

Writing with Light: Reflections on Sarah Strong's *I Hear Fish Drowning* (2014)

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I'm delighted to have this opportunity to introduce Sarah Strong's remarkable film, *I Hear Fish Drowning*, which premiered at the Merriman Summer School in Ennis, County Clare, in 2014.

As you know, Sarah's creative practice ranges across media and materials. Indeed, in an interview with Valerie Heffernan published in 2018, Sarah said: 'I've never understood the idea of separating things. [...] to me, art and architecture, poetry and film, they're all sort of facets on a diamond.'¹

This striking image — of various art forms as interconnected planes that both absorb and reflect light — is particularly apposite in this instance, when we recall that photography — from the Greek *phōs* (light) and *graphe* (writing) — is, literally, a kind of writing with light. Cinema — *kinema* or movement — animates those traces of things and time in a way that complicates any straightforward relationship between the present and the past.

Recalling this etymology offers us a way to reflect on the complex interplay between various registers of time, space, and representation, illuminated by a critically informed creative perspective, that characterises so much of Sarah's work and is particularly evident in the film we're about to see.

Deeply personal yet politically charged, the film is an elliptical exploration of issues around migration, the maternal relationship, and the relationship to the mother tongue, understood in the broadest of senses. Within this, women's writing — specifically the rich seam of Irish women's poetry — is of special concern. The title of the film, *I Hear Fish Drowning*, is borrowed from the poem 'The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks' by Paula Meehan, which excoriates both the symbolics and the realities of motherhood that structure Irish politics and religion.²

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The film itself begins and ends with lines from Sarah's own mother, Eithne's, poetry.³ These lines are spoken by Sarah's 'wise alter-ego',⁴ Stella (Sarah Strong), another source of (this time celestial) illumination. In the process, the issue of translation that the film raises — from text to speech, from Irish to English, and from mother to daughter — becomes a process of refraction, as language passes obliquely through the maternal line and is inflected by new meanings along the way.

Indeed, as Sarah puts it in another memorable turn of phrase, 'Stella's perspective allows me a wider, more spacious viewpoint, like the eyes of a dragonfly, to understand that there are many perspectives.'⁵ In the film, this 'wider, more spacious viewpoint' extends to the very idea of language, the 'mother tongue' itself, which expands to encompass the material, tactile realm. For instance, women's clothes, such as the red pleated skirt worn by an Irish woman in England (Sally Bentley), or the sheen of the red dress that Eithne (Ella Benham) sews and an adolescent Stella (Jade Rankine) rips to shreds, become textual traces that fold time back on itself to reveal memories of childhood and a fraught maternal relationship.

Close-ups of age-speckled hands or shots of pale, hunched shoulders reassert the lived experience of women's bodies in face of their often violent reduction to abstractions in intellectual discourse. For example, in a scene from Stella's childhood, a male psychoanalyst expounds on the function of prostitutes for Irish men as what he calls a 'sewage avenue'. This comes immediately after a scene in which Stella recalls having watched a film at the London Irish Women's Centre about a young, pregnant Irish girl, seen dressed in a red skirt, who moves to England and is targeted by a male predator.⁶ During the film, one of the women watching exclaims: 'he's reeling her in like a fish.' Perhaps like one of the fish that Meehan hears drowning.

Indeed, throughout, communities of women — Stella and her sisters, the London Irish Women's Centre, and the imagined community of Irish women writers, artists and exiles in conversation over generations, offer opportunities for reimagining what echoes of 'our mother tongue' might sound like when spoken by different voices and heard in new contexts.

All this is rendered via highly sensitive cinematography that traces the shifting properties of the physical world, always available to new ways of being seen, much like the shots of stones beneath water that move and change shape in dialogue with shafts of sunlight.

In keeping with these tensions, montage articulates time around psychic patterns of association, while longer takes allow spaces to breathe independently of story. The colour palette ranges from the muted greys and greens of the Irish countryside to a vivid red that, as Sarah puts it, ‘runs like a current’ throughout.⁷

In short, to return to Sarah’s own image of various art forms being connected like ‘facets on a diamond’, the film brings together a political consciousness, a poetic sensibility, and a cinematic perspective, in a challenging and evocative spirit of illumination.

Of course, these are just some of my own reflections when watching this film. No doubt you will find your own way through its many potential pathways. Enjoy.

Works Cited

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¹ Sarah Strong quoted in Valerie Heffernan, “Mending the Torn Fragments of a Relationship: An Interview with Sarah Strong,” *Women: A Cultural Review* 8, no. 2 (2018): 109.

² Paula Meehan, “The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks,” <https://ajd8.wordpress.com/2015/01/30/the-statue-of-the-virgin-at-granard-speaks-by-paula-meehan/> accessed 24th November 2023.

³ The final lines of Eithne Strong’s poem, ‘Synthesis—Achill, 1958’ are spoken over a red screen at the beginning of the film. Eithne Strong, *Spatial Nosing: New and Selected Poems*, 8. Eithne Strong’s poem, ‘However Long That Dark’ is spoken over the penultimate shot of the film. Strong, *Spatial Nosing*, 85.

⁴ Strong quoted in Heffernan, “Mending the Torn Fragments,” 109.

⁵ Strong quoted in Heffernan, “Mending the Torn Fragments,” 106.

⁶ The film is *Felicia’s Journey* (1999) by Atom Egoyan.

⁷ Strong quoted in Heffernan, “Mending the Torn Fragments,” 107.