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The Magdalene Sisters: How to Solve the Problem of ‘Bad’ Girls

Abstract

This article focuses on Peter Mullan’s *The Magdalene Sisters* which explores the scope and complex nature of the punishment experienced by the women incarcerated in the Magdalene Asylum near Dublin. The analysis reflects my long-standing interest in religion, film and feminist values as well as my revulsion at the sexual abuse and predatory practices of countless Catholic priests and nuns. It is the same revulsion that drove Mullan to bring the horrors of the Magdalene Asylums out from beneath the culturally sanctioned shadows into plain sight. My analysis focuses not only on women as victims of abuse, but also on women, and in this case religious women, as victimizers—as the monstrous-feminine. Erving Goffman’s *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situations of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* provides the initial framework for my analysis. I also consider Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* to further illuminate the relationship between sin/crime and punishment, and Barbara Creed’s *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis* to deepen my understanding of wicked women. Each of these scholars offers valuable insights into human behaviors and their consequences.

Keywords

Monstrous-Feminine, Magdalene Asylums, Predatory Practices by Catholic Nuns

Author Notes

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Who does not shudder with horror when reading in history of so many terrible and useless torments, invented and coldly applied by monsters who took upon themselves the name of sage?

C. de Beccaria, *Traité des delits et des peines*, 1764¹

Introduction

The Magdalene Sisters, a film written and directed by Peter Mullan, is based on the documentary *Sex In A Cold Climate* (1997)² in which women survivors of the Magdalene Asylums in Dublin recount the physical, psychological and sexual abuse they suffered at the hands of the Sisters of Mercy. This order of nuns ran many of the Magdalene Asylums throughout Ireland, Australia and the United States since the 1800s.³ Notwithstanding their name, these Asylums were anything but places to which vulnerable women could retreat to find a safe haven. More mercenary than merciful, the Sisters of Mercy betrayed the very values they purported to embrace by creating environments that were punitive rather than restorative. Ostensibly, they proffered shelter and solace. In reality, the nuns ran what amounted to penal institutions wherein vulnerable young women were victims of systematic and sustained abuse. *Sex In A Cold Climate* removed the veil of secrecy that shrouded the Asylums and personalized the horrors by putting a face and a voice on the experiences of the women. Deeply moved by the histories of suffering recounted by these women,⁴ Mullan decided to create a film

that would appeal to a wider audience than the documentary could hope to garner. *The Magdalene Sisters* became an international sensation and won numerous awards, suggesting that Mullan achieved his goal.⁵

My desire to write about *The Magdalene Sisters* reflects my long-standing interest in religion, film and feminist values. In the past, my analyses of films usually focused on women as victims. Mullan's film gives me the opportunity to explore not only the experiences of women as victims of abuse, but also of women, and in this case religious women, as victimizers. In most cultures the stereotype of woman as nurturer prevails. Yet, the concept of woman as wicked is not new as Barbara Creed contends in *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis*.⁶ Images of wicked women from Medusa to the evil stepmother of fairy tales have populated people's imaginations for millennia. Nevertheless, the paradigm of woman as wicked or as a victimizer is difficult for most people to accept. When the victimizer belongs to a religious tradition such as Roman Catholicism, the resistance is even greater.

Mullan's film is intriguing because it fictionalizes the stories women survivors revealed in the documentary and offers a close look at the predatory behavior of the nuns. Victims and victimizers are both caught in his lens. The fundamental questions that Mullan raises in *The Magdalene Sisters* pertain to justice. Does the punishment fit the crime? Are victimizers ever justified? In my analysis, I consider the sins committed and punishments suffered by the women

incarcerated in Mullan's Magdalene Asylum. I turn to the work of a sociologist, Erving Goffman, whose *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situations of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*⁷ provides the framework for my analysis. My intent is not to write a sociological analysis of the film; rather, it is to use Goffman's classic to provide an invaluable window into the nature of total institutions, a nomenclature that proves to be applicable to the Magdalene Asylums. Goffman's analysis supports my argument that the Magdalene laundries were essentially penal institutions with all the trappings that pertain. If Goffman's work illuminates nature of Mullan's Magdalene Asylum, Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis*⁸ enriches the analysis of women as victimizers. Creed work expands the cultural assumptions about the nature of women, which is vital to the understanding of the nuns as predatory. Furthermore, insofar as I consider *The Magdalene Sisters* to fit into the genre of horror films, Creed's monstrous-feminine supports my analysis. Each of these scholars offers valuable insights into human behaviors and their consequences.

The Law of the Father and Women Who Sin

The four main characters in *The Magdalene Sisters*, Margaret, Bernadette, Rose/Patricia and Harriet/Crispina, are fictionalized versions of the women whose narratives form the core of the documentary *Sex In A Cold Climate*. Yet, their

fictionalized stories cannot easily be extricated from the densely woven tapestry that constitutes the real history of Irish Catholic women incarcerated in the real Magdalen laundries. Choosing to blur the line between fact and fiction, Mullan's film makes the women's suffering harder to deny. The four women at the center of his film stand in for myriad women who were incarcerated in the Magdalene laundries as punishment for the crime of bringing shame on their families and communities. The diaphanous veil that separates the facts in the documentary from the fiction in *The Magdalene Sisters* highlights Mullan's commitment to tell the stories of the victims within a specific cultural context. Historically, the lot of women has not changed much in religiously defined cultures. The stories are sadly similar: women are blamed and punished. Whether cast out or shunned or incarcerated or stoned to death, women are marked by multifarious incarnations of the scarlet letter signifying their shame. It is ironic that Christians declare the Muslim practice of honor killing and the Hindu practice of Sati barbaric without acknowledging the barbarism of burning women as witches or incarcerating victimized women in asylums. The practices may vary, but the attitudes toward women remain all too similar.

Mullan's empathy for the plight of women, particularly Irish women, informs *The Magdalene Sisters*. The film explores the tension between those who impose the law of the Father and those who are accused of sinning against it. The film mirrors not only the historical pattern of incarceration in the Magdalene

laundries, but, as noted earlier, also fictionalizes stories recounted in the documentary. What the women have in common is that they are all labeled sinners. The fictional Margaret, Bernadette, Rose/Patricia and Harriet/Crispina are sent to the Magdalene Asylums for sinning against the sexual mores of the community. One is the victim of rape, two are unwed mothers--one of whom is also mentally disabled, and one is identified as a temptress-- the object of male desire. Mullan takes sides. His sympathies lie with Margaret, for example, whose rape is uncontested; yet, she suffers the consequences. The parents, like the law of the Father itself, appear harsh and entirely lacking in empathy. The mothers are absent or silenced; the fathers are dependent on priests to make decisions for them. The victimized girls have no say in determining their fate. They are incarcerated in the Asylum as punishment for bringing shame on their families. Their parents see them as a problem to be solved. To Mullan, the solution proffered by the Church, the priests and the nuns, personified in the sociopathic Sister Bridget, is the problem to be solved.

