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Ghosts of a Nation: Loss, identity and Empty Nationalism in *The Banshees of Inisherin*

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> There is only one way to appease a ghost. You must do the thing it asks you. The ghosts of a nation sometimes ask very big things; and they must be appeased, whatever the cost.
> -Padraig Pearse (1915)

The Banshees of Inisherin (McDonagh, 2022) is a haunted film with a ghost that must be appeased. What exactly this ghost is is a hard and complex question, but the answer begins with an examination of the theme of loss and melancholia on the island of Inisherin. While the film may be somewhat of a tragic and absurdist comedy, the narrative is built upon the pain of conflict, the loss of friendship, the ties of love and hate and the existential despair of living with or without community. In this article, I argue that *The Banshees of Inisherin* subverts stereotypical conceptions of Irishness, what it is that symbolises Ireland, and alludes to an identity that is pivoted upon loss and unacknowledged mourning, the shadow side of the Irish nation. This unacknowledged mourning relates in part to Ireland's transition from being a country under the yoke of colonialism to a post-colonial nation.

I focus on three key mechanisms or plot points that work in this subversion of national identity and that prevent the viewer from identifying with any heroic figure or taking up a comfortable nationalistic position: the role of landscape and the satire of romanticised signifiers of Ireland; the background presence and non-centrality of the Civil War in the lives of the characters; and an interpretation of Colm's self-mutilation in cutting off his fingers as a form of self-hatred induced by melancholia. While this article can only be a sketch of these components comprising the fabric of loss and mourning within the film, the premise of my argument is that through the presence of melancholic signifiers and the exposure of a somewhat empty nationalism, unacknowledged losses and ambivalence within the Irish psyche regarding the history of colonialism can be approached or at least imagined.

This imagining takes place alongside the background of Freud's 1917 paper on mourning and melancholia – where he argues that the aspects of a loss that cannot be acknowledged or mourned are often a result of the conflictual/ambivalent feelings directed towards the lost loved one, or the lost object, and these ambivalent feelings may manifest in actions of self-hate and derision towards the self. In essence, I am questioning the relationship between individual melancholia and a cultural melancholia, while being aware that the link between the symptomatology of the singular and the social is not easy to map. In regard to forging a link between the individual and the social, the article draws on *Freud's Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921) even though somewhat ironically, as Sally Swartz (2023) has pointed out, Freud's language and outlook has been mired in the discourse of colonialism. The analysis will focus, in particular, on the character of Colm (Brendan Gleeson) as a figure whose violent actions lead to a reading of symptomatic melancholia, the constellation of which can then be extended as a metaphor for the wider cultural context of the early Irish Free State. Indeed, the fictional timeframe of the film is set not long after the poignant and poetic words quoted above by Padraig Pearse, one of Ireland’s martyred revolutionaries, within one of the most critical moments in modern Irish history, April 1922, towards the end of the Irish Civil War. As a film released in 2022, yet staged in 1922, it is automatically infiltrated by the backdrop of Ireland's struggle for national identity and freedom from colonial rule, yet it does not self-consciously make this struggle explicit in a narrative of winning or losing. Rather the background presence of the Civil War infiltrates the lives of the characters in a way that is more absurdist than partisan, while its thematic overhang contributes to the shadow of loss and mortality that permeates the island.

While this analysis of the film will have a particular focus on Ireland and Irish identity, from its very title, *The Banshees of Inisherin,* screams (literally) of Irishness, it will also focus on the place of film and cinema within national identity generally, and argue its importance as a potent artefact of psychoanalytic enquiry. One of the tenets underlying this argument is that the art forms of cinema and film play a fundamental role in influencing the collective imagination of a nation, a country and the national identities pertaining to that country. If this is true, then film is a complex tapestry of the losses that characterise a nation, where we witness both the nomination of losses and traumas generally acknowledged (such as wars and significant historical moments) and also an archive of possibly unacknowledged losses, manifesting within the spectrality of the film (as its material pre-recorded characteristic) and a container of significant mnemonic traces. In other words, like the language of dreams and the unconscious, film can provide both latent and manifest thematic content that speaks to what is recognised and also repudiated by the audience. In this argument, the role of the imagination is critical as it is the liminal space through which the film operates to potentially disrupt identificatory processes.

The invocation of the imagination is also resonant with the seminal work of Benedict Anderson (1983/2006) on nations and nation-states (imagined political communities), which convincingly places the imagination as a central factor in the construction of seemingly cohesive and prevailing collective identities. In Anderson’s elaborations, literature and the rise of the novel as a commodity widely disseminated spanning different times and space, where readers are connected through their shared conceptualisations of space and time, cultivates this idea of the imagination as the linking concept in a chain of collective overlaps ultimately constituting the sense of shared national boundaries and culture. In the context of film and cinema, Martin McLoone in *Irish Film: The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema* (2000) has integrally embedded Anderson’s theory of the ‘imagined community’ within an analysis of Irish cultural nationalism and the history and trajectory of Irish cinema, focusing on the ways in which Ireland has been imagined and reimagined through film, in particular highlighting tropes such as the opposition between tradition and modernity, urban and rural.

