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Depicting and evoking vulnerability in Irish-language cinema: *An Cailín Ciúin (The Quiet Girl) (2022)*

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ABSTRACT

We are currently living through an extraordinary period of productivity and success for Irish-language cinema, evident in the critical and commercial success of *An Cailín Ciúin (The Quiet Girl)*, the first Irish-language feature to be nominated for the Best International Feature Film Academy Award. Understanding the reasons for the success of *An Cailín Ciúin* is a complex undertaking that involves considerations at a number of levels including the particularities of its linguistic and aesthetic realisation that contributed to its impact on audiences. This article draws on Laura U. Marks concept of “haptic visuality” to examine how the film realises and communicates evocatively to the viewer the theme of vulnerability. This functions on a range of levels but there are three principle layers to this that this article will examine – one is language and the choice to translate the source text into Irish (and the implications of this); second, the nature and historical context of the Irish language film production; and third and perhaps most importantly, the sophisticated realisation of vulnerability (and its significance) within the film’s narrative and aesthetic approach, including through Kate McCullough’s superb cinematography.

KEYWORDS

An Cailín Ciúin (The Quiet Girl); vulnerability; Irish cinema; Irish language; haptic visuality

We are currently living through an extraordinary period of productivity and success for Irish-language cinema, evident in the critical and commercial success of recent releases including *Kneecap (2024)* (winner of the NEXT audience award at the Sundance Film Festival) and particularly *An Cailín Ciúin (The Quiet Girl, 2022)*. Winner of The Grand Prix of the International Jury at the Berlin International Film Festival in February 2022, *An Cailín Ciúin* subsequently received a large number of further national and international awards including 8 awards at the IFTA¹ Film & Drama Awards and culminating with its nomination on 24 January 2023, for the Best International Feature Film Oscar, the first Irish-language production to receive such recognition. While Irish language films have previously been the recipient of significant national and international accolades (a prominent example being Tom Collins’ London-set drama *Kings (2007)*), *An Cailín Ciúin* uniquely also managed to connect with a wide audience in a manner never previously achieved by an Irish-language production. By October 2022 the film had taken over €1 million at the Irish and

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UK box office and broken box office records at several cinemas, including the Irish Film Institute.²

In reviews that followed the film's release, reviewers repeatedly alluded to the centrality of vulnerability to *An Cailín Ciúin's* narrative, with the *Hollywood Reporter* describing the film as having an "achingly vulnerable centre."³ This article will examine how the film realises and communicates evocatively to the viewer this trope of vulnerability. This vulnerability (as evident in the *Reporter's* review referred to above) is most obviously embodied in the central character of Cáit, played in an incredibly affecting debut performance by Catherine Clinch. However, this article contends that vulnerability is realised on a number of further levels: first, the nature and precarious historical context of Irish language film production; second, the language used in the film and the choice to translate the English-language source text, the novella *Foster* (2010) by Claire Keegan, into Irish (and the implications of this); and third and perhaps even more importantly the sophisticated realisation of vulnerability (and its significance) within the film's narrative and aesthetic approach, particularly through Kate McCullough's superb cinematography. In this final consideration, we will be drawing on the work of Laura U. Marks and her concept of "haptic visuality"⁴ to examine how vulnerability is realised and evoked within the film's aesthetic.

