

Ireland and Dysfunction

Ireland and Dysfunction:

*Critical Explorations
in Literature and Film*

Edited by

Asier Altuna-García de Salazar

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

ASIER ALTUNA-GARCIA DE SALAZAR

This collection of critical essays entitled *Ireland and Dysfunction: Critical Explorations in Literature and Film* finds itself at the intersection of cultural, literary and film studies, which explore the multiple and various ways in which dysfunction is expressed in Irish studies. Accordingly, the thematic focus of this interdisciplinary volume revolves mainly around the concept of dysfunction in the Irish context. Dysfunction might be regarded as part and parcel of a portrayal of a landscape of trauma and crisis that may have been traditionally repressed in Ireland at large. But, dysfunction also envisages mediation, managing, transcending and healing. Thus, it will be of interest for this volume to examine how Ireland tackles dysfunction at large, but more importantly, how mediation, managing, healing and transcending help in the understanding of the ever-changing and on-going process of the construction of an Irish identity today; sometimes looking back at the past but always creating the need of imaging and inventing new ways to understand the future of Ireland. With this theme the volume aims to examine Ireland through different disciplinary angles. From the perspective of Irish Studies, reflections on how dysfunction in its various forms is represented in the Irish context will provide a fruitful forum for debate and discussion from various interrelated angles. It was the wish to explore dysfunction and Irish culture and identity that inspired a conference, hosted at the University of Deusto, Bilbao, in 2014. Most of the papers included here had its origins in this international conference, although they have since undergone extensive debate and refinement.

This collection is divided into five sections. The first section, entitled “Dysfunction and cinema in Ireland today”, includes essays that reflect integration and representations of the “other” in Irish cinema and the way different tropes that are said to be part and parcel of Irishness and identity have been performed in cinema recently. Thus, Pilar Villar-Argáiz’s essay closely examines dysfunction as this is seen in recent cinematic representations of immigrant coming to Ireland. Drawing on critical race theory, Villar-Argáiz looks directly at integration, Irishness and the

interculturality of the “Other” in Irish documentaries. Through her approach to the work of filmmakers Alan Grossman and Áine O’Brien, Villar-Argáiz argues that their productions are a direct critique of hegemonic representations of immigrants in Ireland, combating thus simplified depictions of the “other”. Dysfunction in the documentaries by Grossman and O’Brien is best expressed through their delineation of displacement, exile, absence, forced mobility, the exoticising of the “other” and intercultural transnationality, at a time in which post-Tiger Ireland is very much at stake. For Villar-Argáiz, no one can dispute that cinematic products are exerting an impact on the re-writing of stereotypes through their “alternative ways of knowledge”. In the case of Rosa González-Casademont’s illuminating approach to Kirsten Sheridan’s Irish-set feature films, González-Casademont sets them apart from the long-established tradition of mediating Irishness through the trope of the family. Dysfunction is thus analysed through recent films and how through the films’ narrative and visual strategies and the adolescent characters, these films depict Ireland’s anomic condition. Following Durkheim’s definition of the concept of “anomie” González-Casademont draws a line with what could be understood as “dysfunctionality” of the normative Irish family, which, in fact, in the case of Ireland does not differ from that of other industrialized countries. However, as González-Casademont advances, since 1990s the correlation between nation and family has been harder to maintain in the case of Ireland, and “anomie” proves a good term for the analysis of family representation in Irish-set films. In the case of Kirsten Sheridan’s production, her films are an exemplar of the attempt to venture into more experimental territory.

The second section of this collection, entitled “Dysfunction: sexuality, dislocation and space” brings together ways in which Irish literature has approached the idea of trauma and dislocation, which are present in much fiction and biographical writing. Aintzane Legarreta-Mentxaka’s provocative essay approaches Kate O’Brien’s *oeuvre* through the prism of sexuality and the idea that O’Brien tried to push creative, social and personal boundaries to the limits. For Legarreta-Mentxaka, O’Brien offered new accounts for a myriad of behaviours that were deemed dysfunctional at the time. In particular, Legarreta-Mentxaka’s article deals with the representation of sexuality and emotion, which exuded dysfunction and a likely transgression in O’Brien’s works. For Legarreta-Mentxaka, O’Brien devoted much of her work to study how ordinary people defied oppressive and conservative norms and rules of the time. Through an analysis of dysfunctional sexuality, families, adultery and celibacy, homosexual attachments, sexual education and intergenerational

relationships Legarreta-Mentxaka concludes that O'Brien's actions in real life were also contesting censorship and oppression in Irish society, and her life and works cannot be separated one from the other. The second essay in the section written by Eibhear Walshe approaches the influence and inspiration of Spain in Kate O'Brien's writing. Spain's history, literature and culture played an important role in O'Brien's fiction. As Walshe defends Spain also acted against Irish dysfunction at many levels. So as to transcend many of the traumas, dysfunctions and dislocations of Irish society at large many of O'Brien's characters sought in Spain and her culture an escape, or rather, an alternative atmosphere and space to that of the Ireland of the early twentieth-century. But, through her fiction, O'Brien also had the chance to analyse and comment upon Spain's crisis in politics at the time. The third essay in this section tackles the idea of space too, but in this case in the north of Ireland. The representation of Belfast as a dysfunctional city is Stephanie Schwerter's contribution to this volume. By examining Robert McLiam Wilson's *Eureka Street* and Adrian Shergold's eponymous BBC screenplay, and drawing on Bakhtin's theories, Schwerter explores the remaining dysfunctional networks and structures that prevail in Belfast as the epicentre of conflict in the North since 1968. Dysfunction, thus, has persisted because of the on-going conflict between the two communities that strove to gain power and position. But, as Schwerter defends, since the IRA's ceasefire declaration in 1994, what was previously seen as dysfunctional in terms of riots, violence, sociological and community cleavage could be said to have included a "humoristic" turn. As Schwerter argues, both novel and screenplay "open up new ways of perceiving the city's progress" leaving dysfunction aside and claiming a new start. Accordingly, new frames of communication can be envisaged between the two communities.