If Mullan's depiction of the incarcerated women is sympathetic, his representation of nuns is not. The nuns in *The Magdalene Sisters* veer radically from the typical Hollywood version of nuns, which ranges from the ridiculous such as *Sister Act* to the sentimental like *Lilies of the Field* or *The Bells of St. Mary*, a favorite of the sadistic Sister Bridget. Striving for dramatic effect, he shows that the nuns, either by commission or omission, are complicit in creating

an environment where pain and suffering are meted out under the guise of saving the souls of incarcerated women. The film challenges the viewer to make sense of a schizophrenic Jekyll and Hyde character like Sister Bridget, who masks violence behind her veil. Mullan also questions what redemption means for individuals who, justified by a religious fervor to save the souls of sinners, violate the human dignity of the more vulnerable members of society.

Solving the problem of punishment for what Catholicism has historically identified as sinful or, at the very least, shameful behavior is among the core issues in *The Magdalene Sisters*. When it comes to identifying transgressions and meting out punishments, who decides? Who has the power to determine which punishment fits the crime? What is the desired outcome of the punishments suffered by the incarcerated women? Rehabilitation? Salvation? Mullan's questions point to several themes that, to my mind, provide the narrative thread of the film: fault, punishment, incarceration and horror. Furthermore, these questions underscore the tension between power and powerlessness as it is played out between and among the characters circumscribed by Irish Catholicism. In *The Magdalene Sisters*, Mullan ultimately attributes the destruction of human freedom to the dominance of the Church.

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*⁹ describing the economy of punishment in the late 1770s, Foucault cites the eighteenth-century Italian Enlightenment philosopher and penal system reformer Cesare de Beccaria, who

spoke out against torture and the death penalty. He championed a more humane approach to crime and punishment. Beccaria wrote, "Who does not shudder with horror when reading in history of so many terrible and useless torments, invented and coldly applied by monsters who took upon themselves the name of sage?"¹⁰ My analysis of *The Magdalene Sisters* is an attempt to respond to de Beccaria's question.

In the Name of the Father: The Magdalene Asylum and Consequences of Sin

In Asylums: Essays on the Social Situations of Mental Patients and Other

Inmates, Goffman describes five types of total institutions that share what he calls 'common characteristics'. Regarding the last three types he writes,

A third type is organized to protect the community against what are felt to be intentional dangers to it, with the welfare of the persons sequestered not the immediate issue: jails, penitentiaries, P.O.W. camps, and concentration camps. Fourth, there are institutions purportedly established the better to pursue some work like task and justifying themselves only on instrumental grounds: army barracks, boarding schools, work camps, colonial compounds, and large mansions from the point of view of those who live in the servants' quarters. Finally, there are those establishments designed as retreats from the world even while often serving also as training stations for the religious; examples are abbeys, monasteries, convents, and other cloisters.¹¹

The Magdalen Asylum depicted in *The Magdalene Sisters* exemplifies elements of the third, fourth and fifth types. These three types embody the tension between power and powerlessness that emerges as one of the key themes of Mullan's film.

To apply Goffman's typology to the Magdalene Asylum in *The Magdalene Sisters* is not to impose a social science model of analysis. Rather, it is to suggest that a religious institution like the Magdalene Asylum is one among many that exhibit characteristics of total institutions. Goffman's typology broadens the analytical framework for exploring the impact of incarceration on the four women whose stories Mullan recounts. At issue, is how the women fare in an environment designed to deny them the right to an identity and how they respond to a culture that deprives them of their freedom and of the power to choose.

Furthermore, the laundries are embedded in convents which also fit the typology of total institutions. The nuns who run the laundries have renounced the world in order to become brides of Christ. Committed to doing God's work, the nuns see saving souls from damnation as part of their life's work. Mullan's film is unwavering in its insistence that saving souls is not an adequate justification for inflicting pain and suffering on the most vulnerable. The film's underlying question is whether violence is ever defensible in God's name. Are the nuns doing God's work, or are their putative 'good works' aimed at rehabilitating the 'bad' girls in their care evidence of a sociopathology embedded in the religious organization itself? These questions emerge from the film itself which is colored by Mullan's negative perception of Irish Catholicism. Each frame, each angle of the lens, each close-up bears witness to Mullan's empathy for the women who suffered for sins real and imagined, as well as his disdain for their victimizers.

The film pictures the culture of the religious life in the Magdalene Asylum that shapes the experiences of the inmates as much as does the physical environment. Mullan uses the architecture of the Asylum not only to affirm its character as a total institution but also to make visible its purposes and practices. The Gothic architecture and gloomy setting, as well as the medieval trappings of Irish Catholicism, reflect Mullan's vision of the Magdalene Asylum. Like the Castle of Otranto in the eponymous Gothic romance, the convent that houses the laundry is located on a remote and desolate hillside outside of town. Its forbidding dark brick exterior, high windows covered with iron grates, and high impenetrable iron fence around the perimeter leaves no doubt that the community is protected from the moral depravity ascribed to the inmates. Ancient religious rituals such as liturgical rites, the reading of scripture at meals and evening prayers mark the passage of time. Suggestive of the dread inspired by medieval castles and secretive monastic abbeys, the building and its ancient rituals elicit fear, trepidation and sexual dread.

The power of the Church to identify and punish evildoers emanates from every brick and iron bar of the Asylum. Mullan's lens is unrelenting as it focuses on the dark side, literal and metaphorical. The inmates may not be the archetypal virgins of Gothic romances; however, they too have secrets. Isolated from their communities and from one another by virtue of their scandalous histories,

imagining an eternity in the equally isolated Asylum, the inmates suffer. Unlike Gothic virgins, the inmates do not have visions of heroic knights who will save them. Rarely does a car come by that is not connected to the convent. Visitors are infrequent. Harriet/Crispina's sister occasionally stands outside of the high iron fence with Harriet/Crispina's son hoping to catch a glimpse of his mother. The nuns' confessor, Father Fitzroy, makes regular visits, as do the van drivers, Seamus and Brendan, who pick up and deliver the laundry. Father Fitzroy, much like the evil monks in Gothic romances, sexually abuses Harriet/Crispina and Brendan, unlike the archetypal hero, solicits sex from Bernadette. The high walls meant to keep the community safe from the inmates do little to protect the inmates from the community.

The menacing exterior is a preamble to the sterile and sinister interior. When Margaret, Rose/Patricia and Bernadette are brought to the Asylum, they are marched through long cold corridors lined with white walls. Mullan's lens follows the watchful eyes of the nuns who supervise the inmates at work on their hands and knees cleaning what appear to be pristine walls and floors. The silence of the halls is broken only by the reverberating rhythmic clacking of heels and the sound of rosary beads clacking against one another beneath the nuns' robes, which are themselves a vestige of the Middle Ages. The high ceilings, reminiscent of Gothic cathedrals, amplify the hollow sounds. Highly polished stairs lead to Sister Bridget's office, a dark chamber replete with signs of her power. Mullan places

her at a very large desk which effectively dwarfs her petite size. A photograph of President John F. Kennedy, venerated by virtue of his Irish Catholic ancestry, keeps her company as she sits counting her money. Mullan's introduction of the sadistic Sister Bridget is blatantly ironic. He chooses the image of JFK, whose sexual proclivities are common knowledge,¹² as a symbol of Catholic political power. Accorded the status of secular sainthood, particularly in Ireland, JFK was protected by the code of ethics whose motto is 'boys will be boys'.