An Cailín Ciúin emerged as one of the, to date, eight supported productions (with a further two at the time of writing either in development or production) from Irish language public broadcaster TG4's⁵ Cine4 initiative. These films have been characterised by a focus on often marginalised or vulnerable characters and their attempts to come to terms with challenging circumstances (as I have detailed previously in earlier work).⁶ The first film to emerge from the scheme was Datháí Keane's *Finky* (2019), a dark and somewhat surreal tale (co-written by Keane and Diarmuid de Faoite) of musician and puppeteer Micí Finky (Dara Devaney) who escapes a troubled past by travelling to Glasgow only to be tragically paralysed following an accident. *Finky* was described by *Film Ireland* online magazine following its premiere at the Galway Film Fleadh as "a celebration of the Irish language" that "catapults the language onto an exciting new terrain, far beyond the traditions of Irish-language filmmaking"⁷ and this description could well be applied across all the Cine4 productions to date in their concern with and prioritisation of the Irish language and its role in accentuating tales of marginalisation, vulnerability and precarity. Subsequent films released under the scheme to date include Tomás Ó Súilleabháin's *Arracht* (2019), a famine-set narrative of personal trauma and revenge; *Foscadh* (2021), a raw, emotionally wrought and at times excruciating excavation of loneliness and human vulnerability; *Róise & Frank* (2022), a drama-comedy featuring a dog (possibly a reincarnated dead husband) that helps a widow come to terms with her recent loss; *Tarrac* (2022), a drama focused on the return of emigrant Aoife (Kelly Gough) to the Kerry Gaeltacht to support her ailing father and her subsequent involvement in a female Naomhóg racing team; *Fidil Ghorm* (2024) which focuses on 8-year-old Molly (Edith Lawlor) who wants to learn to play the fiddle in order to wake her father up from a coma; and horror film *Fréamhacha* (2024) which revolves around care worker Shoo (Clare Monnelly), sent to a remote Irish-speaking village to care for an agoraphobic woman (Bríd Ní Neachtain), who fears both the neighbours and *na Sídhe* – sinister folkloric entities she believes abducted her decades before. While all of these films have enjoyed modest theatrical releases to date and some festival success, it was the release of *An Cailín*

Ciúin in early 2022 that brought Irish language film to an unprecedented level of both commercial and critical acclaim.

The Irish language film production sector has had a precarious existence for much of its history (as was the experience of the broader industry in Ireland post-independence) largely dependent on the efforts of dedicated language enthusiasts and organisations (such as Gael Linn) and vulnerable to the changing priorities of successive governments throughout the history of its development.⁸ While the national broadcaster RTÉ (set up in 1962) and the Irish Film Board (now Screen Ireland) (founded in 1981) had statutory obligations to promote Irish culture and language, neither contributed significantly and it was not until the establishment of TG4 in 1996 that an appropriate support structure began to emerge to support the development of a recognisable Irish language film and television culture. The result of decades of lobbying by Irish-language communities and enthusiasts across the island, the arrival of the channel on Halloween night in 1996 was greeted warmly by many Irish speakers – though there was also much criticism in the media of the initiative as a waste of tax-payers money; as Cathal Goan, TG4's first *Ceannasaí* (Controller) remarked, such critics “contrast[ed] the dire needs of a health service in crisis with the sinful extravagance of establishing a television channel in a ‘dead’ language.”⁹ From its beginnings, therefore, TG4 was under pressure to provide both a meaningful service to Irish language communities while still attracting respectable audiences across the country by remaining accessible to a mainly non-Irish speaking audience (hence the decision to subtitle in English all programmes apart from live broadcasts, and feature English language films prominently in its schedule). Despite this challenge, TG4 nonetheless established a reputation for bringing a “*súil eile*” [another perspective] (its motto since foundation) to aspects of Irish culture and society. This was particularly evident within the Irish-language drama productions that the channel supported and broadcast from its foundation. Indeed when the question was put to former Deputy CEO Pádraic Ó Ciardha in 2009 where film fit into TG4's vision, he responded

it is clearly a badge of honour or a symbol of maturity in a minority language broadcaster, in any broadcaster really, that you make film, and drama particularly [...] When we were founded in 1995 our ambition was, like our Welsh cousins, to make a feature film that would show that the language was alive, could deal with the narrative form, could come alive in that art form.¹⁰