Similarly, I suggest that film is both an artefact of the collective imagination and a catalyst for continuing to re-imagine the ways in which we identify as both singular individuals and inhabitants of collective land spaces. It is, therefore, a critically productive link in the conceptualisation and perhaps in the actual formations and deformations of national identity at home and abroad. That is, film can provoke the unconscious or even the subconscious of the spectator, on the one hand, as an individual located in psychic space or, on the other, as a subject in geographic space with a shared sense of collective identity, and by doing so challenge the borders around these identifications. To the question as to whether we can actually speak of identity as a collective entity or whether we are always dealing with a singular subject, Freud's work on *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921) is instructive, where he states that individual psychology *is* a social psychology and a nation is nominated as a phenomenon falling within the category of a group.

This point will be revisited later in the article when the role of authority and leadership, more so its critical absence, is considered on the island of Inisherin, and as a reflection of the post-colonial context of Ireland where censorship and authoritarianism held sway. Contemporary Ireland is certainly haunted by many ghosts from this period, and echoes of loss, injustice and cruelty still resound through the annals and discourse of our current time. In this context, *The Banshees of Inisherin* provides a metaphor for loss within the imagination, through which certain silences can be made to speak in spectral form. This spectrality is invoked from the film's very title through the figure of the banshee, which represents what we could call, in the words of Padraig Pearse, 'the ghosts of a nation'. But who or what was the banshee?

Loss and Symbolism

The banshee is a mythical and fictive character of Irish folklore who traditionally heralded the event of an impending death. According to Elliot O'Donnell (1907/2016), the banshee only specifically haunted families of ancient Irish origin, in particular, more well-off families, and she could be both a figure of benign and malevolent intent. Generally speaking, the banshee is a spectral mythical figure, typically imagined in the form of an old woman who keens and cries as she combs her hair. The cry of the banshee is legendary, and often, growing up in Ireland, if an animal screamed at night, most usually a fox, people would say there was the cry of the banshee - an unmistakable high-pitched hyena-like screen conveying a portent of death and grief. In *The Banshees of Inisherin*, the banshee from the very beginning of the film (embodied through the old woman character of Mrs McCormick [Sheila Flitton] and as a signifier in the title) operates as a ghostly but also humorous figure throughout the narrative arc. McCormick serves as the caricature of a typical busybody gossip-enjoying figure of a small village but also critically as a pivotable structuring point of the film's trajectory. It is she who haunts the lives of the other characters on this small and socially claustrophobic island of Inisherin, warning of impending death and also attempting to seduce the character of Siobhán to her doom on the lake. In a metaphorical sense, the figurative banshee of Inisherin operates as a liminal space in the filmic narrative from which the deep losses of a nation can be imagined or portended through folklore. While the actual banshee, Mrs McCormack, is the personification of the seduction towards death on the island that posits the characters as existing on the threshold of mortality. If imagining deep losses sounds slightly esoteric, we must think of the fact that, from a psychoanalytic point of view, the true depths of subjective loss are almost inaccessible to us through language, the boundaries of pain as that which encapsulates loss, or even expresses loss, are almost intangible. Our very being is built upon more losses than we can consciously capture, stemming from our entry into language as subjects who speak and embedded within the trajectory of our lives as beings unto death. This constancy of loss requires both symbolisation and pacification, found in the personification of doom embodied by the banshee, a figure who remains watchful and casts a shadow over all the events in *The Banshees of Inisherin*.

Although the island of Inisherin is a place of scenic beauty and life-affirming natural aesthetics, it is a place that is stalked by death and morbidity. This is a point we should pause on as the juxtaposition of the beautiful landscape of Ireland, represented by aerial shots of green hedgerow fields, contrasting with the theme of a darker socio-cultural and tragicomic nature is, I argue, a deliberate subversion of some of the myths constituting the nation of Ireland. In other words, the landscape holds an active and satirical role in the narrative of the film. As the opening sequences unfold, we are introduced to all the signifiers that we may associate with a romantic portrait of Ireland, the picture-perfect postcard of the land whose reputation is carved through myths both at home and abroad. Green fields, a rainbow, evocative music and a statue of the Virgin Mary accompany the entrance of Pádraic (Colin Farrell), walking down to his friend's house, Colm (Brendan Gleeson), who lives in a thatched cottage on the edge of a cliff. We soon learn that Colm is avoiding Pádraic and refuses to go with him to the pub for a pint.