The tropes of family, memory and home are the unifying themes of the third section of this collection, entitled "Dysfunction: family, home and memory". José María Yebra approaches Colm Tóibín's collection *Mothers and Sons* and *The Testament of Mary* in order to tackle dysfunction and family in Ireland. Drawing on Cathy Caruth's "trauma theory", Yebra argues that family roles in the Irish discourse are "queered" and transformed in Tóibín's works under analysis. Even if dysfunction in the Irish family can also be seen within discourses of abuse, drink, poverty and inequality, in Tóibín's fiction a dysfunctional family has a "rule-breaking" aspect that tries to transform the boundaries of what has been traditionally accepted, as Yebra argues, such as "heterosexuality, monogamy and conventional family bonds". In the end, all these issues point to dysfunction within Ireland at large, as they address inequality and

imbalance in the body politic and Irishness too. In the case of these two works by Tóibín, dysfunction acts as a textual device “to revise values and confront them with their own contradiction and new challenges”. For her part, Sara Martín pays homage to Edna O’Brien’s iconic *A Pagan Place* and how the Irish family is represented. Drawing on the discourses of medical tenets regarding dysfunction, post-independence Ireland and the articles that refer to the institution of the Irish family of De Valera’s Constitution of 1937, Martín approaches O’Brien’s early novel intertwining the patriarchal modes both of the new Irish State and the overpowering influence of the Catholic Church in Ireland, which Martín regards as “a concentric hierarchy”. Martín argues that because of all most factors of traditional dysfunction in the family, such as abuse, domestic violence and alcoholism, dysfunction in the Irish family also addresses a “dysfunctional masculinity derived from the postcolonial condition of the country”. Through an approach to memory in the early stages of life, i.e. childhood and adolescence, Inés Praga-Terente explores the (dys)function of memory in John McGahern’s *Memoir* and Edna O’Brien’s *Country Girl*. As Praga-Terente states, remembering involves a reconstruction of past events and situations through the present in which the author’s recall and the moment of narration take place. In the case of both Irish writers, they had to bear the brunt of the repressive Ireland of the 1940s; a time they repeatedly referred to in many of their writings. McGahern and O’Brien examine the harrowing experiences of family life and dysfunction within the family cell in different ways although some topics remain constant: absence of the fathers, unhappy mothers, poverty. In the end, for Praga-Terente, the writing of this dysfunction brings in healing, which ranges from personal catharsis to lament or even, celebration. This section ends with a feminist approach by Burcu Gülüm-Tekin to the silent mother in Roddy Doyle’s *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* (1993). Gülüm-Tekin is also fascinated by the way in which the ten-year old narrator represents the late 60s suburban Dublin from a child’s point of view. Gülüm-Tekin analyses the shift in Doyle’s fiction from a happy family atmosphere to a quiet and harrowing environment which is characterized by domestic violence. Drawing on feminist theories by Irigaray, Rich, Chodorow and others, Gülüm-Tekin approaches the implications of domestic violence and its influence on the character of Paddy, through an analysis which evolves, mainly, around Mrs. Clarke’s (Paddy’s mother) significant silence.

The fourth section of this collection brings together a multifarious array of essays that approach dysfunction from different perspectives that revolve around contrastive and inspirational dysfunction. The section, entitled “Dysfunction: struggles and quests” begins with María Gaviña’s

approach to Brian Friel's *Give Me Your Answer, Do!* in such a way that dysfunction appears in the play itself, when it tackles issues such as communication, family interaction, disappointment and silence; but, also in an autobiographical hue that the play presents. Drawing on Friel's interest in Wittgenstein, for Gaviña, the play represents "the closure of a very personal cycle in which [Friel] unveils himself using his own vital experiences as a direct source of inspiration". The play can be considered an introspective attempt by Friel. Gaviña believes that the play is also an exemplar of how the artist of the play, but also Friel himself, was struggling to come to terms with his inspiration and artistic mastery, so that there appears a contrast between popularity versus quality. María José Carrera analyses Samuel Beckett's *From an Abandoned Work* as a "narratively dysfunctional prose piece". Although the narrative background has a dysfunctional family as a central piece, Carrera, drawing on narratology theories, argues that Beckett's prose can be regarded as "autographic writing"; and in the case of this prose piece by Beckett autobiography and literary biography come together somehow. Besides, dysfunction can be seen since the very writing of the piece and the different "ups and downs". Beckett envisaged a complete separation between narrator and text in an attempt reconstruction of the *I*. Accordingly, Carrera argues that "the intertextual component of the autographic action at work" in Beckett's short story gives a clear clue to the way in which this dysfunctional piece was designed by Beckett. For her part, Olga Fernández-Vicente takes a comparative approach between Irish James Joyce and Spanish Pío Baroja. The author sees how both writers strive to come to terms with the situation of their countries at the time. For Fernández-Vicente, both Joyce and Baroja seek artistic independence among a milieu of modernist, postcolonial and nationalist discourses that depict dysfunctional relationships between these two authors and their countries. At a time of fin-de-siècle crisis all over Europe, both Ireland and Spain, and in particular the Basque Country, were going to suffer a "profound feeling of uneasiness, by the crisis of formerly accepted values". As Fernández-Vicente argues both Joyce and Baroja tried to break free from "nets of nationalism, religion and language" so as to "revolutionize" the novel both in English and Spanish.

The final section is an illuminating and reflective interview with author Billy O'Callaghan. Marisol Morales-Ladrón conducted an interview with the short-story writer about his mastery, his writing techniques and the way in which inspiration forms part of his everyday writing. For Billy O'Callaghan, his writing has to convey the dysfunction of unpleasant realities. In his stories he shows his craft in the choice of language,

characters, settings and times. All of these serve to express his concern for human dramas and miseries and a belief that dysfunction and extreme circumstances can be managed and eventually healed.