TG4's initial focus was on short film productions, given the more modest budgets involved and the possibility of getting funding support from other Irish film agencies, including the Irish Film Board. However, there was ongoing frustration regarding the limited budget and length allowed in the short film initiatives and the Irish-language film sector lobbied for a scheme to emerge that would facilitate and support feature film productions in Irish. The success of Tom Collins *Kings* (2007), a bilingual production set in London among Irish-speaking emigrants from Conamara which received a theatrical release, and considerable critical acclaim (including five awards from the Irish Film & Television Academy), suggested that there was potential for the further development of the Irish-language film sector. *Kings* was part-funded by the Irish Language Broadcasting Fund in Northern Ireland set up in 2005. Section 6 of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement (signed seven years previous) set out a commitment to support Irish-language broadcasting in the UK and this eventually led to the establishment of this fund, administered

by Northern Ireland Screen. This initiative provided an important precedent for a dedicated funding scheme to be established in the Republic and eventually in 2017, TG4 announced the Cine4 scheme in conjunction with the Irish Film Board (now Screen Ireland) and the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (now Coimisiún na Meán). Uniquely the scheme was only open “to live action feature film projects in the Irish language” but with “the potential to appeal to Irish and international audiences.”¹¹ A budget of up to €1.2million was also provided which while modest by international standards, did allow some certainty to directors now shooting on cheaper digital formats.

This broader challenging cultural and industrial context that prevailed historically as regards Irish-language cinema accentuates the status of *An Cailín Ciúin* as the product of what Jeannine Woods has described as “a minor cinema.”¹² For Woods (in a chapter also considering a further Irish-language production, *Foscadh* (2021)),

To the extent that Irish is the language of both films, a minoritised language in a post-colonial society, they can be regarded as *minor cinema*, in contrast to the cinematic modes of dominant cinema and the discursive values underpinning it.¹³

On one level that “minor cinema” production context underscores the appeal and status of a text such as *An Cailín Ciúin* dealing with marginalisation and vulnerability, in a manner comparable to Neasa Hardiman’s explanation of the reasons behind the commercial success of John Carney’s Oscar-winning release *Once* (2006). *Once*’s appeal, Hardiman contends, was due to its strategic deployment of its low-budget production context to complement the central theme within the film:

the success of *Once* is connected to its strategic deployment of two central ideas: peripherality and equality. These two ideas pervade every aspect of the film, informing its narrative, determining its form and even inflecting its conditions of production and distribution. In its deployment of these ideas, *Once* creates a sense of honest, unvarnished authenticity.¹⁴

In light of Hardiman’s comments, it is noteworthy that the low-budget context of *An Cailín Ciúin*’s production was also repeatedly alluded to in critical commentary following the film’s release, and was also a factor in framing and informing how the film was received. Prominent examples include *Screen Daily* which remarked on how for “a low-budget film in the Irish language with no big stars, *The Quiet Girl* (*An Cailín Ciúin*) has certainly made its mark on the international film stage,”¹⁵ while the *Financial Times* described the transformation of “the low-budget production into the highest-grossing Irish-language film in history.”¹⁶ Furthermore, the choice of Irish as the principal language of *An Cailín Ciúin* provides a still more distinctive and evocative complement to the central thematic focus of the film.

A complex and delicate coming-of-age drama, *An Cailín Ciúin* concerns a 9-year-old girl – Cáit – who is coming to terms with her family’s decision to deliver her to distant relatives for an extended period, with strong suggestions that she may have been the victim of abuse. In this context, the Irish language itself – given its history of oppression and decline in status and use, marginalised contemporary status in Ireland and uncertain future as a community language – accentuates the narrative heft of a story concerned with marginalisation, precarity and loss. Once the first language of most inhabitants of the island of Ireland, the status of the language in Ireland was fundamentally undermined over centuries by the processes of colonisation and the horrendous impact of the famine in the mid-nineteenth century that was particularly devastating for areas where the Irish

language continued to be the dominant mode of communication. Despite efforts by the Irish Free-State post-independence in 1922 to revive the language in Ireland (following “revivalist policies under the three themes of Pressure, Preferment and Projection”)¹⁷ these efforts were poorly applied and largely unsuccessful evident in the relatively small number of people who speak and use Irish regularly on a daily basis in Ireland today (less than two per cent of the population).¹⁸ Furthermore, a 2015 report commissioned by Údarás na Gaeltachta (the state agency responsible for the development of Irish-speaking regions) on the Irish language raised serious concerns about the likelihood of the language surviving as a community language beyond the current generation.¹⁹