Unfortunately, there is no parallel code for women.

As she chastises the three newly arrived young women, Sister Bridget preaches about the consequences of sin and the value of hard work and repentance that ultimately lead to salvation. Surrounded by signifiers of greed and power that conflict with her vows of poverty and obedience, Sister Bridget glowers at the women. She threatens Margaret, who tries to tell the nun that she did nothing wrong. Nothing in the austere surroundings with hard polished surfaces suggests that justice will prevail within the hallowed walls of the Asylum. Mullan's characterization of Sister Bridget, as well as of her confessor Father Fitzroy, is an unequivocal condemnation of a religious life that is a self-serving perversion of authentic religious values. He is none too subtle in his characterizations of their abuse of power as a sublimation of vexing desires and as compensation for their sacrifices. There is little evidence that the lesson about the camel and the eye of the needle has penetrated the Asylum walls.¹³

The harsh treatment suffered by the newly arrived inmates of the Magdalene Asylum is consistent with Goffman's description of total institutions. Sister Bridget expects unquestioning obedience. Furthermore, all aspects of their lives, including where they eat, work and sleep, take place in one collective space overseen by a single authority.¹⁴ Goffman writes that within these institutions, inmates gradually experience what he calls 'disculturation'¹⁵ or the loss of connection to and understanding of the outside world the longer they are incarcerated. In the Asylum at the center of *The Magdalene Sisters*, depersonalization and disculturation take many forms. The convent and the laundries are under the general authority of the Sisters of Mercy; in her role as Mother Superior, Sister Bridget exercises absolute authority over the nuns as well over the inmates in this Asylum. With the exception of two or three nuns who are addressed by name, the others who scurry down corridors with their heads down or who perform various menial or supervisory tasks remain nameless. Given their religious garb, they are nearly faceless beneath their veils and wimples. The power the subservient nuns exercise over the incarcerated women is also controlled by Sister Bridget.

In one scene, Katie, an inmate who looks aged beyond her years, is tasked by the supervising nun with keeping an eye on Margaret and Bernadette. As the nun sits by the door making lace, the older woman, who claims to have spent the last forty years in the Asylum, admonishes the new inmates for trying to

communicate with one another. Silence is the rule in the Asylum. From Katie's tone and content of her dire warnings, it is clear that she is out of touch with the outside world, that she is exhibiting signs of disculturation. Her world is circumscribed by the stories she hears from nuns, and the effect is to leave her with a flawed understanding of the real world. The nuns also experience a degree of disculturation. They chose to isolate themselves from the outside world, which makes them unreliable narrators. Their views of the world are skewed not only by their religious tradition, but also by their sexual segregation. They have an antiquated understanding of the role of women in society not to mention of the women's rights movement that by the 1990s made inroads even within Ireland.

Mullan's representation of the Magdalene Asylum is aligned with Goffman's description of total institutions as "a social hybrid, part residential community, part formal organization" Such establishments, Goffman notes, are "forcing houses for changing persons; each is a natural experiment on what can be done to the self."¹⁶ To breakdown the 'I' in order to create a collective 'we' is among the hallmarks of the Asylum. Focusing on the two cultures that coexist in the laundries, the nuns and the inmates—the saints and sinners, Mullan examines how the experience of disculturation contributes to the obliteration of identities. The nuns may not define themselves as saints; however, having chosen religious life, there is an implicit assumption that they can discern the difference between good and evil. They are viewed as saintly by the wider Catholic

community for their choice of chastity and for their selfless devotion to the care of others and to the remediation of sinners. In choosing the religious life, they accept anonymity as part of their commitment to become the brides of Christ. From the loss of their given name at entering the novitiate, to wearing the habit, to the ritualized routines of prayer and work, nuns choose to become identified with their religious order. In their case, the obliteration of the self, including the denial of a sexual identity, is considered a grace. Their anonymity is a core value that defines them as nuns.

Yet, for some nuns, the pursuit of power and privilege is an obsession that makes the shift from the 'I' to the 'we' illusory at best. Mullan's Sister Bridget is utterly lacking in humility. She is driven to extreme behaviors by her greed and desire to maintain her power. As Mother Superior, she has virtually absolute power over the other nuns and inmates. As a business woman, she runs a large commercial laundry business that brings considerable wealth to the convent. Her dealings with the local priests who deliver wayward women to the Asylum also enrich the convent's coffers. In a different world, she could be seen as a ruthless entrepreneur. She could even be accused of human trafficking and unlawful imprisonment. In her religious world, however, Sister Bridget is seen as protecting the incarcerated women from their baser instincts and the community from loose women. There is little doubt that Sister Bridget believes that she has right, not to mention God, on her side. As she viciously punishes inmates who

challenge her authority, she can always argue that the punishment is for their own good, a justification that has long been in the Catholic lexicon.

To Mullan, Sister Bridget represents the degree to which power corrupts. He invests her character with the same venality that he ascribes to the Irish Catholic hierarchy and their refusal to deal with the scandals described in the *Report of the Irish Commission to Inquire About Child Abuse*.¹⁷ Furthermore, he underscores her covetousness by showing her counting her money at the beginning of the film and then, toward the end, when he shows her apoplectic as she searches for the lost key to the safe where she has hidden her significant profits. Ironically, the Asylum functions as a 'forcing house' with regard to Sister Bridget as well. Although the film does not offer any clues about her past, arguably, the Asylum became the context wherein, by virtue of her choices, Sister Bridget changed herself into an amoral and sadistic woman. Inadvertently, she became part of the experiment that gages "what can be done to the self" in total institutions.

