself, where performances weave together fragments of 'other times and places' – the persons and occasions of a piece's performance history as well as the multiple 'stories' alluded to therein. This 'chronotopic' dimension of traditional music, its simultaneous existence in different times, makes it an irresistible object for nationalists and antiquarians, but also a powerful device for deconstructing their modernist narratives.

Seán Ó Riada spent much of his life working to elevate local musical traditions, in dialogue with the power and prestige of 'high' cultural forms, to the national and international sphere. Ó Riada made his greatest impact in his orchestral score to *Mise Éire*, a film which embodied the nationalist allegory in its very title. An admirer of Eisenstein, Morrison collaged together fragmentary newsreel footage to recreate the story of the 1916 Dublin insurrection and the birth of the Irish state.

Ó Riada composed a score to accompany the silent footage, in effect returning film music to its early roots, but with a difference – Morrison and Ó Riada's film turned Irish history into a symphony, orchestrating time itself as the statement, development,

conflict and resolution of a symphonic theme – Hardiman's arrangement of Róisín Dubh. Ó Riada's score was so powerful that it all but overwhelmed the complexities of the film, creating an emotional response which perhaps eclipsed the intellectual engagement demanded by its creator. Thus for Harvey O'Brien,

> ... problematic political questions were reduced to the level of mythology. [*Mise Éire*] represented a projection of the past, not an investigation ... Each moment had been a natural progression to the homogenic, seemingly classless, certainly united, Irish society ... of 1959. It suggested that even the historical documents themselves were now closed off. (O'Brien 2000: 342)

I would argue that this is not so, at least on a discursive or intellectual level, since the film's narration begins with a discussion of the political power of images and their manipulation for the sake of ideology. The viewer is constantly invited to decode, question, and challenge the visual evidence provided. *Saoirse?* (Freedom?), the sequel to *Mise Éire* – another collaboration with Ó Riada – questioned the very nature of the revolution itself and challenged the legitimacy of the Irish state. For its listeners, Ó Riada's score for *Mise Éire* perhaps achieved, on a sonic level, a redemption and recovery of Irish musical history, making palpable the beauty and expressiveness of 'traditional' themes in a modern orchestral setting, and using modern techniques and tonalities to interrogate and deconstruct these themes.

The first Irish-language feature film, *Mise Éire* is textured by its alternation between the lyric and the diegetic. Historical background is explained through discursive narration, while the viewer hears elements of the orchestral themes and sees actual historical footage and stills. At dramatic moments the narration switches into verse, and then both narration and musical score go silent, increasing the tension even more as the 'silence' we are thrown into is filled with the sounds – crowd noise, street sounds – which have been dubbed over the entire film, and which suddenly occupy the foreground. It is as if we are momentarily thrown into the actual events themselves through the magical verisimilitude of sound. Then the musical score resumes, giving a new emotional shape to the images we see, consolidating them as story. These three sonic layers – noise, narration and music – work together very effectively to create an overwhelming sense of the reality and teleology of Irish history.

Morrison and Ó Riada's orchestration of Irish history contrasts sharply with Iarla Ó Lionaird's score for Nichola Bruce's (1999) film version of Timothy O'Grady and Steven Pyke's book *I Could Read the Sky* (1997), which dramatizes the disintegration of the Irish narrative in the economic stagnation of the intervening decades, through a depiction of an emigrant labourer in London and his fragmentary memories of home. *I Could Read the Sky* began as a series of black

and white photographs taken in Ireland and England between 1987 and 1996 by Steven Pyke. Novelist Timothy O'Grady was invited to contribute text, and as the project developed, he interviewed several Irish migrant labourers in England. O'Grady assembled an oral history of emigration which he then fictionalized as the story of one old man, dying in a London flat, and his memories of life, work, emigration and home. For O'Grady, 'the subject of *I Could Read the Sky* is the activity of memory in the mind of a man'. O'Grady was fascinated by the wilful anonymity of the labourers he interviewed and sought to dramatize the fact that 'the story of migrant labour … is … the central demographic story of our time'. (O'Grady 2006: 261)

Crucial to the effect of *I Could Read the Sky* is the disjunction between Pyke's photographs, which function as fragments of unknown narratives, and O'Grady's text, a collage of fragmentary memories. Produced independently of the photographs and later assembled by Nichola Bruce (O'Grady and Pike 1997), the resulting montage carries a strong allegorical feeling which means in the same manner as traditional music and song. This feeling is enhanced by the protagonist's role as a traditional musician, and his memories of performance and descriptions of the power of song and instrumental music. O'Grady and Pyke's book is thus a visual-textual representation of how traditional music represents.

The forms and discursive patterns of Irish expressive culture work to structure the experience, emotional habits and memories of its participants (Coleman 1997, 2004). O'Grady's art consists in his allowing the narrative to be saturated by its oral sources on a structural level, letting it take on the semiotic forms of Irish performance tradition. Combined with these forms is an acute and ironic sense of economic contingency and emotional loss.

The complex semiotic history of *I Could Read the Sky* adds to its chronotopic depth. The highly processed text is redolent of context – the contexts of the photographs, of O'Grady's conversations with emigrants, of scenes depicted or alluded to in the fictional narrative, and of the historical and social life of the songs and tunes mentioned. This interweaving of contexts is an imbrication of pain into memory, and the book combines this with a series of intense reflections on the labour process – ultimately seeing memory itself as a work of labour.

Nichola Bruce's film version of *I Could Read the Sky* deepens the semiotic density yet again, adding layers of digital image processing, and a soundtrack which combines 'live' sounds and Iarla Ó Lionáird's musical score, itself heavily processed and layered.

In the case of the film, however, the audio and digital effects represent not just memory as the active construction of the world but also the damage inflicted by the world, the damage which is defied though the act of remembering. Bruce's film formalizes these qualities through montage, fade-outs, and aural and

visual digital static.

In effect, *I Could Read the Sky* takes Morrison's and Ó Riada's re-assembled national history and disassembles it again, reflecting the experience of the generations of mass emigration, as those left out of 'Ireland's unfinished revolution' discover themselves to exist in a very different 'time-space' to that of the triumphant nation. As we enter a new and potentially dark period of Irish history, we may need to draw upon the resources, not only of the 'tradition' as it has come down to us – which as I have presented it here, is primarily a resource for the mediation of private and public negotiations of pain and discontinuity, but also of the new forms of artistic practice which seek to deploy these forms effectively in the contemporary public sphere.

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