Yet despite this challenging broader historical and contemporary context, the Irish language nonetheless continues to hold an important place in the lives and sense of identity of most Irish people. A poll conducted by Ireland Thinks/The Good Information Project in March 2022 found that 65% of Irish people indicated that the Irish language was important or very important to their identity, with that percentage rising to “75% among 18–24 year-olds.”²⁰ There is a real dissonance here, a poignancy perhaps, between actual ability to speak and use the language and its continuing importance to Irish people as a distinct marker of identity that may also have contributed to the emotional impact *An Cailín Ciúin* has had on Irish audiences in particular.

To accord with the translation of the text, the location of Cáit’s foster family is moved from Wexford in the novella to Waterford, and in particular An Rinn – the choice of Gaeltacht area is also significant. While all the Gaeltacht areas are under linguistic pressure from the dominance of English in Ireland generally and the increased number of English speakers moving into the areas concerned, An Rinn is part of one of the smallest and most threatened Gaeltacht areas (Gaeltacht na nDéise), consisting of just two parishes An Rinn (Ring) and An Sean Phobal (Old Parish). This choice of setting also foregrounds the distinctive Munster-Irish dialect of the area, a feature found across all of the Cine4 productions to date in which each film features prominently the dialect of Irish within the region in which it is set, underscoring the importance of language as a key component of the productions and the initiative more broadly.

That very vulnerability of the language is evident within the film itself at the level of the family in the figure of the alcoholic, neglectful and English-only speaking father Dan (Michael Patric). Within Cáit’s biological family the Irish language functions primarily between the mother and children, all of whom would appear to be the victims of a neglectful and (both novella and film strongly suggests) abusive English only speaking father. Dan has limited conversations with Cáit: when travelling in the car together few words are exchanged, and he also repeatedly belittles her in the film (and novella) in conversation with others, including the Kinsellas: Cáit to him is “the wanderer,” “the prodigal child,” who’ll “ate you out of house and home” with the sole consolation that “you can work her.” The history and power relationships between the Irish and English languages provides a resonant context here as personified in the relationship between the neglectful father and traumatised child.

As also noted by Jeannine Woods, the Irish language draws on a cultural and discursive legacy distinctive to the language and Irish experience. For Woods while *An Cailín Ciúin* invokes centrally the theme of vulnerability, it does so by creatively re-imagining “the indigenous discursive modes bound up with relationality.” In doing so, the film offers “a challenge to discourses of globalisation” particularly as they relate to vulnerability.²¹ By

“relational mode” Woods refers to the manner through which a “person is imagined in a relationship with many other beings, both human and non-human, [...] a model,” she contends, “that stands against the dominant model of individualism, which came with modernity and has been reinforced by the discourses of neoliberalism.”²² This “relational mode” arises for Woods (drawing on the work of Gearóid Ó Cruaíoch) “from the ‘symbolic universes’ of the Irish language which are largely taken from the concept of *dúchas*.”²³ This is an important term in Gaelic culture historically that is difficult to give a direct and straightforward translation for but encompasses a range of areas including (Peter McQuillan notes) “a sense of *origin* (where you come from), of *relations* (to whom and where you belong to); of heritage (what is natural or appropriate for you), of tradition (what it tells you about yourself), of *identity* (*your country and culture*).”²⁴

The Irish language and related cultural and historical context, therefore, powerfully inscribe the very vulnerability that Cáit herself experiences, while offering an alternative and productive “relational mode” response to the dominant discourses that prevail within global neoliberalism. This “relational mode” response is evident in the relationship that develops between Cáit, her foster parents, and the natural surroundings she encounters in her time spent in their company, a period critical to her own development and personal recuperation within the film. This mode is also relevant to the title of the film.