The loss of the self, of an individuated identity, is implicit in the choice of a religious vocation. It is radically different from the loss of self that is imposed on the inmates. For the incarcerated women, the attempt to obliterate the self begins with abandonment by their families as a result of their alleged deviant behaviors. The four main characters in *The Magdalene Sisters* are relegated to the Asylum by their families because they engaged in sex before marriage, whether

by choice or as victims of rape, and/or because of mental illness. They brought shame on their families and endanger the moral rectitude of their communities. Margret, for example, who was raped by her cousin during a wedding celebration, is considered damaged goods by her parents. Rose/Patricia had a child outside of marriage, and therefore, is disowned by her family. Owing to her beauty, Bernadette is judged a temptress by the nuns in the orphanage; Crispina is not only mentally challenged, but had a child outside of marriage. Having ‘fallen’ and, therefore, having shamed their families, the women paid for their sins by being committed to the Magdalene Asylum. They became known collectively as the Magdalenes, which underscores the loss of individuation or of self-identity associated with total institutions. It is ironic that the nuns choose to call the ‘fallen’ women the Magdalenes, allegedly after Mary Magdalene, the whore whom Jesus forgave. It is the case that traditionally, Christians describe Mary Magdalene as a whore despite the absence of Biblical evidence. However, in the *Gospel of Philip*, one of the Gnostic Gospels, Magdalene is “described as Jesus’ intimate companion, the symbol of divine Wisdom.”¹⁸

The obliteration of individual identities is a core principle of the Magdalene Asylum. As soon as Margaret, Bernadette and Rose/Patricia arrive, all their personal belongings are taken from them. The young women are taken to Sister Bridget who makes their status as non-persons very clear from the outset. She treats them as a cohort of unrepentant sinners and compares them to Mary

Magdalene. Sister Bridget tells them that through repentance and hard work they will be able to return to Jesus. The women are spoken at, not spoken with.

Goffman points out that total institutions restrict communication between inmates and their supervisors, which he describes as “talk across the boundary.”¹⁹ When Margaret speaks, Sister Bridget calls her a stupid girl and chastises her for speaking without permission. The women must bend their wills to the institutional will personified by Sister Bridget. Furthermore, the incarcerated women become disculturated by degrees. In Margaret’s case, she never forgets who she is, which saves her. At the end of the film, as she is leaving the Asylum after four years of incarceration, she encounters Sister Bridget in the hallway and refuses to step aside to allow her to pass. In response to Sister Bridget’s threats, Margaret again ‘talks across the boundary’ signifying the strength at the core of her identity. In an act as defiant as it is ironic, Margaret kneels in front of Sister Bridget and prays aloud to be delivered from evil. Sister Bridget’s wrath is kept in check by the presence of a priest walking beside her. Mullan leaves the answer to the question as to what or who is evil unanswered. For the viewer, the answer may depend on whose perspective is seen as valid. Saints and sinners rarely agree on who is right.

Within the Asylum, the process of destabilizing the inmates’ sense of self and making a case for their sinfulness infuses every aspect of their daily lives.

Their clothes are replaced with institutional garb signifying their dependence on

the institution.²⁰ From the drab long brown dresses and blue work aprons to their high-necked long night gowns, the clothes make the women indistinguishable. What is clear, however, is that the non-descript clothes serve two purposes. First of all, they create an institutional uniformity; secondarily, they mask the body. In an asexual culture where the body is seen as evil, the clothing, like the nuns' habits themselves, is designed to conceal even a hint of breasts. When Rose/Patricia arrives at the Asylum, she is still lactating and awakes at night in great pain as her breasts are full of milk. One of the other inmates warns her if a nun finds out, she will be punished. Bearing children out of wedlock is a sin; consequently, suffering breast pain from unexpressed milk is proportional punishment. The nuns can justify Rose/Patricia's suffering by turning to Genesis 3:16: "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing."

The assumption of moral turpitude, like Hester Prynne's scarlet letter, brands each inmate. Had the women not engaged in acts inconsistent with Catholic morality, they would not be in the asylum. This belief has the status of an act of faith. How else could their incarceration be justified? The inmates do penance for their sins by being forced to live and work together separated by an enforced silence. Nuns watch over their daily routines of eating, working, praying and preparing for bed to assure that a deafening silence prevails. Mullan amplifies the silence, the sense of isolation and despair that the inmates experience, as his camera pans from images of disembodied hands washing and/or ironing to the

dark and forbidding attic that serves as their dormitory. Once the nun locks the dormitory door behind her, two windows above the doors, like all-seeing and omnipresent sentinels, like Foucault's Panopticon,²¹ illuminate the room from on high. Only guarded whispers challenge the silence as the women try to lay claim to vestiges of their identities and connections to others. In Mullan's Magdalene Asylum the Panopticon transmogrifies into all-seeing nuns. What the incarcerated women experience is shaped by the power of their captor's gaze.

Salvation at What Price

Restitution through hard work and rejection of sinful ways is the message of salvation preached by the nuns in Mullan's Magdalene Asylum. Goffman describes this kind of reasoning as instrumental justification. Hard labor in the interest of saving souls is the *raison d'être* of the Asylum. Motivated by the proverb, "idle hands are the devil's tools," the nuns force the inmates to work very long hours in harsh conditions as penance for their sins. In the laundries, the women use caustic whitening agents and extremely hot water to clean stained linens, a process which leaves their hands red and raw. Regardless of the weather, clad in thin cotton dresses, they hang the laundry outdoors to dry. The connection between white linens and pure souls, portrayed in Catholic iconography as a white heart, is all too obvious. The whiter the soiled linens, the more purified the souls

of the sinners. Although the laundries provide services to the clergy and the community for which the nuns worked was richly rewarded, the inmates do not benefit from the fruits of their labors. Within the Irish Catholic worldview, the inmates should be grateful for the opportunity to purify their souls.

Committed to saving the souls of their immoral charges, the nuns pay little attention to caring for the bodies of the incarcerated women. From the hard physical labor in the laundries and the gruel they are fed, to the inhospitable dormitories, lack of heat, thin blankets, and thinner mattresses, the Asylum's privations recall harsh penal institutions not to mention concentration camps. A cold water sink in a small bathroom with toilet stalls without doors are further reminders that attention to bodily comfort is non-existent. The same can be said for any notion of privacy. Referring to penal institutions, Goffman notes "... the inmate is never fully alone; he is always within sight and often earshot of someone, if only his fellow inmates."²² Mullan emphasizes the utter lack of privacy with images of the interior architecture that serve as powerful reminders of the depersonalization of the women's environment. In addition, the attic dormitory, accessible by one staircase, is a dark poorly lit space with a low dormer ceiling and unpainted wood floors and walls. The confined space itself must be endured. Sinners cannot expect anything other than privation. The very brick, mortar and wood are suffused with the pain and suffering of the innumerable inmates who lived, and in some cases, died there over long decades

of the Asylum's existence. Beds aligned close to one another suggest the possibility of human interaction that is contradicted by the enforced silence. The nuns' admonishment that God is watching their every move is made manifest in the two backlit glass squares over the door that cast an eerily dim yellow light. This is further evidence of the pertinence of Foucault's image of the Panopticon.

Discussing instrumental justification, Goffman points out that incentives give total institutions the semblance of legitimacy. If the inmates follow the rules, they will be rewarded. What constitutes an incentive within total institutions may be different from the types of rewards and incentives found in society in general.²³ In the case of the Magdalene Laundries, however, there is no difference between how those within the Asylum and those in the community regard incentives. The salvation of souls is the only incentive worthy of determining human choices and behaviors. Mullan focuses on the beliefs held in common by the nuns in charge of the Asylum, by the incarcerated women and by the community. With the procession to venerate the Blessed Virgin, Mullan offers a powerful example of shared values.