Thus the opening gambit is set: the initial refusal of one friend's gesture of friendship around which a whole saga of bizarre happenings and ghostly hauntings will circulate. The fecundity of the lush green scenery and the aesthetic draw of the island's see-scape aspect trigger the romantic associations of an innocent and idyllic Ireland set within the countryside and lure the spectator into a false sense of security. Yet the figural presence of the banshee, from the very beginning set within the film’s title, serves as a potent signifier of not just simply death in a literal sense but loss, mourning and nostalgia. Or rather, nostalgia in the context of this particular film functions more as a form of an ironic or hyperbolic nostalgia; we have the visual symbols of a romantic Ireland, thatched cottages, donkeys, the pub and rural accents, but they function as empty signifiers, rather than the signifiers of the desire for a lost place, space or experience. Functioning as empty signifiers, that is, signifiers without a concrete signified, these stereotypical flag-bearing characteristics of the Irish as a nationality are placed in suspension as being signifiers and not solid hallmarks (signs) of an intrinsic race. This ironic nostalgia can be seen in the pivotal situating of the landscape as an object within the filmic narrative. As McLoone (2000), and Rockett, Gibbons and Hill (1987/2014) point out, in a cinematic context, landscape is often not a neutral visual element or simply an incidental backdrop but potentially functions as an object and a way of representing and symbolising key characteristics, stereotypes or idealisations of a country or nation. As McLoone argues: “The myths embodied in Irish landscape and the ideological constructions of the west of

Ireland — the way in which a particular form of Irish identity was imagined, in other words — have provided one important theme in recent Irish cinema. Thus, one of this new cinema's main projects has been to demythologise rural Ireland and to question the ascetic nationalism that underpinned it." (2000: 44).

If the situation of landscape aids in the mythologising or idealising of certain symbolisms of the country, symbolisms desired and cultivated by a home audience to appeal to those abroad (through tourism, for example), or even to perpetuate myths to those living within the nation; we can say that landscape functions as a metonym within the film. That is to say, for example, that a signifier related to Ireland as a land, the landscape of the West of Ireland, comes to stand in for Ireland as a whole or as a collective and also serves to embellish certain mythical ideas about the country. Part of the function of this embellishment is to substitute for what is unrepresentable about that nation or what may be difficult to acknowledge about the history upon which the modern conception of the country is built. In other words, myths and romantic symbolisms may operate almost like cultural hauntings and are tied somehow to the complex, potentially painful and inexpressible historical reality of that country, place or nation.

As in any identity structure, within the contours of national or collective identity, what we do not want to face often becomes repressed or foreclosed, only to return in spectral and uncanny form. It must be said that a number of issues raise themselves here regarding the topic of national identity, which this article does not have the space to elaborate on fully but which I will return to briefly at the end as reflections to consider as arising from the filmic context. One in particular concerns the ontological structure of collective identity and the relationship of mythical idealism as a factor in its cohesion. Another is the social or subjective consequences of reading national identity as something destabilised through the film. As Daniel Pick (1995), in his reading of Freud's group psychology text through the lens of nationalism, asks regarding the tenets of collective and national identity theories: "whether a stress on the myths, ideologies, shibboleths of nations really adds up to the decidedly psychological notion of collective identity? These issues have yet to be fully worked through in the historiography of nationalism" (1995: 52).

While I take heed of Pick's point here that we must be careful with our definitions of national identity and keep the notion of the collective and the individual as questionable and in need of more rigorous analysis, I proceed on the assumption that there is something collective and resonating in certain symbols and narratives told of a nation that has the power of forming or at least influencing a group identity (a nation) in the Freudian sense of the word.

These symbols or mythical narratives of a nation, such as progress, innovation and an allure of welcome, may also be a way of covering difficult histories that the current population of the country would rather forget, such as the history of colonialism across many different continents and countries as in Latin America, North America, Australia and Ireland. In the case of Ireland, a more complicated and conflict-ridden past can be hidden beneath the picture postcard representations of a land untainted by urbanisation, a land romanticised by its diaspora in America and beyond. Ireland has a vast and extensive history of emigration and depopulation, poverty, famine and colonialism, yet it is frequently portrayed as the land of a thousand welcomes. Given Ireland's place in a history of vast emigration, with millions emigrating to America and South America over the centuries, during the famine years (1845-1852) but also before and after, the frequent nostalgic representation of Ireland in American cinema is particularly striking. As Bob Quinn has said, ''Ireland has long been a figment of the American imagination' (Quinn quoted in McLoone 2000: 15). In other words, within the diasporic imagination, Ireland becomes not an actual geographic place but a mythical signifier of nostalgia, a repository or projection of a land where life is romantic, simple and earthy, contrasting with the more industrialised, fast-paced and urbane America. As signifiers of potential nostalgia, at home and abroad, symbolic stereotypes of Ireland as a country and the Irish nation of 'saints and scholars' simplify some of the more complex identities and fractured landscapes of Irish history. The horror of the famine years, the tragic unfolding of the Irish Civil War, the difficult economic conditions of the early Irish Free State, the tyranny of the Catholic Church and the troubles of the conflict in Northern Ireland are all harsh realities of a near-to-hand Irish past, obscured by picture postcard portrayals of lush green fields and welcoming simple folk.

From the perspective of the fecundity of the role of landscape in film, and in particular, in the Irish context, we could also say that the presence of the landscape in *The Banshees of Inisherin* functions metonymically as both representative and displacement of stereotypical signifiers of the Irish and Irishness. In other words, there is a certain subversive manipulation inherent to the aesthetics of the film as regards the position of the spectator vis-à-vis a representation of Irish identity set within the context of a strong resonance of place and rural landscape. In this sense, the film subverts what McLoone has pointed out regarding romantic depictions of Irish landscape as a capitulation to an identity imposed and inflected by imperialism: " In accepting and promoting a romantic rural sense of Irish identity, therefore, cultural nationalism ironically accepted one of the great stereotypes of Ireland produced by imperialism" (McLoone, 2000: 38).