Some focus has been given in critical commentary to the title of *An Cailín Ciúin* (*The Quiet Girl*): on one level it recalls the title of one of the most successful Irish-set productions ever made: seminal Irish-American director John Ford’s greatest commercial success *The Quiet Man* (1952).²⁵ While Roddy Flynn has stated that “John Ford’s fantasy melodrama, populated with Irish stereotypes and punctuated by sequences of high drama (the horse race, the 11-minute fistfight) bears no relation to the later film,”²⁶ I would contend that the relationship between these two texts is more complex, including with regard to language. It is perhaps overlooked by some that the Irish language does feature in *The Quiet Man* – Ford was the son of native Irish speakers from the West of Ireland, grew up in a partly Irish-speaking home, and insisted that Irish be featured in his story of a returning Irish emigrant.²⁷ In the sequence concerned, the film’s lead female protagonist Mary Kate Danaher (Maureen O’Hara) discusses with the parish priest Father Lonergan (Ward Bond) through Irish the rather intimate subject of sexual relations with her husband, recently returned Irish American emigrant Sean Thornton (John Wayne). Significantly, the sequence was never subtitled on release and various reasons have been suggested both for the inclusion of the scene and the manner of its delivery.²⁸ Perhaps the most persuasive of these explanations is that Ford was conscious of the delicate subject being addressed – sexual relations – and the likelihood of censorship and the removal of the scene should it have been articulated in English.²⁹ Sexual relations (particularly female sexuality) was rarely a subject for public discourse for much of the twentieth century in Ireland, at a time when women’s own sexuality was strictly controlled with limited opportunities to express their perspective publicly on this, as in other matters. It is here that a significant and perhaps more resonant connection can be found with the 2022 Irish language production.

The title of *An Cailín Ciúin* (*The Quiet Girl*) suggests this very vulnerability of the female voice. The film is set in 1981 a period in which the silencing of particular voices (above all the female perspective) continued to be a feature of Irish culture more broadly. Cáit’s much put upon mother Máire (Kate Nic Chonaonaigh) regrettably

represents the experience of a considerable number of women in Ireland in the period, responsible for the care of a large family of young children, with limited access to contraception, and perhaps limited support from the father of the house or the state more broadly, with few options to articulate discontent. Her own response (as was the case with many families) is to seek care from relatives. This is a woman clearly trapped within what James Smith has described as the broader “architecture of containment”³⁰ that prevailed in Irish society well into the 1980s that impacted above all on women and what could be expressed with regard to their experiences and limited opportunities.

Cáit is already despite her young age clearly well aware of the necessity of silence. Shortly after arriving at her foster home, she responds to an invitation from her foster mother Eibhlín (Carrie Crowley) to go down to the well with the question “an rún é?” (is it a secret?). What young child would normally respond to an invitation to go to the well with the question: “is it a secret?” The strong implication here is that she has been taken to out of the way places by an adult previously, and warned to keep it a secret, sadly the tragic experience of too many children in Ireland in the period in which the film is set. It is moments such as this in *An Cailín Ciúin* that reveal one of the great strengths of the film and the approach taken by Bairéad that contributes to the emotional impact it has on the viewer: its ability to communicate traumatic and significant content often suggesting vulnerability not through exposition, dialogue or re-enactment (the route often taken in previous Irish films dealing with abuse) but rather through suggestion or visual allusion that requires the viewer to interpret and narrativise internally, making the impact of these moments all the more powerful and affecting. Eibhlín’s response is to emphasise that “Níl aon rún sa teach seo” (“There are no secrets in this house”). However, while well-meant and sincere in its expression, this remark also turns out to be untrue as the great reveal of the film is that the Kinsellas have their own traumatic secret that is not discussed with Cáit until revealed by a neighbour: the loss of their young child years earlier.