The symbolism of sin and the hope of redemption is mirrored in the pageant where sinners and saints, evil and good, power and powerlessness are juxtaposed. The incarcerated women dressed up in blue capes and white lace veils are paraded through the village like medieval penitents. The hems of their drab brown uniforms that signify their impure state are visible from under the blue

capas that symbolize Mary's saintliness. The procession forces the women to suffer public scorn; yet, ironically, it also gives them an opportunity to escape their daily dose of forced labor and institutionalized existence. Guarded by the local constabulary as though they were hardened criminals, the women are living proof that sinfulness will be punished. They serve also as a powerful warning to all the girls and women in the community who, by choice or by force, may find themselves sexually compromised.

As Father Fitzroy, in his richly embroidered liturgical vestments, carries the Eucharist encased in an elaborately bejeweled monstrance, the villagers cast scornful glances toward the women. To the onlookers, the spectacle of the blue-caped white-veiled Magdalenes is far more compelling than the Eucharist. Mullan's lens never loses sight of the ironic possibilities in Irish Catholic culture. The richness of the gold trimmed vestments, the gold monstrance and the elaborate procession contrasts sharply with the poor villagers in drab ill-fitting clothing who are asked to contribute to the Church's coffers from their menial wages in order to perpetuate a medieval ritual that itself masks the truth behind the walls of the Asylum and beneath the Roman collar. Who among the spectators could imagine that Father Fitzroy is a rapist and sexual abuser? How many spectators would see the nuns as the incarcerated women see them?

Processions, pageants and rituals function to socialize the faithful. They are also a vivid demonstration of the power differential between the hierarchy and

believers. With the promise of salvation as the reward, the priestly cast determines the path to eternal life. Mullan chooses the procession to unmask the deeply ingrained hypocrisies of a corrupt institution that betrays its own values, not to mention the simplicity of Jesus' message. Prior to the day of the procession, Margaret accidentally observes Father Fitzroy forcing Crispina/Harriet to perform fellatio. Mullan's critical lens cuts from this to the next scene in which Father Fitzroy is standing at the altar saying mass as Harriet/Crispina runs into the Asylum chapel late. Margaret decides to punish Father Fitzroy by placing nettles in the dryer along with his clothing and underwear. As he presides over an open-air liturgy at the culmination of the procession, he begins to itch. To the shock and horror of the congregation, Father Fitzroy starts ripping off his clothes and running naked through the field. Harriet/Crispina, who pulls up her dress to show that her thighs are itching as well, chants "You are not a man of God (1:23:20)." That night, Sister Bridget has Harriet/Crispina taken away and admitted to an insane asylum where she ultimately dies. Margaret tries but fails to save her. However noble Margaret's desire for justice, the single-mindedness of Sister Bridget and the dark power of the Asylum prevail.

God's Monsters: The Horror

Although Mullan may not consider *The Magdalene Sisters* a horror movie,²⁴ it fits the genre surprisingly well.²⁵ Horror movies are distinguished by a wide range of elements including the Gothic with its dark side and monsters that terrify. These films target our primal sense of dread as well as our fears of contamination of pollution by contact with bodily fluids and of bodily harm. In *The Magdalene Sisters*, these as well as other elements of the horror genre are present. Among the stock characters in horror films is the monster; in *The Magdalene Sisters*, monsters abound and most are female. In *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Creed argues that, "The horror film is populated by female monsters, many of which seem to evolve from images that haunted dreams, myths, and artistic practices of our forebears many centuries ago. The female monster, or the monstrous-feminine, wears many faces. ... Why has woman-as-monster been neglected in feminist theory and in virtually all significant theoretical analyses of the popular horror film?"²⁶ What is missing from *The Magdalene Sisters* is catharsis; a resolution that supplants the horror and reassures viewers the good will prevail. For the Magdalenes, even those who escaped, the horror continued to haunt their lives.

Creed, framing her analysis using Freud's theory of the castrated mother and Kristeva's theory of abjection and the maternal, argues that feminist theory

can deepen the understanding of horror films by looking at women not only as victims, but also as victimizers. Creed's notion of a woman as active rather than passive, as the perpetrator of horror rather than the victim, offers a new way to think about the role of women in horror films. By developing the concept of woman as castrator, as *femme castratrice*, she goes beyond the concept of the castrated woman and focuses on 'the toothed vagina', a motif identified by Campbell.²⁷ By adding the monstrous-feminine to the feminist analytical lexicon, she expands the theoretical framework for interpreting horror films. Furthermore, the monstrous-feminine challenges the viewer to move beyond the female stereotypes and internalize the reality of women as violent and sadistic. In the case of *The Magdalene Sisters*, the viewer has even more deeply engrained stereotypes to overcome. After all, as servants of God and brides of Christ, nuns promised to do good. How do we solve the problem of Sister Bridget?

The notion of women as monsters capable of inventing and executing "terrible and useless torments" is at the heart of *The Magdalene Sisters*. To Creed's long list of the faces of the monstrous-feminine, a catalogue which includes: the amoral primeval mother ...; witch ...; castrating mother ...; aged psychopath ...; deadly *femme castratrice*...,²⁸ I would add religious sociopath.²⁸ By preying on the most vulnerable and powerless women under the guise of saving their souls, Sister Bridget and many of the other nuns violated the dignity and basic human rights of their charges. While appearing to the outside world as

models of religious decorum, the nuns exercised nearly absolute power with impunity over the incarcerated women. Whether motivated by self-hatred or sexual sublimation or even envy, the nuns created a house of horrors wherein disobedience is severely punished while conformity and obedience are rewarded with a promise of salvation.

The disobedience/obedience dialectic played out in *The Magdalene Sisters* is closely aligned with the socialization practices of total institutions. Goffman notes that socialization “may involve an ‘obedience test’ and even a will breaking contest.”²⁹ The goal of such tests is to assure compliance with the institutional codes of behavior. The test also functions to reinforce in the inmates the sense of their own powerlessness. In effect, such testing or hazing is common to initiation rites of organizations such as college campus Greek societies or other clubs, or other total institutions such as the military. They are also part of the rituals practices in religious institutions that place a high value on obeying God’s law. In *The Magdalene Sisters*, Mullan’s critical lens focuses on the humiliation, abuse and physical violence by which the women are brought to obedience, and to which the women are subjected at the hands of other women. The monstrous-feminine of horror films inhabits the Asylum with a vengeance.

Following several scenes that mark the passage of time including the turning of large wooden clockworks, Mullan creates a scene that makes most viewers squirm. We hear loud jovial laughter and see naked feet running in place.