In contrast to this upholding of a romantic cultural nationalism, *The Banshees of Inisherin* subverts some of the stereotypical 'friendly' connotations of Ireland, almost making a mockery at times of the insular, too close for comfort, valley of the squinting windows type community so characteristic of rural and small population locations. In this vein, Ireland, quintessentially known for its welcomes, is in the midst of one of the most contentious and conflictual moments of its contemporary history, with the rioting, anti-immigration protesting and violence on the streets of the city centre of Dublin in December 2023. This type of unrest does not simply arise spontaneously but lurks in the shadows and in the melancholic recesses of our cultural history. In other words, when the borders of the country and its culture are challenged, national identity becomes solidified or reified as if it already existed in its current essentialised form. Therefore, a picture postcard depiction of Ireland as a green and pastoral land cannot show the true complexity and heterogeneous human forces at work in culture and the inherent violence and conflicts pertaining to collective uprisings of nationalism, as in the rise of right-wing forces in anti-migration protests. In thinking about how the film destabilises conceptions of Irishness, it is worth noting the words of Mary Caputi (1996) on the role of national identity within the meaning-making structures of the human subject:

> National identities strive to denote stable, clearly defined sets of meanings, meanings unsullied by annoying ambiguities and ambivalences. They aim at functioning as signifiers untrammeled by the sometimes disturbing openendedness that can otherwise characterize our sense of self. They seek to engender definition, clarity, and closure; moreover, one need only think of the numerous jokes involving different national temperaments to realize that, to a good degree, they succeed in this task (683).

The Banshees of Inisherin does not avoid the ambiguity referred to above and could, in contrast, be said to flaunt it. Although the film begins with an aerial shot of green fields and hedgerows, conveying a note of what Mark O'Connell (2023) refers to as "here comes Ireland", and could be seen as a touristic advert for the country, the hyperreal style of the narrative and the dark absurdist plotline retroactively decouples this pastoral essentialist view of Ireland from its scenic anchor, opening out onto a more complex existential reality. In this regard, the eponymous banshee could also refer to the death of an idealised land, a loss that induces a nostalgia to return to a place that never actually existed, but the trace of the lost ideal is represented opaquely by signifiers of geographical place.

Apart from the more figural dimension of loss in the film, there are numerous concrete and metaphorical references to loss and death: from early on in the narrative, we learn of the deaths of Pádraic and Siobhán's (Kerry Condon) parents, the loss of Colm's friendship for Pádraic, the tragic death of Dominic (Barry Keoghan), a probable suicide, the emigration of Siobhán from the island, the death of Pádraic's donkey by the 'hand' of Colm, the Civil War fighting on the mainland and of course, there is the symbolic and physical loss of Colm's fingers through self-mutilation. As regards the two main characters, Colm and Pádraic, loneliness and alienation permeate their lives. Colm is found dancing with his dog amongst his symbolic trinkets of masks and relics, and Pádraic is desperate to resolve the loss of his friend, unable to tolerate the consequences of being alone on the island. The emotional landscape of the film, set within such extreme contours of loss and tragedy, albeit apart from the hyperreality, resembles the work of the Irish playwright Marina Carr, known for her Greek tragedies set within Irish rural landscapes. The farcical element, however, distinguishes the film from the more sombre connotations of Greek tragedy and creates a faultline of identification in our reception of events. An element of this farcical dimension is the presence of the Civil War and the comparative place it occupies in filmic representations of this period in Irish history.

The Civil War

The backdrop of the Civil War frames the conflict between the two friends as an analogy of the war taking place in Ireland at the time. However, what is particularly interesting about the presence of the Civil War is how we can read for a satirical and irreverent account of this event in a way that challenges meaning-laden narratives of winner and loser, right and wrong. There are no heroes or antiheroes here, certainly not in taking up arms for one's country. It is interesting to note that the writer Martin McDonagh, who was born in London to Irish parents from the West of Ireland, had, many years previous, written a play called *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (2001), which was a satirical account of Republican violence staged in the west of Ireland. Writing in the introduction to the published version of this play, the Irish commentator Fintan O'Toole says, "[*The Lieutenant of Inishmore* was] an exercise in theatrical counter-terrorism, attempting to induce in its targets the same kind of outrage they provoked in wider society….Martin McDonagh has recalled wanting to write a play that would make militant nationalists want to shoot him" (O'Toole, 2014: 7- 8). This is undoubtedly a very strong statement and points to the contextual backdrop of the creation of the island of Inisherin, whether overtly or tacitly.