All in all, this collection attempts to bring together diverse ways of examining dysfunction in Irish writing and cinema. It encompasses theory and analysis so as to better comprehend the trope of dysfunction and dislocation. Through the inclusion of the works of senior academics, emerging scholars, as well as those outside academia, this collection of critical essays offers fresh perspectives on dysfunction.

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SECTION I:

DYSFUNCTION AND CINEMA
IN IRELAND TODAY

CHAPTER ONE

CINEMATIC REPRESENTATIONS
OF IMMIGRANTS IN IRISH
ETHNOGRAPHIC FILMS:
ALAN GROSSMAN AND ÁINE O'BRIEN'S
DOCUMENTARY WORK¹

PILAR VILLAR-ARGÁIZ

Introduction

Since the 1990s, Irish media have exerted a significant role in investigating, interrogating and criticizing the State and the Church (MacKeogh and O'Connell 2012, 1). A case in point is the recent disclosure of all sorts of religious scandals which have compelled public institutions to issue apologies and modify their policies. Whereas previously the media maintained the status quo of conventional political and religious institutions, now they have become "the watchdog of society" in their challenge of the hegemonic socio-political structures (ibid.). Documentary films have been particularly successful in charting the contemporary tensions in Irish society, mirroring the anxieties and problems that have emerged in the Celtic Tiger and Post-Celtic Tiger eras. In *Documentary in a Changing State*, MacKeogh and O'Connell celebrate this medium as "a force that has, if only recently, helped Irish society change its ideas and own up to its past." (2012, 7)

One of the artists who is included and discussed in this volume is Alan Grossman, a South-African documentary maker residing in Ireland, who has collaborated closely over the course of fifteen years with Irish filmmaker Áine O'Brien. Like other documentary makers in Ireland, Grossman and O'Brien have focused extensively on the demographic transformation that the country experienced as a result of the economic boom, which attracted large numbers of migrants from many different

nationalities.² Their interest in the themes of migration and displacement is somehow determined by their personal backgrounds. Grossman was born and raised in South Africa; then he emigrated when he was 16 to Israel and was later educated in various British universities, until he based himself in Ireland where he now resides (interview with Villar-Argáiz 2016). For her part, O'Brien has been working for many years in the United States and Scotland and now she is commuting constantly between London and Dublin as co-director of the Counterpoint Arts, a cultural project exploring refugee and migrant experiences in the UK and beyond. Bearing in mind the personal backgrounds of the artists, Kakasi sees their work as an example of "accented cinema," as it is "influenced by the two filmmakers' personal trans-national experiences." (2011, 43) Here Kakasi relies on Hamid Naficy's definition of such term, as "both a cinema *of* exile and a cinema *in* exile," which "concerns deterritorialization and is itself produced in the interstices of cultures and cinematic production practices" (Naficy 2001, 8).³

Indeed, as in most "accented" films, exile and displacement constitute the main themes of the three documentaries Grossman and O'Brien have co-directed: *Silent Song* (2010), *Here to Stay* (2006) and *Promise and Unrest* (2010). One of the most striking aspects of their work is that they manage to address a broad global phenomenon (immigration into the West) without falling into sweeping generalizations. Their three documentaries portray different types of immigrants: political refugees and asylum seekers (i.e. the Kurdish composer Muhamed Abbas Bahrán in *Silent Song*), immigrants with high-skilled jobs (i.e. the gay Filipino nurse Fidel in *Here to Stay*), and more vulnerable immigrants with no working permits and low-skilled jobs (the so-called economic migrants, represented by Noemi in *Promise and Unrest*). The actuality of political refugees is the main focus of *Silent Song*, a 15-minute documentary film which premiered in Ireland at the 45th Murphy's Cork Film Festival in 2000 and was later screened in numerous international film and documentary festivals. This film deals with the theme of Kurdish musical protest in Europe by focusing on one migrant living in Edinburgh, the professional Kurdish composer Muhamed Abbas Bahrán. The title itself, *Silent Song*, metaphorically suggests, in its oxymoron, the silence which surrounds all possible acts of sonorous resistance, as will be analyzed below. It alludes to a poem written in 1976 commemorating Bahrán's refusal to perform in a concert at the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad before an audience of Ba'ath party members (Grossman and O'Brien 2006, 271). Abbas Bahrán later translated this poem into a musical score, recording "Silent Song" for the first time at The Royal Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh, on 31 July 2000.

Transnational migration also constitutes the main theme of *Here to Stay* (2006), the second documentary Grossman and O'Brien have produced and directed. Funded by The Irish Film Board and by various NGO organizations, this film premiered at the 2006 Stranger Than Fiction Documentary Film Festival (at the Irish Film Institute in Dublin), and it was later received with high critical acclaim in numerous international film festivals.⁴ This documentary offers a different view of immigration, this time from the perspective of gender and sexuality, by drawing on the character of Fidel Taquinod, a gay Filipino nurse living in Dublin. The title *Here to Stay* is taken from one of the sentences mentioned by Fidel at the INO Annual Delegate Conference (in Killarney, 2004), when trying to implement motions in order to improve the migrants' working conditions.

Promise and Unrest (2010) is the third documentary film that Grossman and O'Brien have directed on the theme of migration. Funded by the Irish Film Board and produced by the project Forum of Migration and Communications (FOMACS),⁵ this documentary, like *Here to Stay*, foregrounds the theme of gender and its entanglement with the pressures posed by forced migration. It focuses on the daily life of Noemi Barredo, a single mother from the Philippines who works in Dublin as a caregiver for old people, in order to send money back home. The film chiefly centers upon the relationship Noemi establishes with her daughter Gracelle, a relationship defined by selfless love despite physical and emotional estrangement.

This contribution offers a critical introduction to the work of both documentary makers by drawing on critical race theory (Marks 2000; Naficy 2001), a methodological approach adopted by Agnes Kakasi (2011, 43-8) in her close study of Irish films dealing with immigrants, such as *Seaview* (2006) and *Capital Letters* (2004).⁶ It also draws simultaneously on the taxonomy of documentary film styles established by Bill Nichols (2001, 99-137) in his influential study *Introduction to Documentary*, in order to examine the different modes of representation employed by these filmmakers in their dealing with the theme of immigration. This general overview of their work is followed by a close analysis of their most recent documentary, *Promise and Unrest* (2010), an "accented" cinematic production which draws upon the variety of documentary modes commented above.