As the camera pans to the naked bodies of the inmates, a very fat nun says, "There is nothing like exercise before supper. But I must say some of you could do with cutting down on the potatoes (53:51 – 54:01)." Few scenes could more powerfully testify to the perversity of the nuns than this highly sexualized scene in the convent's bathing room. The nun, with her silent younger and thinner consort by her side, lines up the naked women in a cold white tiled room. She carries out a degrading and demeaning contest to identify which woman has the largest or smallest breasts or buttocks, or hairiest pubic area. The horrified women, shivering from cold and embarrassment, are expected to applaud as the nun picks the winners. The scene would be horrific enough if priests rather than nuns were conducting this beauty contest. Feminist critics could then engage theories of the active male gaze³⁰ and the passive female victims in their analysis. When the victimizers are women and the victims are women, the horror is amplified. Creed's monstrous-feminine closes the intellectual gap by affirming that women can indeed be represented as monstrous in horror films.

The irony of this scene is impossible to miss. In a religious culture that sees the body as a site of wickedness, as something to be secreted away beneath long robes and veils, the sight of naked weeping women caught in the leering gaze of nuns is a powerful visual signifier of moral depravity. Nothing prepares the viewer for this scene, nor does Mullan provide a context for it. The fact that it is a random occurrence makes it even more powerful. What kind of monsters are

these sexually depraved nuns? How can such behaviors be sanctioned within a convent? Just to say that there are women whose being in the world is best explained as the monstrous-feminine seems inadequate. Mullan's excruciatingly painful scenes suggest that the feminist critique of the male gaze which associates male pleasure with voyeurism, objectification, fetishism and scopophilia should also apply to the female gaze.³¹ Otherwise, there is no theoretical framework to argue on behalf of vulnerable women who are objectified to feed the pathologies of the monstrous-feminine and who have no recourse or hope that justice will prevail in the end.

The suffering experienced by the incarcerated women includes psychological distress as well as physical pain. Sister Bridget is practiced in inflicting both as a means of control. Meting out physical pain and degrading victims even for minor offences takes place in her dark foreboding cave-like office. When the women first arrive, the assault on their sense of identity begins. Sister Bridget forces some of the women to change their names, which contributes to their sense of isolation. They had already suffered rejection by their families; the loss of their names adds to their pain. On the pretext that there are too many Roses in the laundries, she changes Rose's baptismal name to Patricia, her confirmation name. Owing to Harriet's curly hair, she rechristens her Crispina. Harriet, who has only a tenuous hold on reality, is left further disoriented. At the end of the film, after Rose/Patricia and Bernadette escape from the Asylum, Rose

reclaims her name as she boards the bus on her way to the ferry that will take her to Liverpool.

Identity, after all, is closely aligned with names. To change someone's name without their permission is a form of assault, a disenfranchisement. For women who are already marginalized, their real names are the fraying threads that connect them to their past. In according herself the right to change the names of the incarcerated women, Sister Bridget violates their sense of personal identity and further disempowers them. The power to name is highly symbolic with deep biblical roots. While the loss of worldly identity and the acceptance of a new name and new religious identity are central to the process of becoming a nun, for the incarcerated women, re-naming is a punishment. By excising their real names and renaming the women, Sister Bridget usurps the power of their parents who have already named them. She also accords herself the priestly power to pronounce the name by which a child enters the Church, an outward sign of which is part of the Baptismal ritual.

Sister Bridget's sadistic tendencies are graphically represented in two horrifying scenes that focus on inmates who attempt to flee. When Una runs away and returns home hoping that her parents will forgive her, her father literally drags her back to the Asylum. As punishment for her attempt to escape, Sister Bridget shaves Una's head. The camera pans to Una's face which is bruised, suggesting that she had also been beaten. As Una bends down to pick her shorn hair off the

floor, as though to underscore the positive side of the punishment, Sister Bridget reminds Una that the hair will be sold and the money sent to help black babies. In Buddhist cultures, shaving off a woman's hair signifies her chastity and her celibate state.³² The same symbolism pertains for Catholic nuns who shorten their hair and cover it with a veil. However, for Sister Bridget, the shaven head signifies both her power over the women and their powerlessness. It is also a form of what Goffman calls personal defacement that is common in total institutions.³³

Shaving women's heads has sexual overtones and can be interpreted as a form of castration. It is worth noting that one of the faces of Creed's monstrous-feminine is the *femme castratrice*. The connection between sexual promiscuity and shaved heads is not new. In several countries, women who engaged in adulterous relationships, or who fraternized with the enemy, during World War II, had their heads shorn as punishment.³⁴ It is interesting to note that during the Irish Civil war in the twenties, and more recently in the Northern Ireland Troubles, Irish women who fraternized with the English had their hair cut off. Ultimately, Una chooses to take the veil and enters the novitiate. The viewer is left to wonder whether her choice signifies her acceptance of powerlessness or her desire to acquire power. As a victim of a morally bankrupt system sequestered in the Asylum, as a nun, will she remain a victim or will she become a victimizer, a *femme castratrice*, in the image of Sister Bridget?

Physical indignities are integral to the cultures of total institutions.

Goffman notes that, “the humiliation of bending over to receive a birching”³⁵ is a common form of punishment. The pleasure Sister Bridget takes from punishing sinners is a manifestation of her sadistic obsession with sex. As Bernadette and Harriet/Crispina lift their long skirts and bend over to be birched, Sister Bridget cautions them not to let ‘the lads get fingers inside them’ (41:49). She makes this comment as she beats them with a birch switch with such intensity that she draws blood. In another scene when Bernadette is caught trying to escape, Sister Bridget not only shaves her head, but sadistically beats her with large sheers gouging her scalp and eyebrow. Setting the scene in Sister Bridget’s small dark office where she counts and hides her money, it is hard to miss the connection between greed and sex, scissors and phallus, pleasure and pain. Mullan’s lens focuses mercilessly on the grotesqueness of the violence inflicted on Bernadette. The juxtaposition of the bleeding scalp, the blood-filled bowl and the bloody eye and Sister Bridget’s contorted voice telling Bernadette that she must choose between good and evil leaves the viewer breathless and squirming. The horrors inflicted by the monstrous-feminine may be unforgiveable; however, from Sister Bridget’s perverse perspective, Bernadette’s punishment is justified. After all, the task of religious women is to save the souls of the inmates, to save them from their own wickedness. If Bernadette’s beauty enticed boys, and attracted too much of Sister Bridget’s attention or envy, it will be a while before they notice her again.

Creed's engagement with the elements of Kristeva's theory of abjection is particularly relevant with regard to the viewers' response to Sister Bridget's sadistic punishment of Bernadette. The viewer's response mirrors the revulsion and outrage that compelled Mullan to create *The Magdalene Sisters*. Creed quotes one of Kristeva's definitions of abjection: "We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it—on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger."³⁶ She also notes that Kristeva's "definitions of the monstrous as constructed in the modern horror text are grounded in ancient religious and historical notions of abjection ... in relation to the following religious 'abominations': that include sexual immorality and perversion; ... bodily wastes; the feminine body and incest."³⁷ Watching the sadistic attack on Bernadette, the viewer is horrified and repelled, yet compelled to watch as the blood and tears fill the bowl soaking the cotton and dripping on Bernadette's clothes. There is a cinematic economy to the scene that suggests Mullan's preference for 'less is more.' The full extent of his rage is kept in check to allow the audience to experience its own sense of horror.