Instead of the reference to the Civil War taking up a concrete valorisation on the axis of good or bad, tragedy or grim necessity, the backdrop of the war is almost banal within the quotidian life on the island, and the characters often display somewhat distanced, bemused perspectives on events. Every now and then, one of the characters will pause to the sound of the gunfire on the mainland, and the film ends with Colm and Pádraic facing outward on the shoreline and contemplating the end of the war but in a somewhat dispassionate way. Although Pádraic's comment on the fact that "some things there is no moving on from and I think that's a good thing"(1.46) signifies a more solid reference to the intractability of the pain of certain conflicts and the fact that as his particular case with Colm testifies to, when a line is crossed, when someone or something betrays or destroys that which we love most, conflict is often taken to the grave, and beyond. We may wonder whether the presence of the Civil War in the film is a self-conscious attempt to critique the absurdities of war, particularly that of the Civil War, or whether it is simply the fallout of a subtly satirical account of the Irish in general. But even if it is not a self-conscious and deliberate portrayal of the pitfalls of nationalism, we cannot escape the evocations of absurdity pertaining to the war.

By absurdity, I refer to the lack of emphasis and meaning given to the Civil War in the film and the almost seeming irreverence attributed to its references. This lack of centrality is in contrast to the terrible place that the war occupies in the annals of Irish history, the full horror of the events of which are still only being uncovered in recent years. Therefore, on the one hand, it could be said this incidental or in-the-background portrayal of war is ethically unpatriotic to a country deeply scarred and yet, on the other, the presence of absurdity in a narrative is often the existential route to experiencing a truth about existence. A truth where meaning falls from the alter of sense and lies fragmented, from which vantage point the spectator experiences a flash of insight regarding the shielding embrace of conventional signification. In other words, in this instance, the narrative invites a question regarding the senselessness of war and violence. One particular scene, with the policeman Peader (Gary Lydon) and Colm talking in the pub, highlights this absurdist idea pretty starkly. When Peader tells Colm with great excitement that he will be attending an execution on the island, he does not seem to know who is executing whom and he actually does not care: " The Free State lads are executing a couple of the anti-treaty lads, or is it the other way round? I find it hard to follow these days. Wasn't it so much easier when we was all on the same side and it was just the English we was killing? I preferred it"

(McDonagh, 2022: 47.35). For him, this tragic event is entertainment and worth the few "bob" he will receive in payment, and he suggests that Colm would get inspiration for playing music by attending this event. We know that Peader is already portrayed as perverse and unpleasant, with the implications of sexual abuse towards his son Dominic and his general belligerence.

Although Peader symbolises the corruption of authority on the island of Inisherin, his character possibly points to a much deeper schism and hypocrisy at the heart of leadership in general. The big Other is revealed to be lacking on the island; the law is corrupt, there is fighting on the mainland, there is, in a sense, no safe place except the pub, which even becomes a source of conflict for Pádraic. Psychoanalytically, for the big Other to be revealed as lacking is potentially a greatly disturbing experience for a subject and can lead to psychic collapse as the unconscious fantasies that subtend the belief in meaning in the Other are unravelled, rendering a potential confrontation with the void of subjectivity. We can also think of this idea in the context of a shift in power from one nation to the other or in the movement from a colonised land to a post-colonial one; in what way is the vacuum of a master (or authority/law) filled? What is the psychological process involved in this transition? These questions are not easily answered but resonate through the timeframe and context of the island of Inisherin as a microcosm of Ireland. The literal meaning of Inisherin, as Keohane, Kuhling and O'Brien (2023) point out, is *inis erin*, literally the island of Ireland (275).

This microcosm of Ireland is portrayed in a rather cynical light, yet it is this very cynicism, inherent also to the portrait of the Civil War, that disturbs the viewer at the site of potential nationalistic identification. The senseless and cynical portrayal of the Civil War prevents the viewer from identifying a winner or loser in this event and rather leads us to question the very point of the fighting in the first place. The war concerns the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1922, which left Ireland partitioned into twenty-six counties in the south and six counties in the north. Ireland became divided after the signing of this Treaty by Michael Collins, and fighting broke out between those in favour of the Treaty and those against. The Irish, who had fought together so recently to subdue the English, turned on each other to fight for the nation's future. An obvious but rarely asked question is, was this fight for ultimate Irish independence from England worth the Civil War and all the betrayals and deaths that occurred as a consequence? Perhaps this is the question embedded in McDonagh's satire. What does it mean to die for our nation or to give our lives fighting for freedom? If the boundaries of a nation are always in the process of becoming or of imagining, then in dying for the nation, who or what are we really dying for?

From one perspective, the losses incurred through this type of internal civil war are even more senseless than a war in which one country defends its boundaries from another. One seems necessarily or contingently tragic, the other utterly or senselessly tragic. The pain and death incurred through the Irish Civil War, pre-the dawning of the Irish Free State in 1922, is a loss that is ingrained within Irish culture and history but is not often talked of due to the sensitive nature of the current etchings of this conflict on the generations of today. In some respects, silence is a feature of the early Irish Free State, not simply in the silence of the early films shown in movie halls but also in the repressive censorship of artistic works that would follow for years to come. Paradoxically, while the Irish Free State obtained a relative freedom of governance initially, the attempt to protect the early modern nation led to restrictive and authoritarian measures that ultimately stifled the country's imagination and free dissemination of ideas.