Representing migrants through various modes of documentary film practice

As explained above, Grossman and O'Brien's documentaries share certain features with the cinematographic productions that Naficy analyses in *An Accented Cinema*. Like accented filmmakers who tend to "operate independently, outside the studio system or the mainstream film industries, using interstitial and collective modes of production that critique those entities" (Naficy 2001, 10), Grossman and O'Brien's work is located within the auspices of the collaborative project FOMACS. Although they have also been financially supported by the Irish Film Board (Ireland's national film agency), their documentaries are situated outside mainstream modes of production in their artisanal mode of production and their critique of hegemonic representations. As Grossman and O'Brien explain in the introduction to *Projecting Migration*,⁷ the purpose behind their work is "to situate migrant subjectivity, its collectivised political instantiation and performance against the concrete restrictions of the Irish government immigration policies." (2007, 7) This involves challenging two predominant views of immigrants that prevail in Irish broadcast media: 1) on the one hand, the simplified view of migrants as victims, whose rights are constantly violated by the State; 2) and on the other hand, their representation as an homogeneous group, radically opposed to the Irish, in which all sorts of class, gender, linguistic and religious specificities are elided.⁸

In order to defy such stereotypes, their films portray migrants as agentive, three-dimensional characters with a complex socio-historical background of their own. This is chiefly attained by means of an "observational" mode of documentary film practice. Grossman defines his films as "observationally led," (2012, 20) in their attempt to capture the sense of a lived experience in all its intimacy and immediacy. As they acknowledge in an interview, their task as filmmakers at times coincides with the role of the observant "anthropologist" (Villar-Argáiz 2016). In this kind of films, as Bill Nichols explains, there is barely any intervention of the filmmakers, an ethnographic approach which favors intimacy, immediacy and the revelation of individual migrant characters in their ordinary life situations, affirming "a sense of fidelity to what occurs" (Nichols 2011, 113). Indeed, Grossman and O'Brien attempt to provide a window on the "factual", "performative" world of immigrants in Ireland by observing and recording their daily life as accurately as possible.⁹ *Here to Stay* and *Promise and Unrest* follow Fidel or Noemi in their daily activities, recording them in real life, as they converse with workmates, friends and relatives.¹⁰ In both cases, the presence of the unobtrusive

camera creates direct engagement with the everyday life of these migrant characters, who are left free to act as if no cameras were filming them. This demands the active engagement of the audience, because as Nichols claims:

We look in on life as it is lived. Social actors engage with one another, ignoring the filmmakers. ... We make inferences and come to conclusions on the basis of behavior we observe or overhear. The filmmaker's retirement to the position of observer calls on the viewer to take a more active role in determining the significance of what is said and done.¹¹ (2001, 111)

Although firmly rooted in the observational mode, Grossman and O'Brien's documentaries also combine other modes of representation analyzed by Nichols such as the "poetic," the "performative," and the "reflexive." (2001, 99-137) The combination of all these modes of representation contribute to the effect of creating a complex, non simplistic, portrayal of migrant characters, a representation which combats simplified representations in Irish broadcast media. One illustration of the so-called "poetic" mode is the attempt to establish visual associations between distant places, such as the host country and the world that the immigrant has left behind (see Nichols 2001, 102). This feature of the poetic mode corresponds with one of the most recurrent techniques of "accented" cinema: to compare places, cultures and societies by placing them in "analytic and critical juxtaposition" (Naficy 2001, 290). Grossman and O'Brien use this dramatic combination to transmit on screen the existence of a diasporic and transnational liminality. In *Silent Song*, shots of Edinburgh city centre are constantly interspersed with video footage of Qamishlo, in Kurdistan, Syria. As the directors claim, their main aim is to reflect a "radical disjuncture between the 'here' and the 'elsewhere', furnishing a narrative framework within which to address the (dis)embodied dimensions of acoustic memory" (Grossman and O'Brien 2006, 278). This juxtaposition between places also occurs in *Promise and Unrest*, where images of Ireland are constantly interspersed with shots of Noemi's hometown in the Philippines. As we will see, this film intentionally crosses and problematizes the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction by its reliance on such poetic analogies. As iconic cultural theorist Declan Kiberd maintains, documentaries are inevitably constructions that incorporate imaginative elements which at times conceal themselves "behind veneers of objectivity." (1997, 33-40) These imaginative elements are present in Grossman and O'Brien's films.

The “poetic” mode is also illustrated by the repetitive use in the three documentaries of images of travelling which are clearly loaded with metaphorical connotations, particularly the train, the Dart, and the Luas. Vehicles of mobility (such as buses or trains) are frequently emphasized in “accented” cinema as symbols of exilic displacement and liminality (see Naficy 2001, 222-261). Grossman and O’Brien rely on this journey motif in order to reveal the complex spatial and temporal coordinates of contemporary migratory movements. Identity is no longer fixed to a single territorial location, but defined by constant movements across and through different private and public spaces. In analyzing Solana’s *Tangos: Exile of Gardel*, Naficy notes that trains are appropriate settings for displaced individuals to reflect upon their lives, and that a train ride can be “used as an occasion for a poignant reflection on the meaning of exile and the multiple absences and losses that constitute it.” (2001, 261) This metaphorical use of the journey by train is also observed in *Here to Stay*. At a particular stage, we are shown images of Fidel inside a train on his way to one of his political conventions. We see what Fidel sees (a moving rural landscape outside), while his voice-over reflects on how the West, and particularly Ireland, is not such an ideal place as he first thought. Such dialectical relationship between the inside closed space of a vehicle in movement and the outside open space of nature is also reflected in *Promise and Unrest*, where, as we will see, journeys across spaces, both real and imaginary, constitute an important thematic thread.