The "female body," Creed argues, "is central to the construction of the border in the horror film."³⁸ The border is the site of Kristeva's abjection, and like *metaxu*, it both separates and connects. It is the ambiguity embedded in all human experience. Abjection is inextricably connected to religious taboos. Blood,

whether from Bernadette's wounds, or the menstrual blood on bed linens and sanitary wraps; mother's milk that Rose/Patricia must not expel from her aching breasts; sweat that soaks Harriet/Crispina's mattress; tears that run down the faces of the naked inmates—all are bodily excretions that define the female body as an abomination. The greatest abomination is the sexual immorality that Sister Bridget ascribes to all the incarcerated women. Punishing the female body which exudes secretions and desires, Sister Bridget embodies the monstrous-feminine. In so doing, she denies her own femaleness, and she rejects myriad dimensions of the maternal prerogative ascribed to woman. Although she denies the female body, she worships the bloodied body of Jesus sacrificed for the sake of others and celebrated in the Eucharistic feast: this is my body, this is my blood. In her calculus, male and female bodies are not created equal.

Mullan's attitude toward the female body is antithetical to the perverse attitudes of the Sister Bridget and the Church. His critical lens scans the landscape of female and male bodies to confirm that the body, regardless of its gender, exists at the mercy of the randomness of fate. In and of itself, the body is neither good nor evil. How the body is treated is the issue. As Beccaria asked, "Who does not shudder with horror ... (at) the useless torments, invented and coldly applied by monsters"³⁹ The graphic images of bodies naked, bleeding, itching, lactating and suffering create a spectacle that preys on the mind, heart and soul of the viewer. As with all horror films, the viewer is caught between conflicting

emotions, in the ambiguity that is abjection, the border between fear and loathing, on one hand, and fascination and awe, on the other. The subliminal unuttered message is that anyone can suffer insofar as abominations are universal. The monstrous-feminine places everyone in 'perpetual danger'. The object is human experience.

After the Horror

With Bernadette and Margaret, and to a lesser degree Patricia/Rose, Mullan explores the consequences of incarcerations that lasted four and five years respectively. Whereas the years strengthened Margaret's sense of justice, they reinforced Bernadette's cynicism and hatred of nuns, and infused Patricia/Rose with courage. These women share the residual trauma related to the horrors they endured. Victims of abuse, sexual or otherwise, suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, which haunts them throughout their lives. Even after they escaped the Asylum, they could not excise the Asylum from their psyches.

Betrayed and victimized by nuns, Bernadette is the only one of the four women who takes up the mantle of the victimizer. Although her cruelty does not rise to the level of horror inflicted by Sister Bridget or the nun who presided over the body contest, nevertheless, her cruelty brings suffering to the most vulnerable of the inmates. When she finds Harriet/Crispina's treasured St. Christopher medal

which serves to connect her to the outside world, Bernadette makes a very deliberate decision not to return it. For Harriet/Crispina, the medal is a holy conduit to her little boy, whom she sees on the rare occasions when her sister brings him to the Asylum gate. Already ill and only tenuously connected to reality, for Harriet/Crispina the loss of the medal signifies to send her further over the edge to attempt suicide. When Rose/Patricia asks why Bernadette took the medal and would not return it, her answer is in keeping with the culture of the Asylum. She explains that she wanted to make Harriet/Crispina suffer, because suffering is integral to the experience of being a penitent. Similarly, Bernadette's cynicism about the value of punishment and the role of suffering on the road to redemption plays out in her treatment of Katie, the woman who spent forty years in the Asylum. As Katie lay dying, Bernadette is tasked with changing her bed linens. Believing that the nuns care about her, Katie asks to see them. Bernadette tells her that no one cares about her and that she should do all of them a favor and just die. Finding Katie had indeed died, in an unexpected and deeply moving gesture of love, Bernadette leans down and kisses her forehead. The viewer is left to ponder whether Katie's story of being forced to give up the son she birthed touched a compassionate nerve in Bernadette, who herself was brought up in an orphanage.

Mullan's film itself is a moral tale, an exemplar of how evil can be endured, even if there is no evidence that it will be punished. To Margaret, he

ascribes the role of moral compass. She is the one who never loses sight of who she is nor of what is just. In her quiet way, she tries to right at least some of the wrongs she experiences in the Asylum. She also resists internalizing her family's and community's condemnation of her loss of virginity. As she is being raped by her cousin at a wedding, her cries for help are masked by the priest's singing a traditional ballad, "The Well Below the Valley"⁴⁰ accompanied by a band of musicians. Mullan's choice of ballad and singer is telling. The dark ballad recounts the story of a girl who may or may not have given birth and buried six children for which she may or may not be punished for twenty-one years, the last seven in hell. Perhaps an odd choice to celebrate a wedding, but the ambiguity of the girl's situation is suggestive of the reality that frames the lives of Irish Catholic girls and women, including Margaret. Mullan seems to suggest that many at the wedding will be victims of rape or incest or other violence at the hands of a stranger or family member. Margaret's story is one of many.

Margaret was victimized first by her cousin, then by the priest who suggested the Asylum, and, finally, by her parents who acceded to his suggestion. In the Asylum, it is Margaret who finds a way to make Father Fitzroy pay for raping Harriet/Crispina. Seeking the nettles in the garden, she discovers an open gate and steps out into freedom. A car comes by, but she refuses the ride, perhaps out of fear that the young man will rape her. Choosing to stay, she takes her revenge. When Harriet/Crispina discovers that her medal is missing, Margaret

promises to find it. Discovering that it was Bernadette who hid it, she hits her. Surprised that she gets no support from the other women, she asks: "Am I the only one who thinks what she has done is completely despicable? (1:16:50)" Margaret's strength of character and her refusal to succumb to the disculturation exacted by an environment that nurtures horror and submission is most powerfully expressed at the point of her liberation. Placing the kneeling Margaret literally at the feet of the enraged and threatening Sister Bridget, Mullan underscores the ambiguity at the core of religious traditions: they liberate as much as they condemn. As she recites the Lord's Prayer, Margaret asks forgiveness for those who trespass against us and for deliverance from evil.