However, silence does not function within the film only as an indicator of oppression, control, or concealment.³¹ There is also the recognition that silence can provide its own strength and possibility, what Roddy Flynn calls “an act of resistance, a refusal to accept the premises implied in an interrogative question.”³² This recognition is most evident in the developing relationship between Cáit and her foster father Seán (Andrew Bennett) which is built around shared gestures and practices (leaving a biscuit on the table, the particulars of farmwork) rather than conversation, as part of the broader “relational mode” the film articulates. Indeed Seán defends Cáit’s silence to the nosy and spiteful neighbour Úna (Joan Sheehy) who dismisses her as “cailín ciúin an cailín chéana” [“A quiet girl, the same girl]:” “Deir sí an méid is gá di a rá. Go mbeadh a leithéid arís ann” [She says as much as she needs to say. May there be more like her] Seán retorts. Later he remarks to Cáit in a critical scene where their relationship deepens as they speak together at night on the beach by the Kinsella’s home: “Ní gá duit aon rud a rá. Cuimhnigh ar sin i gcónaí. Is iomaí duine nár thóg an deis a bhéal a choiméad dúnta ‘s a chaill mórán dá bharr” [“You don’t need to say anything. Remember that always. There are many who did not take the opportunity to remain silent and lost much as a result”]. As Flynn observes,

silence arguably allows [Cáit] to retain a kind of freedom. By declining to speak, to state her views and her positions, she remains free to interpret new situations as she encounters them.

She stands in stark contrast to those characters who simply parrot received wisdom, unthinkingly amplifying and reinforcing it as they do so.³³

The invocation of vulnerability within *An Cailín Ciúin* is facilitated above all by the sophisticated aesthetic approach taken to the adaptation of the source text. In common with Claire Keegan's novella *Foster* on which it is based, *An Cailín Ciúin* positions the viewer primarily (though unlike the novella not exclusively) from the perspective of Cáit the young girl at the centre of the narrative. As such, the achievement of the film is its ability to create an affective engagement and connection between viewer and protagonist that accounts significantly for the emotional heft of the film itself. To achieve this requires considerable aesthetic sophistication and the creation of what Laura U. Marks in another context describes as a "haptic visuality," that is an appeal "to contact – to embodied knowledge and to the sense of touch in particular – in order to recreate memories."³⁴ *An Cailín Ciúin* is a masterful demonstration of this trait and possibility, particularly in its evocation of vulnerability. Significantly, the film was shot in late 2020 and was one of the first features to be made under strict Covid-19 regulations in Ireland at that time.³⁵ This was a period when considerable efforts were being made to reduce human interactions and contact to restrict the spread of Covid-19 (including separating older and younger family members), a broader context that could only have added to the additional significance and poignancy of haptic processes (and their evocation) within the film.

From its opening sequence (Figure 1), *An Cailín Ciúin* evokes vulnerability by powerfully bringing the viewer into the subjective perspective of the young girl at the centre of the narrative, Cáit. This is realised through the sophisticated employment of mise-en-scène, cinematography, sound, editing and character placement and movement within the frame. Opening onto a rural landscape, the camera pans down to reveal a girl obscured beneath the grass of a hayfield. Given the unnatural pose she strikes on the ground (evoking what Nonie May has described, drawing on the work of Julia Kristeva, as "the semiotic chora: the affective spaces of infancy associated with the mother's body"),³⁶ the viewer would be forgiven at first for believing they were witnessing a body left



Figure 1. *An Cailín Ciúin* (2022). Permission to reproduce kindly granted by Breakout Pictures.

abandoned.³⁷ The fact that we hear voices call for “Cáit” can only further contribute to this initial unsettling possibility, as a voice off-screen shouts “Tá mam dho do lorg” [mam is looking for you]? Familiarity with stories of violence and abuse (including death) suffered by Irish children can only add to these initial concerns. Until movement is evident in the body depicted.

Eventually the young girl stands up in the hay field, her height barely above that of the blades of grass that surround her. She walks apprehensively back towards her family home (past bedclothes drying on the line) where we encounter the reason for her absence: she has wet her bed (one of several tropes denoting trauma and vulnerability returned to repeatedly in the film) and clearly fears the repercussions that will follow. This vulnerability is all the more impressed upon the viewer by the musical accompaniment: high-pitched delicate piano notes against a sweeping orchestral background. On entering Cáit’s family home, the first sound we hear is that of a crying baby, clearly distressed and seemingly alone.