The “poetic” mode is also observed in Grossman and O’Brien’s deliberate transgression of long sequences through edits and cutaways. As Grossman explains when commenting on *Here to Stay*, the film is not solely “observational,” (2012, 23) as they deliberately edited pieces in the post-production sequence. Fidel’s biography is transmitted through accumulative fragments, glimpses of his life filmed over a period of three years. We follow the trajectory of his life; but this life is transmitted as in constant transit, in flux, mediated by persistent fluctuations between the domestic and public spheres. In this film, the “poetic” mode is also observed by the suggestive employment of certain cinematographic techniques. The opening sequence, for instance, is significant as the viewer is denied a direct view of the figure of Fidel. He is behind a yellow and greenish hospital curtain conversing with a patient; we are unable to see him at first, and we just hear his foreign accent, “provocatively invit(ing) the viewer to first and foremost listen to Fidel’s accented voice” (ibid). This first image, which recurs towards the end of the documentary (10 minutes before finishing), deliberately foregrounds the gestural aspect

of nursing, disrupting the hegemony traditionally attached to the visual (and voyeuristic) dimensions of cinema.

Together with the “observational” and the “poetic” modes, Grossman and O’Brien’s documentaries share some features typical of “performative” documentaries in their emphasis on the emotional and subjective dimensions. As Nichols explains, in “performative” documentaries, knowledge is described as “concrete and embodied, based on the specificities of personal experience.” (2001, 131) Grossman and O’Brien look at the Irish institutional framework (particularly the government or the State) by means of the characters’ experience and emotional involvement. By doing so, they approach the political sphere from the personal standpoint, transmitting a collective experience through the particular perspective of an individual. The expressive dimension is crucial in the three documentaries, as observed in the writing of letters and the composition of songs. As I will show in my close analysis of *Promise and Unrest*, the mother and daughter’s communication which is established is mainly epistolary. The migrant’s world is represented through our directly subjective encounter with Noemi, who as a voice-over narrator reads aloud the letters she has written to her daughter and other relatives back at home. Thus, the stories of these migrants are revealed in their most personal and emotional aspects. This “performative” dimension of the documentary, which gives an embodied dimension to the theme of migration, is also present in *Silent Song*. Here, the “emotional intensity and subjective expressiveness” (Nichols 2001, 101) typical of the “performative” mode is reflected by means of the musical component. Its protagonist is Bahrán, one of the numerous Kurdish singers, musicians and composers resident and exiled in Europe. Ever since he released his first album *Karwan u Sinûr (The Caravan and the Border)* in 1999, he has been composing and singing music, for a projected audience mainly comprised of the Kurdish Diaspora living in the West (Grossman and O’Brien 2006, 274). Music is envisioned as a medium of resistance for this exiled community. As specified in the initial credits, “Music relayed on radio, satellite television and the Internet provides a resistant mode of national, political and cultural expression for the Kurdish diaspora.”¹² Music is also a medium of communal expression, as it surpasses geographical boundaries and political censorship, linking this diasporic community together. This emphasis on music and performance is also evident in Grossman and O’Brien’s second documentary, *Here to Stay*. Fidel’s performance as a transvestite or *bakla*¹³ calls our attention to the performative-becoming aspect of identity itself. This film shows that identity is not a fixed essence but something that is deliberately *performed*, following Butler’s

terminology (1990),¹⁴ as Fidel *constructs* his identity in front of his audience. Naficy notes that there is a “slippage between identity and performance of identity” in “accented” films; such slippage may occur by the deliberate use of the postcolonial strategy of “mimicry,” “the kind of overimitation or underimitation of the other that, in its surplus or deficit and in its irony, produces partiality of identity, where there is a slippage between the original and its copy.” (2001, 285) Fidel’s mimic performances on stage allow him to fashion new empowered identities which counteract his subalternity as a gay migrant in Ireland. As he hints to a local lady from Mayo who flirts with him in one of his transvestite performances, he can transform himself into whatever the Irish want him to be: he can be native or foreign, man or woman. Interestingly enough, the film ends with Fidel’s musical performance on stage, leaving the ending open and suggesting the shifting nature of all identities.

Grossman and O’Brien’s films are not only “observational,” “poetic” and “performative.” Their documentaries are also “reflexive” in that they draw attention to the problems of representing Others by questioning the truthfulness or authenticity of representation itself (see Nichols 2011, 125). As Eric Barnoux (1993, 358) states in his historical overview of documentary films, the “point of view” is intrinsic in any documentary and all documentary-makers inevitably transmit their “version of the world” (quoted in O’Brien 2012, 18). Acknowledging this inherent subjectivity is at the core of all reflexive documentaries. It has been noted that adopting an “anthropologist” mode in filmmaking can be risky at times, as it can lead to accusations of being “exploitative” or “voyeuristic,” maintaining thus “colonial” relationships between the filmmakers and the characters the film (Rodgers and Spitz 2007, 32). Nevertheless, Grossman and O’Brien avoid such risks by means of different techniques. To start with, rather than perceiving their own documentaries as transparent windows on the world, they force the audience to think about filmmaking as a construct. This is clearly reflected through the metaphor of the empty stage, which constitutes the dramatic climax of their first documentary, *Silent Song*. This “non-realist” component in the filmic narrative (using Naficy’s terminology, 2001, 276)¹⁵ acquires such a symbolic importance that it deserves close analysis here.