As Mullan's epilogue makes tragically clear, the problem of 'bad' girls cannot be solved by sequestering victimized women in workhouses that violate their human dignity under the guise of saving souls. Reconnecting the fictionalized women with their real life counterparts, Mullan honors them as he offers a glimpse into their post-Asylum fates. The fate of Harriet was sealed when she was taken from the laundry to the insane asylum. Her sister was not notified of the state of her mental health for over a year. Harriet died in 1971 at the age of 24, ostensibly from anorexia and having lost all connection to the real world. The other three women survived, but, the trauma they suffered never really healed. Mullan makes this point in one of the last scenes of *The Magdalene Sisters*. Bernadette is standing in a tunnel to get out of the rain and sees nuns standing

across from her. The enraged face of Sister Beatrice flashes before her eyes leaving her terrified. The camera lingers on her bruised face; the viewer is left with the sense that the horror may never fade. The postscript offers a glimpse into lives never fully realized. Bernadette trained as a hairdresser, moved to Scotland, married and divorced three times. Rose married and had other children. She spent 33 years trying to find her son, which she did just months before she died in 1998. She remained a Catholic. Margaret never married, moved to Donegal and became the assistant headmistress of a primary school. Mullan leaves the wrenching personal narratives of broken lives to *Sex In A Cold Climate*. In *The Magdalene Sisters*, he allows the sense of horror to settle uncomfortably on the viewer as he implicitly asks Beccaria's question: "Who does not shudder with horror when (seeing) ... so many terrible and useless torments ...?" The question remains unanswered and unresolved: How *do* we solve the problem of monsters who take upon themselves the name of the sage?⁴¹

¹ C. de Beccaria, *Traite des delits et des peines*, 1764, ed., 1856 in Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, 1999, p. 90).

² For a summary of the documentary see: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0380703/>. Also, for a review, see: <http://www.observer.com/node/47963>. For a You Tube video summarizing of the history of the Magdalene Laundries, see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mVLJaa6XYaA>.

³ Several books explore the history of the Magdalene Laundries, including Linda Mahood, *The Magdalenes: Prostitution in the Nineteenth Century*, (London: Routledge, 1990); Frances Finnegan, *Do Penance or Perish: A Study of the Magdalene Asylums in Ireland*, (Oxford University Press, 2004); and most recently, James M. Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre dame Press, 2007). Smith's book offers an extensive bibliography that includes government documents,

newspaper articles, radio programs, articles in professional journals as well as full-length studies. For an ABC news report see: <http://abcnews.go.com/WNT/story?id=129865&page=1>

⁴ Mullan was very angry about how the Roman Catholic Church responded to the abuses in the Asylums. He wanted to challenge the institutional silence that greeted revelations about Catholic institutions, in this case the Magdalene Laundries that resembled concentration camps. See: <http://www.futuremovies.co.uk/filmmaking.asp?ID=33> For an interview with Peter Mullan, see: <http://www.spike.com/video/magdalene-sisters/2474649>

⁵ In 2002, the film was celebrated at the Venice Film Festival where it was awarded the Golden Lion. The film also received several other prestigious awards, including the British Independent Film Award for Best Ensemble Cast; the London Film Critics Circle Award for British Director of the Year; the London Film Critics Circle Award for British Film of the Year; and the National Board of Review Freedom of Expression Award.

⁶ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).

⁷ Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situations of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*, (New York: Anchor Books for Doubleday, 1961). I was introduced to Goffman's work by Dr. Doug Pryor, Professor of Sociology at Towson University in Maryland.

⁸ Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*.

⁹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*. Although Foucault does not focus on the Church *per se*, it is virtually impossible to separate Church from State within the timeframe of his analysis of the nature of punishment. The Church's power to punish those deemed to have sinned and to selectively impose a reign of terror in the name of saving souls is legendary. In a recent study titled *God's Jury: The Inquisition and the Making of the Modern World* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing, 2012), Cullen Murphy cites the Inquisition as the single most notable symbol of the abuse of the Church's power.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 90.

¹¹ Goffman, 4-5.

¹² For a recent assessment of Kennedy's sexual transgressions, see: <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/06/are-we-letting-jfk-off-too-easy-for-his-philandering/258771/>

¹³ Matthew 19:24.

¹⁴ Goffman, p. 6.

¹⁵ Goffman, p. 13.

¹⁶ Goffman, p. 12.

¹⁷ <http://www.childabusecommission.ie/>

¹⁸ Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p. 64.

¹⁹ Goffman, p. 9.

²⁰ Goffman, p. 19.

²¹ Foucault, 195-228. In the chapter "Panopticism," Foucault expands on Jeremy Bentham's idea of a circular prison within which stands a watch tower with a view in all directions. He argues that since inmates could not be certain as to whether or not they were being watched, they tended to behave as though someone was watching.

²² Goffman, p. 25.

²³ Goffman, p. 10.

²⁴ In Fall 2010, I taught a seminar in the Honors College at Towson University, *Holy and Unholy: Representations of Women in Film*. Among the films I taught was *The Magdalene Sisters*, which I treated as a horror film. Barbara Creed's "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection," *Screen* 27, no. 1. (January, 1986) served as the framework for interpretation.

²⁵ <http://www.filmsite.org/horrorfilms.html>

²⁶ Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, p. 1. Among the many faces, Creed includes: "the amoral primeval mother ...; vampire...; witch ...; woman as monstrous womb ...; woman as bleeding wound ...; woman as possessed body ...; the castrating mother ...; woman as beautiful but deadly killer ...; aged psychopath ...; monstrous girl-boy ...; woman as non-human animal ...; woman as life-in-death ...; woman as deadly *femme castratrice*."

²⁷ Ibid. The motif is discussed in Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin), 1976.

²⁸ For a definition of sociopathology see: [Antisocial personality disorder](#). Also, <http://behavenet.com/apa-diagnostic-classification-dsm-iv-tr>, [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders](#) Fourth edition Text Revision 2000, pp. 645–650.

²⁹ Goffman, p. 17.

³⁰ The male gaze enters into feminist discourse in 1975 when Laura Mulvey writes, "Visual Narrative and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn, 1975).

³¹ Ibid.

³² Karen Lang, "Shaven Heads and Loose Hair: Buddhist Attitudes Toward Hair and Sexuality," in Howard Eilberg-Schwartz and Wendy Doniger, *Off with Her Head! The Denial of Women's Identity in Myth, Religion, and Culture*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press), Chapter 3.

³³ Goffman, p. 20.

³⁴ Richard Vinen, *The Unfree French: Life Under the Occupation*. Allen Lane, 2006. A punishment commonly used in Germany, France and Holland.

³⁵ Goffman, p. 22.

³⁶ Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, p. 8.

³⁷ Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, p. 9.

³⁸ Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, p. 11.

³⁹ C. de Beccaria, in Foucault, p. 90.

⁴⁰ <http://www.kinglaoghaire.com/site/lyrics/>, See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Maid_and_the_Palmer A palmer begs a cup from a maid who is washing at the well, so that he could drink from. She says she has none. He says that she would have, if her lover came. She swore she had never had a lover. He says that she has borne six babies and tells her where she buried the bodies. She begs some penance from him. He tells her that she will be transformed into a stepping-stone for seven years, a bell-clapper for seven, and spend seven years in hell.

⁴¹ I would like to thank my editor and friend Dr. Laurie Kaplan for her support and expertise. Her encouragement and keen analytical eye were invaluable to me.

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