We also witness Cáit depicted repeatedly alone or positioned isolated within the landscape particularly in the first third of the film, including at the beginning of an early sequence where she receives a letter from the postman and walks towards her family home. The letter is the acceptance of the request from her parents that Cáit stay with her cousins Eibhlín (Carrie Crowley) and Seán (Andrew Bennett). Under their care and devotion, largely absent it appears (particularly from her father) in her home life, Cáit grows in character and confidence as she becomes close to her foster parents and discovers their own traumatic history of loss, before she must return to her family in a powerful final and emotionally impactful parting at the end of the film.

Beyond the manner in which the sparse dialogue of the film conceals often traumatic content just beneath the surface of the film’s action, the sophisticated cinematography itself gestures towards hidden, underlying secrets across the film. This is particularly apparent in the manner in which the camera observes hesitantly and seemingly uncertainly scenes unfolding throughout the film, aligning the viewer with Cáit’s perspective and powerfully evoking her own vulnerability. It is remarkable, for example, how much of



Figure 2. *An Cailín Ciúin* (2022) permission to reproduce kindly granted by Breakout Pictures.



Figure 3. *An Cailín Ciúin* (2022) permission to reproduce kindly granted by Breakout Pictures.



Figure 4. *An Cailín Ciúin* (2022) permission to reproduce kindly granted by Breakout Pictures.

the film is shot through doorways or windows (see for example [Figures 2–4](#)), evoking a sense of looking in on but not perhaps entirely immersed within or fully understanding the narrative as it unfolds, a position that evokes for the viewer precisely the experience of so many children as they try to comprehend what is going on in the adult world.

As the film progresses there is a gradual revealing of Cáit as a person in parallel with the growing of intimacy between her and her foster parents. In one key sequence [30:30–35:00], the film moves from the discovery by Eibhlín that Cáit has wet her bed shortly after her arrival, to her first night where she does not do so. This sequence is hugely impressive in how it subtly yet powerfully realises a “haptic visuality” to evoke an affective response from the viewer. Laura U. Marks contends that cinema is as much a tactile and haptically charged medium as it is visual and aural, with bodily mimetic processes critical to understanding the relationship between the spectator and the film.³⁸ For Marks, tactile and sensory experiences can deepen our understanding of visual media. She contends that haptic perception, which involves

physical touch and sensation, plays a key role in how we engage with images and film. Rather than simply relying on visual cognition, haptic theory suggests that certain films or artworks encourage an embodied, sensory experience that involves the viewer's body and physical responses. This theory connects the senses of touch and vision, showing how images can evoke a more visceral, intimate connection with the viewer, often creating a deeper emotional or psychological response. Marks uses the term "haptic" to highlight the ways in which cinema and art can move beyond just visual pleasure to evoke an embodied, sensory encounter with the world. This is evident for example in how this sequence begins with Cáit and Eibhlín cutting onions together (Figure 5). The tears that flow in the scene evoke similar processes in the viewer affirmed by the music and Cáit's own vulnerability. There is an incredible subtlety and sophistication in this sequence (structured around the counting of strokes as Cáit's hair is brushed by her foster mother) in how it foregrounds successively human touch, interaction and the senses (hearing, seeing, touching, tasting) through close-ups and sequences that invoke successively all of these embodied aspects of human experience in a manner which highlights the potential in cinema to create a "haptic visuality."

Understanding the reasons for the success of *An Cailín Ciúin* – both critically and commercially – in Ireland and internationally is a challenging undertaking, given how rare it is for a low budget production in a minoritised language to have a significant impact on large audiences. We live in a time when there is a saturation of visual content and when this content is more accessible and travels more widely than at any point in the development of cinema and related audiovisual content. This article contends that a key contributing factor for the success of the film was its ability to create an affective engagement and connection between viewer and protagonist through its evocation of vulnerability. However, this vulnerability also carries with it a strength. As noted by Sarah Clark Miller:

The receptivity that our vulnerability signifies means we are open to a whole host of experiences – positive, negative, and many in between – and, therefore, is a concept that should not be understood merely in terms of potential injury of some kind. Instead, there are forms of vulnerability that we should value. For example, openness to certain aesthetic experiences might be a kind of vulnerability we want to cultivate for the enrichment they can bring. We may well need to enter into and embrace vulnerability in order to have many other experiences that carry with them positive affective states and the possibilities of personal transformation, such as falling in love.³⁹



Figure 5. *An Cailín Ciúin* (2022) permission to reproduce kindly granted by Breakout Pictures.