Silent Song is the most “reflexive” of the three documentaries. The story itself centers upon the challenge of transmitting the resistance exerted by the Kurdish diaspora. How could documentary makers address this issue when Kurdish composers such as Bahran have been hindered in expressing themselves in their own country? The documentary begins with a scene which simulates computer editing, inviting us to reflect on the

process by which reality itself is constructed through continuous mediations and editings. Bahran's council-estate building in Sighthill (Edinburgh) is seen as if through an interactive Internet window, highlighting the relevance of new media communication technology (satellite television and music websites) as relevant conduits for the transmission of Kurdish artistic expression. The success of such process of transmission is interrogated towards the end of the film, when we see Bahran performing "Silent Song" in an empty auditorium, the Royal Lyceum Theatre in Edinburgh. As Grossman and O'Brien note, this "imperial resonant European playhouse" is "deliberately bereft of an audience and remote from a concert hall in Baghdad, simultaneously recuperating and celebrating an event that never occurred, yet memorialised 24 years later in this concrete performative act." (2006, 283) The purpose of using an empty stage for such a scene was, in the words of both filmmakers, to raise "questions surrounding the re-construction of an historical event within a filmic present" (271). Bahran appears "as both social actor and performer" (ibid). The boundaries between this character as a (real) subject and as a (fictional) actor dissipate. Suddenly, the artifice of documentary-making is revealed on the screen. The fictive reconstruction of the song prompts an interrogation of the success of the transmission. The theatre is empty and therefore there is no audience at all, with the exception of the viewers of the film. The performance of the song in this imperial stage celebrates Bahran's resistance, but it also documents the inability he faces when transmitting his message to a receptive audience in Europe. Naficy has expressed accurately the contradiction that assails many (political) exilic artists in the West: while there they manage to escape the censorship they would experience in their home country, in the West they still struggle to make their voices heard. In this sense, speaking in the West is not a guarantee that their voices would be heard:

When they speak from this site at home, they have an impact, even if, and often because, they are punished for it. In fact, interrogation, censorship, and jailing are all proof that they have been heard. But if they move out into external exile in the West, where they have the political freedom to speak, no one may hear them among the cacophony of voices competing for attention in the market. In that case, Gayatri Spivak's famous question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" will have to be reworded to ask, "Can the Subaltern be heard?." (2001, 11)

Bahran's voice does not remain mute but it is largely constrained in terms of reaching a broad audience. By questioning the potential of this voice to be heard, Grossman and O'Brien lay significant stress not only on *what*

gets represented (in this particular case the resistant act of performing the song), but also on *how* this event is represented and the limits involved in such an act. As the directors acknowledge, this scene “acts as reminder of the continuing repression of Kurdish cultural practices in the present” (Grossman and O’Brien 2006, 284).

Such silencing of oppositional voices is not only reflected in visual terms by the opera seats which are vacant, but also in auditory ways by the lyrics of Bahran’s song. This song is defined as “silent,” thus pointing to the inarticulate state which surrounds Bahran’s performance. The oxymoron “Silent Song” serves different purposes. First, as the directors explain, the poem criticizes the dominant Iraqi State for censoring Kurdish cultural expression (Grossman and O’Brien 2006, 280). As the lyrics say, “You are the chorus and I am alone. I don’t understand you”; “How can I sing beautiful songs for you?,” “For you, it will never be heard. My song will remain silent.” But the oxymoron of the title also alludes, in its opposing terms, to the presence of an absence; in other words, to the existence of an archive which is already lost and inaccessible. As Bahran claims at the beginning of the film, “all my studio, all my library, all my memory, all my interviews with Kurdish professional singers” had been looted by the Iraqi government; “All the hard work is bye-bye. So that itself is a symphony. If you want to compose a symphony about Kurdistan and my memory—that is a symphony” (272). *Silent Song* powerfully mediates on the problems of representing such loss, by foregrounding the inability to recuperate a destroyed archive while at the same time highlighting Bahran’s ability to reconstruct a “living archive” (Bailey and Boyce 2001, 87) through his resistant musical performance.

This “reflexive” aspect of Grossman and O’Brien’s films is also observed in other aspects worth reviewing here. As they admit in an interview, their anthropological observations are subject to a series of negotiations and ethical responsibilities (Villar-Argáiz 2016). Moreover, the protagonists in their documentaries slip outside strict categorizations, with the implication that it is impossible to appropriate them in full. In terms of narrative structure, these films share with “accented” cinema their reliance on incompleteness and open endings (the “difficulty of achieving closure, completion,” Naficy 2001, 289). In *Here to Stay*, Fidel is never reduced to a narrow role; he is not simply a migrant, a nurse, a gay, or a political activist; his identity is complex and constantly in flux, fluctuating along the social and political structures around him. As Grossman explains, “we set about trying to create a rounded portrait: he wasn’t just a nurse, he wasn’t just a diva, he wasn’t just a political agitator and activist. We became interested in how he brought these different dimensions

together” (Villar-Argáiz 2016). The problem of exoticising the Other is majestically reenacted by this character in the closing sequence of the film. Fidel appears in his *bakla* performance, as an Other doubly Othered; his conversation with a local lady from Mayo reveals the utter pressure exercised in Ireland by gender and racial distinctions and Fidel’s ability to slip outside such strict categorizations. Noemi’s silences, in *Promise and Unrest*, also disrupt easy voyeuristic appropriations of the migrant Other. Her relationship with her daughter is defined by gaps and puzzling silences and all this is transmitted accurately on screen. Overall, the protagonists of Grossman and O’Brien’s documentaries defy enclosure within cinematic frames. Comparing documentary films to photographic work, renowned ethnographic filmmaker David MacDougall notes, “If film adds movement and transiency to still photography, it has never resolved the deeper transiency of the subjects escaping from the work. Even as a film is being shot, its subjects are in transition, moving towards a future that the film cannot contain.” (1998, 33) Indeed, Grossman and O’Brien’s characters slip away into the future at the end of the film. In the final credits of *Here to Stay*, we learn that Fidel left the Mater Hospital and that he continued to work as a staff nurse at another hospital in Dublin. Pointing to a future time which is not recorded on screen, the viewer realizes that Fidel’s life has radically changed since the time of filming, and that the film just captures a particular period in his life. The same happens in *Promise and Unrest*. As we will see in the next section, the open ending of this documentary suggests that the subjects would move on and that their future reality cannot be grasped.