The fictional temporal location of the film *The Banshees of Inisherin* is worth noting: that of April 1923. The film is set absolutely on the cusp of the 1923 Censorship of Film Act, which was to prove extremely censorious and repressive in the development of Irish cinema and literature in general, with many of Ireland's talented writers fleeing the repressive perimeters of their home country. As McLoone (2000) notes regarding the censorship of films and the following 1929 Censorship of Publications Act: "The operation of these two acts resulted in the most extensive and most punitive censorship regime in Europe and represents, in many ways, the most inglorious chapter in recent Irish history" (25). It is within this conflictual and repressive temporal context that the melancholic and satirical echoes of *The Banshees of Inisherin* resonate as a placeholder for the affectual inscriptions of loss and nostalgia enfolded within Ireland's past and present, and future (the banshee is a figure portending future doom). In satirising an excess of Irishness inherent to the stereotypes of an innocent and pastoral land, we return to a critical question regarding the nature of the idealisations at work in foreclosing less palatable truths about our personal or collective histories. It is also within the context of identity, identifications and loss that the most grotesque and perplexing theme of the film, Colm's self-mutilation of his fiddle-playing fingers, can be approached.

The Fingers

To add insult to his self-inflicted injury of cutting off the fingers of his fiddle-playing hand, Colm decides to inflict the severed fingers of his bizarre act as tortured trophies of his contempt for Pádraic and flings each finger at the door of Pádraic's cottage. With this act that seems to defy rational understanding, Colm destroys the very thing that he loves, which is his ability to play the fiddle and, towards the end of the film, tells Pádraic, who arrives at the pub to confront him about his dead donkey, that no apology is needed as it was a relief. Admittedly, he does not explicitly say it was a relief to sever his fingers but simply says enigmatically, "I don't need your apologies, all right. It's a relief to me. So let's just call it quits and agree to go our separate ways, for good this time" (McDonagh, 2022: 1.33). From a psychoanalytical perspective, this is a very telling statement that indicates a certain subjective satisfaction at a symptomatic level. It's almost as if an unsaid or unexpressed loss for Colm becomes inscribed on the body through the act of mutilation, inscribed by the very absence of the fingers as the placeholder of this loss. Colm's relief at this particular point in the film seems to take the burden of existential choice away from him; he can no longer play the fiddle with any expertise and, as such, cannot complete his goal, as effectively at least, of being remembered for his talent for music. Prior to severing his fingers, his overt concern was of spending his time creatively and not wasting time chatting about nothing with a dimwit like Pádraic. Colm is weighed down by the idea of being remembered for a work of art or for an action that means something in the eyes of others, such as the desire to be recognised and to create something of value. The imperative that drives him to sever his relationship with Pádraic thus seems to contradict this existential question he has formulated for himself. What does it mean to be remembered? Or to have really existed in the eyes of others? According to Colm's logic, you are never remembered for simply being nice.

We must pause for a moment to consider the symbolic ramifications of Colm's self-mutilating act as an act that may bear a relationship to the unconscious as it can be conceived through the formation of a symptomatic action. In other words, I argue that the mutilation of the fingers is a symptomatic formation of a pain or conflict unexpressed and unspoken in Colm's life. From this perspective, Colm's overt reasons for needing peace from Pádraic and this act of seeming hatred can be contextualised as being simply the trigger for an already preexisting underlying depressive constellation. In fact, although Pádraic is portrayed as being a dimwit or simple type character, who has a closer relationship with his animals and the environment than people, he is also capable of making some shrewd assessments, such as when he tells Colm that he might be depressed and that he still has other options other than cutting off his fingers: "You've loads of options left open to you, how is fingers the first port of call? Me and me sister were thinking you might just be a bit depressed Colm, and fingers just confirms it" (McDonagh, 2022: 0.35).

Apart from its senseless signification; that is, the act just does not seem to fit what Colm says he wants: to make music and be remembered for an act of greatness, the act of self-mutilation can be viewed as an internalised self-destructive impulse with its origin in unresolved mourning. Freud's 1917 paper, *Mourning And Melancholia*, elaborates on the deep complexities at work in the process of mourning and its potential relationship to what we in contemporary times call depression or, in 1917, melancholia. A fundamental point here is that through the process of mourning, we gradually let go of the attachment and the pain associated with the loss of the person or the thing or ideal we may have lost. It is important to recognise that in Freud's theory, melancholia is not simply related to a person who was lost but more specifically to what we have lost in ourselves through that person or ideal. The following quote from Freud explains the difference between an obvious loss and one of a more subtle kind:

> Where the exciting causes are different one can recognise that there is a loss of a more ideal kind. The object has not perhaps actually died, but has been lost as an object of love (e.g. in the case of a betrothed girl who has been jilted). In yet other cases one feels justified in maintaining the belief that a loss of this kind has occurred, but one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost, and it is all the more reasonable to suppose that the patient cannot consciously perceive what he has lost either. This, indeed, might be so even if the patient is aware of the loss which has given rise to his melancholia, but only in the sense that he knows whom he has lost but not what he has lost in him. (Freud, 1917/2009: 24.)