Cáit's vulnerability allows for a reconnection with family, nature, and community, a process powerfully facilitated through the discursive methods of the Irish language as a relational mode, a mode that prioritises connection with place, people, and practices, over the stress on individualism and concomitant alienation that has characterised anglophone global neoliberalism.⁴⁰ Beyond the linguistic resonances within the film and its narrative, *An Cailín Ciúin* also displays a masterful sophistication in its impressive realisation of cinema's haptic visuality. It is here in a very meaningful and skilful manner that the film evokes a strong emotional response in aligning the narrative of a vulnerable 9-year-old child with the perspectives and embodied experiences of audiences internationally.

Notes

1. Irish Film and Television Academy.
2. RTÉ, "An Cailín Ciúin Passes €1 Million."
3. Rooney, "'The Quiet Girl' Review."
4. Marks, *The Skin of the Film*.
5. The National Irish Language Public Service Broadcaster based in the Conamara Gaeltacht (or Irish-speaking region).
6. Crosson, "Irish Language Film Policy."
7. McQuinn, "Review of Irish Film."
8. For a more detailed examination of the uneven development of film production in the Irish Language, see Crosson, "Irish Language Film Policy."
9. MacDougall, "Finding a Voice," 198–9.
10. *Ibid.*, 193.
11. TG4. "Major Funding Initiative."
12. Woods, "Scannánaíocht Chomhaimseartha," 81.
13. *Ibid.*, 81. Author's translation.
14. Hardiman, "Once Won't Happen Twice," 82.
15. Dobson, "'The Quiet Girl' Team."
16. Anonymous, "The Quiet Girl: The Irish-Language Film."
17. McDermott, "'Rish isn't Spoken Here?" 25–31.
18. Central Statistics Office (CSO), "Census of Population 2022."
19. Ó Giollagáin & Charlton, *Uashonrú Ar An Staidéar*.
20. Duffy. "Two-Thirds Support More Irish in Daily Life."
21. Woods, "Scannánaíocht Chomhaimseartha," 81–82. Author's translation.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*
24. McQuillan, *Native and natural*, 23. Quoted in Woods, 82.
25. See for example Ní Bhaoill, "An Cailín Ciúin," and Flynn, "An Cailín Ciúin."
26. Flynn, "An Cailín Ciúin."
27. Ó Torna and Ó Conchubhair, "John Ford, The Irish Language."
28. *Ibid.*
29. This was a period of strict film censorship not only in Ireland (see Rockett, *Irish Film Censorship*, for more on this) but also in the United States where the ongoing implementation of the Motion Picture Production Code (or "Hays Code") strictly regulated what subjects could be depicted or discussed on screen.
30. Smith. "Ireland's Architecture of Containment," 119.
31. For an in-depth discussion of the complex and multifaceted topic of silence in contemporary Irish culture see Caneda-Cabrera and Carregal-Romero "Introduction: Silences that Speak."
32. Flynn, "An Cailín Ciúin," 366.
33. *Ibid.*

34. Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 129.
35. Kuźma, "Kate McCullough ISC."
36. May, "An Cailín Ciúin."
37. I've been struck repeatedly when watching the film with Irish audiences in public settings how often I hear other audience members taking a sharp intake of breath when they first see this sequence, suggesting that this perception of the image as evoking that of an abandoned body is shared by others.
38. Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 138–45.
39. Miller, "From Vulnerability to Precariousness," 646.
40. See also Woods, "Scannánaíocht Chomhaimseartha," for further discussion of this point.

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