***Promise and Unrest* as an “accented” cinematic production: narrative structure, epistolarity and juxtaposition**

Promise and Unrest constitutes one of the most sustained explorations by filmmakers of the situation of immigrants in contemporary Ireland. In a 2010 review of this film, Ronit Lentin praises it for being a powerful reminder “of the hidden lives of thousands of migrant care workers in post-Tiger Ireland,” whose plight is often ignored “as Irish people are ... preoccupied with Ireland’s crumbling economy.” Indeed, this documentary captures subversively the realities of economic migrants in Ireland. Challenging simplified or victimized representations of immigrants in broadcast media, Grossman and O’Brien offer a rounded portrayal of Noemi, a Philippine care-giver. Her daily life is described at a particular slow pace. There are shots when nothing deliberately happens: we see her

with a pensive look sitting on a chair of her tiny dining room in Dublin, or patiently waiting in a hospital for registering in an intensive “care course”. The routines of Noemi’s life as a migrant are emphasized by the repetition of sequences where she is transferring money, rehearsing with her music choir, chatting with her roommate while preparing dinner and even actively participating in protests and meetings. Such filmic representation of the rituals of her life on exile is deliberate, and it is used to emphasize stability rather than instability, thus counteracting the deterritorializing effects of exile. As Naficy notes, “At certain junctures in an exile’s life, it becomes important, even mandatory, to stress the fixity, not fluidity, the weightiness, not weightlessness, of identity.” (2001, 287) Towards the end of the film, we learn that Noemi is made redundant. After working for more than six years in Ireland, she has no working permit and with no papers she would need to leave Ireland. Like that “cinema of transition” that Naficy (77) analyses (films focusing on characters “who are in transit in third spaces, where they attempt to obtain passports, visas, and plane tickets”), *Promise and Unrest* highlights Noemi’s interstitial, vulnerable condition as a full-right citizen in Ireland. Through her political involvement in a “Domestic Workers Forum” organized by a national, rights-based migration NGO, she is eventually reinstated in a job and recuperates her work permit.

This section examines in detail *Promise and Unrest* by looking at various “accented” features regarding this film’s plot, visual style and narrative structure. I will particularly focus on its circular structure and other elements regarding narrative structure such as multilinguality, epistolarity and juxtaposition. In terms of narrative structure, two features that this film shares with “accented” cinema are its incompleteness and open ending. *Promise and Unrest* displays a circular structure, and this is built around the image of the Luas, Dublin’s tram, a suggestive metaphor of migration, movement and fluidity (Interview with Villar-Argáiz 2016). The film starts with the image of the Luas passing quickly over a bridge; it is very early in the morning; it is dark and the setting is Dublin, 2007 (as shown by the credits on the screen). A scene later, we see Noemi and Gracelle walking towards the train station. She admonishes her to bring her gloves next time, as Ireland is much colder than the Philippines. Moments later, we see both characters inside the train; they have taken the Green Line of the Luas, which connects Ranelagh to other places around and within Dublin. This scene of mother and daughter inside the Luas will reappear later in the film, and is loaded with metaphorical connotations. Significantly enough, Noemi and Gracelle are together in a liminal geographic location, a train in constant movement, what anticipates the

precariousness and instability of their physical union. As we will see throughout the film, their relationship as mother and daughter occurs and blossoms in the flux between cultures. While we see both of them inside the train, we hear the voice-over narration of the mother explaining in her dialect Waray the reasons why she left her daughter as a baby in the Philippines: “Dear Chinggay. I wrote this letter so you would understand why I left you behind in the Philippines where you were still a baby ... The reason was because of love.” As we hear these words, the camera shows close-ups of Noemi’s and Gracelle’s faces. As Noemi utters her last words (“The reason was because of love”), the camera angle changes and we see Gracelle’s image reflected on the window of the Luas, an image which becomes diffused at times because of the lights changing and the rapid movement of the train. This blurring shot signals the transition to the next scene, which takes us back to the Philippines two years before, in 2005.

This image of Noemi and Gracelle taking the Luas on their way to school reappears once again towards the second third of the film (1.06 minutes). Again, we hear Noemi addressing Gracelle diegetically and reminding her to bring her gloves next time. Seconds later, they both wait for the Luas at the station and then we see close-ups of their faces inside the Luas. The sequence finishes, again, with Gracelle’s image reflected on the train’s window as she looks outside at a dark landscape passing by quickly.

Towards the end of the film, this same sequence of images (the Luas and the daily journey to school) reappears although with some important modifications. The intrusion of the mother as a voice-over narrator is significant as she has been absent for almost the last part of the film: “Chinggay. I am writing this letter for you to remember. I am getting older and you are a grown up girl now. I would like you to never forget why I left you behind when you were only a baby. It was because of love.” As in her opening address, Noemi repeats the reasons why she left Gracelle behind in the Philippines. The circular structure which frames the film emphasizes the continuity and endless cycle of selfless giving that characterizes transnational motherhood. This circularity is also highlighted by the voice-over of Gracelle, who communicates towards the end of the film her intention to follow her mother’s steps: “I guess if I work abroad, I’ll send some money home as well. I don’t have to do it, but I want to help them.” Gracelle, it seems, will follow the example of her mother, as she predicts she will be working abroad in order to support her relatives in the Philippines.