As Freud says here, melancholia can be more related to the loss of an ideal or the state that has been triggered by the absence or loss of a more intangible object other than the case of grief concerning a person who has died. We could think, for example, of losing one's job or position in society and the devastating consequences that often result from these losses. As Caputi (1996) points out, this loss can even entail that of the nation as an ideal within the context of identification. This particular latter aspect of loss is key in the argument of this article, when we consider the ramifications of either losing or gaining a foothold within a collective sense of nationalism and the shift from a colonised territory to a post-colonial nation. In these cases of more abstract loss, we can imagine that a person's identification or sense of self has been greatly disturbed by what they perceive to have been lost in the key triggering event. In Freud's paper, he distinguishes between the more normal or less pathological processes of mourning, that is, the step-by-step process of working through loss, and the melancholic state incurred through a fixation or truncation of mourning.

In contrast with mourning, where bit by bit, through a painful process of letting go, we relinquish our libidinal attachment to that object, melancholia is a state where we may remain fixated on the lost object, through what Freud calls an object cathexis, and in this fixation, we absorb the lost object as part of our ego. In essence, we identify with what has been lost to preserve the attachment to the object within the psyche. As Freud says, "The analogy with mourning led us to conclude that he had suffered a loss in regard to an object; what he tells us points to a loss in regard to his ego" (Freud, 1917/2009: 23) Furthermore, this type of melancholia is more likely to occur in cases where we have had ambivalent feelings towards the person or object that has been lost and may have great difficulty in facing or feeling these more hostile feelings. In these cases, the inner ego identification that takes place with the lost object splits the ego between the one who has been harmed and the one who persecutes or the one who harms: "the shadow of the object fell upon the ego" (Freud, 1917/2009: 25). In essence, feelings of self-hatred and depression are an internalised form of the ambivalent and potentially aggressive feelings we had for the lost object. We harm ourselves as a substitute for the expression of the anger and hatred of the other. As Freud explains:

> We have long known, it is true, that no neurotic harbours thoughts of suicide which he has not turned back upon himself from murderous impulses against others […]. The analysis of melancholia now shows that the ego can kill itself only if; owing to the return of the object-cathexis, it can treat itself as an object—if it is able to direct against itself the hostility which relates to an object and which represents the ego's original reaction to objects in the external world (Freud, 1917/2009: 24.)

To return to the film, Colm's act appears to be self-defeating and senseless; why would he cut off his fingers to have some peace or be left alone by Pádraic? While the very absurdity of Colm's act lends itself to endless speculation and metaphorical considerations as to what the fingers may symbolise, the very irrationality and bizarreness of this act lends itself to psychoanalytic speculations, which, when used as an interpretive principle, holds at its core that the human subject is inherently divided, split and fundamentally often at odds with rationality; a putative rationality revered in contemporary society. Once we remind ourselves of this very irrationality at the heart of many symptomatic acts, the act of self-mutilation, while grotesque, theatrical and bizarre, might not be so strange after all. The fact that the act makes no sense is the place where its real signification lies.

Colm experiences despair without a concrete reason that we are aware of, as we know nothing of his background, only all the symbols and cultural artefacts that hang in his thatched house. He appears to suffer existentially, is acutely aware of the temporal passing of his life, and wants to make something count in his final years, which is why he wants to ditch his friend Pádraic. What is left out of the narrative of the film is the backdrop as to why he would commit an act of such absurdist mutilation in order to have some peace of mind. In this enigmatic context, the Freudian idea of ambivalence and object loss provides a frame through which Colm's self-sabotaging act can be approached, and his cutting off from a particular enjoyment can be conceptualised as an attack on someone else, the negative feelings towards whom have become inscribed within Colm's own self.

In other words, according to Freud's theory of identification and loss, what has been hated and loved regarding the lost object, and in particular, ambivalent feelings unacknowledged, may be written on the body in some way. We can note the absence of any significant loved one in Colm's life apart from his previous friendship with Pádraic and his relationship with his dog. This very absence points to something lost and potentially unacknowledged for Colm at the level of human relationships. Yet, something profound at the level of experience and affect is alluded to by him on various occasions, such as when he confides to the priest and is asked about his despair, and when he discusses the point of it all with Siobhán, he insists she knows what he is hinting at darkly about the pointlessness of life. Colm appears to be ambivalent around meaning; he wants to create it and leave a musical legacy, yet he despairs and seems to truncate any possibility of leaving his mark other than through the brutal severing of what potentially means the most to him. Even more striking is the isolation and small-town mentality of rural life on the island and the importance of social ties in this context; to end a friendship is to sever a critical lifeline and a potential means of survival in this beautiful yet barren land.

Social Context

Having considered this idea of self-inflicted aggression emanating from ambivalence and loss in relation to Colm, and bearing in mind that loss can also involve the loss of a cultural ideal, a nation, or an ideology, we can now, more culturally, extend this analogy of identification and melancholia to a comparison with the Irish cultural psyche. I wish to apply the idea of melancholia (as authors such as Gilroy [2005] and Ranjana Khana [2003]) also invoke within the context of post-coloniality) to the context of a country or region that is freeing itself from the yoke of the oppressor, in this instance, the Irish nation. *The Banshees of Inisherin,* through its subversive mis-en-scène, corrosive commentary on Irishness and spectral hauntings of both the land and its characters, lends itself to this interpretation while at the same time resisting any interpretation. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of the fictional temporality of the film and its narrative of self-harm with the historical timeframe of the early Irish Free State is interesting, particularly as it concerns the banning of film and artistic works.

In this regard, the following words from historian and writer Declan Kiberd in *After Ireland* regarding the censorious years following the inception of the Irish Free State give great pause for thought:

> Many more artists would leave. The 1929 legislation was crucial: it was as if the nation-state was intent on self-harm, even self-mutilation. It was cutting off one of the major supply lines which had made independence possible. (Kiberd, 2017: 6).

Kiberd's critique of the protectionism of the early Irish nation set on defining its own borders and revising the notion of a preexisting Gaelic identity reveals the ambiguity at the heart of a post-colonial nation, intent on recreating an identity that is, from a psychoanalytic perspective, always at best, potentially porous and unstable. Furthermore, as Gilroy (2005) has pointed out, to attempt to deny the role of imperialism and its critical importance in shaping the current state of a nation is to find oneself in the shadowy and spectral realm of melancholia. Gilroy refers to this in the context of English history, the denial of the brutality of imperialism, the current resistance to cosmopolitanism and the rise of anti-emigration sentiment, but the idea can also be applied to a nation in the wake of colonisation.

Regarding the symbolism of Colm's severed fingers, I wonder if there is an analogy to be drawn here with the initial years of the Irish Free State. While with the inception of the Free State, the Irish obtained a relative political freedom at a tremendous cost; perhaps there were and still are some unacknowledged losses, particularly in the complex movement from being a colonised land to a self-governing one. Is it possible that within Irish culture, a certain identification with the aggressor lurks behind the scenes in spectral form? And as I said earlier, according to Freud, melancholia may occur because although we may know we have lost someone literally, we do not know exactly what we have lost in that person symbolically. In other words, to apply this idea culturally, has the Irish nation lost something in the transition from imperialism to being a nation-state, something that cannot be acknowledged? The initial years of censorship, economic protectionism and subversion to the authority of the church indicate the processing and absence or loss of a symbolic authority.

Ireland was imposing restrictions on itself, oppression it had just freed itself from. Furthermore, in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud relates the idea of identification and loss to the mechanisms of adherence pertaining to the collective and the curious capacity of human beings to devote themselves to a leader. Given that leadership is essential in establishing certain components of national identity, and as mentioned earlier in this article regarding the absence or instability of the law on Inisherin, our relationship to authority is a relevant fact to consider in an analysis of individual or societal melancholia. If, as we have seen in the case of Colm, an ambivalence toward the lost object exists within the cultural psyche, resulting in a form of self-aggression and mutilation, perhaps then identification at the level of nationalism is based on a loss or losses that should be acknowledged but is painful to do so. To some degree, the collective inhabitants of a nation concerned within a melancholic context cannot mourn properly because aspects of that loss remain unconscious, and they cannot fully experience the pain of the absence of what has not been fully realised or acknowledged symbolically, leading to mythical idealisations and sanitised accounts of history. To put this another way, perhaps rhetorics of nationalism belie the ghosts of a nation through the continuous attempt at solidification of something essential that has never really existed but only does so in a process of becoming and differentiation from an other.

So, while *The Banshees of Inisherin* has the conflict between two men as its central narrative, a much broader, more ambiguous question of national identity and the slippery slopes of meaning it is built on lurks like a spectre in the background. Is the ghost to be appeased in the film the ghost of a nation that lost its identity through colonisation or a ghost emerging from a spectral place of apparitional essentialism through the desire to build a sovereign nation? If national identity, like all individual identity, contains and is built upon certain losses: structural and ontological pertaining to language, the necessary losses of youth, and tragic losses of circumstance, perhaps these subversive nostalgic signifiers of Ireland and Irishness in *The Banshees of Inisherin* are beacons of the past, both real (in a melancholic sense) and imagined (as never fully existing). Furthermore, as cinema is so crucial to the dissemination and cultivation of the imagination and how we conceive of ourselves as nations, nation-states, or countries, including the subversion of that inception, then cinema may have a place in the very building and the potential undoing of our sense of place and collective identity.

A question that has informed the analysis of this article is whether the elaborations engendered by the film are simply a postmodern play of deconstructing identity without substantive real-world ramifications. In response to this, Freud's remarks towards the end of *Group Psychology* lend credence to the power of the artistic imagination, where he describes the movement from the existence of being a member of the collective to the individual as originating within the imagination of a poet. The shift to a more singular subjectivity born of a mythic creation began with an act of the imagination. In conclusion, while the individual and socio-political consequences of destabilising national identity remain to be examined in a sociological and clinical context, the beginnings of its decentering may begin on screen.

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