In spite of the fact that *Promise and Unrest* displays a circular structure, the ending exhibits some interesting differences with respect to

the opening sequence. To start with, not the same words are used by Noemi in her letter to Gracelle; she adds this time an important fact: that she is growing old, emphasizing the fact that the cycle of migration will continue but death is irremediable. The theme of migration is thus expressed majestically both in diachronic and synchronic ways. Interestingly enough, Gracelle leaves for school on her own; we hear a door closing and the noise of the Luas as it departs from the station in Ranelagh. The last shot shows Noemi sitting in her apartment with a pensive look, while Gracelle is presumably in the Luas on her way to school. This hints another future separation between mother and daughter. Motherhood is thus defined by constant separations and reunions. Migration, in turn, is described as an endless cycle of goings and returnings, of *Promises and Unrest*, as Grossman explains when commenting on the metaphorical significance of the title of the documentary:

One can get caught up in this promise or adventure in so far as one never may arrive at a point where one can rest, metaphorically speaking, hence the last shot of the film where we see Noemi sitting alone in a chair at night. So the title speaks to the hopes and dreams of migrants. It also recalls the fact that the act of migration itself is a never-ending process without any guarantees of a better life. (Interview with Villar-Argaiz 2016)

Together with this circular structure, other features that *Promise and Unrest* shares with “accented” cinema in terms of narrative structure are multilinguality, epistolarity and juxtaposition. Regarding multilinguality, the narrative structure of the film is constructed around the voice-over narrators of mother and daughter: Noemi speaks in Waray and Gracelle with a perfect, though accented, English, like most exilic and diasporic films which are bilingual or multilingual (Naficy 2001, 50). By incorporating different narrators in different languages, *Promise and Unrest* destabilizes the so-called “voice-of-God commentary,” or omniscient narrator, of mainstream cinema and journalism:

If the dominant cinema is driven by the hegemony of synchronous sound and a strict alignment of speaker and voice, accented films are counter hegemonic insofar as many of them de-emphasize synchronous sound, insist on first-person and other voice-over narrations delivered in the accented pronunciation of the host country’s language, create a slippage between voice and speaker, and inscribe everyday non dramatic pauses and long silences. (24)

Noemi’s use of her mother tongue can be a powerful indicative of her desire to maintain an organic relationship with her original culture and

with her community of address. The spectators are turned into active participants in the story, as their role is not simply to watch, but also to read carefully the English translation which appears as subtitles. Another narratological difference is that Noemi delivers her own voice-overs in direct speech by means of letters written to her family relatives back at home (most of them addressed to her daughter). On the other hand, Gracelle's interventions are not structured around the epistolary form and are addressed in the third person. This narratological difference (both in terms of language and style) might indicate the emotional gap that separates mother and daughter. As is common in "accented" art (see Naficy 2001, 127), motherhood appears as dysfunctional in *Promise and Unrest*. The documentary depicts a mother and a daughter who occupy different generational, cultural, and linguistic worlds. For most of the film, both protagonists live in different countries. While Noemi tends to be preoccupied with her far-off homeland, her daughter is more concerned with the here and now. Their estrangement is also signalled by the projection of their voice-over narrations in different geographical locations. For the first 57 minutes of the film, and thus for the first two halves of its duration, the physical and spiritual separation of both mother and daughter is also indicated by the setting in which these two voices are projected. We hear the voice-over of the mother only in Ireland, while Gracelle acts as voice-over narrator when the spectator is situated in the Philippines. This, suddenly, begins to change moments after we learn that Noemi has applied for a family reunification visa and that Gracelle will soon join her in Ireland. In minute 57.01 we suddenly hear the voice-over of Noemi for the first time in the Philippines, as she is addressing her sister Neriza, expressing her gratitude for taking care of her children, as she has stood as a mother to them. Three minutes later it is the voice-over of Gracelle the one who speaks, this time in Ireland. Her voice transmits stagnantly the confusing feelings that assail her as a new migrant in Dublin: "It was a winter night when I came. I felt nothing. It seemed like I'm still in Babatngon, except that it's very cold." Towards the end of the film, the voice of the daughter predominates over the voice of the mother, until Noemi's voice-over is heard once again at the very end of the film.

This fluctuation of voice-over narrations accurately expresses the theme of exilic displacement central in the film, and it creates a structure which is nonlinear, repetitive, and fragmented. The successive addition of new letters by Noemi in the film brings new pieces of information, building what Naficy calls "a palimpsestic narrative structure." (2001, 113) Psychological depth is achieved by means of the epistolary mode, which allows us to have access to Noemi's emotional states and the

intensity of her interiority. By writing these letters to her daughter and also to other family relatives such as her mother (Nanay) and her younger sister (Neriza), Noemi expresses her feelings of longing, the pain of exile, the routines of her work in Ireland, and some recollections of her childhood in the Philippines.¹⁶ This epistolary mode attests to the importance exerted by subjective forms of representations and the relevance of the “highly situated, embodied and vividly personal perspective of specific subjects” (Nichols 2001, 132). Grossman and O’Brien invite us to see the migrants’ world in its expressive dimension, by focusing on the specific, the local and the embodied. Borrowing Nichols’s words, they manage to animate “the personal so that it may become our port of entry to the political.” (137)

These letters by Noemi are also appropriate mediums to transmit her trauma of exile. Each letter written by her recalls her inability to close the emotional gap created by exile, as this gap is repeated with each letter, “turning epistolarity into, if not communication, at least a ritual of communication” (Naficy 2001, 114). As a common feature of the “accented” films’ narratives, letters appropriately transmit the opposite meanings of presence and absence which are embedded in all experiences of exile: “Exile and epistolarity are constitutively linked because both are driven by distance, separation, absence, and loss and by the desire to bridge the multiple gaps” (101).

The tensions and dilemmas experienced by Noemi in her exile are not only transmitted acoustically in the film through the oral articulation of these letters. The film is full of images suggestive of migration and displacement. The Luas becomes a signifying trope signaling the exilic tensions of interstitiality and liminality. As commented above, it is common to see the image of this Dublin train passing quickly over a bridge. Other means of transport which are emphasized are cars, bicycles, motorcycles, and boats, whether fishing boats (in Noemi’s hometown) or rowing boats (in Dublin’s River Liffey), all of them in movement. All these images suggest migrants’ fractured identities, in their diasporic status as subjects in-between two countries, two realities, two experiences. They also act as powerful narrative devices for introducing the transition between the two geographical settings of Ireland and the Philippines. Noemi’s various journeys back and forth are inscribed in these “third spaces and border chronotopes” of “accented” cinema, “transitional and transnational sites, such as borders..., train stations, and transportation vehicles” (Naficy 2001, 153-4).

In terms of narrative structure, this film also shares an important aspect with “accented” cinema: spatial juxtaposition. As Naficy notes, filmic