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History by proxy: imaging the great Irish famine

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INTRODUCTION

The Great Irish Famine began in 1845 and its direct effects were acutely felt for at least six years, with ongoing ramifications for cultural, political and economic life in Ireland until the end of the century. Some historians and cultural analysts argue that the shadow of the Famine lingers today as an inadequately addressed aspect in the forging of a modern republic.[1] The population in 1841 is widely thought to have been over 8 million (Campbell 1994: 15), based on estimations following the census of 1831. By 1851, the population had been depleted by over 25 per cent (Kinealy 2002: 2); over a million died, while in the region of one and half million probably emigrated during this period, with diverse results. As the single most significant and definitive event for the demographic alteration of Ireland in modern history, the Famine is a peculiarly quiet and understated presence in the representational practices of Irish museums, art, commemoration and heritage.

The primary objects of my research are a selection of exhibitions (permanent and temporary), artifacts, artworks, illustrations, ruins, replicas and geographical sites that specifically seek to relate the events starting in 1845, their immediate aftermath and the political, socio-economic and cultural consequences. Some of these objects, images and places are of a nineteenth-century origin, others were produced much more recently and some were realized as transient events, but all of them in some way contribute to how representations of the Famine are read today. The core questions underscoring this study revolve around the interconnected perceptual axes of time and representation; events and the making of history; memory and remembrance. How can a remembrance of poverty occur, contemporaneously and retrospectively, within the systems of positivism that attend the visual and material codes of museum, art, commemorative and heritage practices? In what ways do representations of suffering construct a meaningful approach to history in the present day? Is it possible to engage with a negatively formed memory of loss through a radical reconsideration of strategies of evidence, documentary and witness, and related concerns of realism? In short, in the absence of tangible objects and images of agreed literal and material proximity to the past, how might a history by proxy be constructed?

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[1] This is apparent in the tone of many of the submissions to Tom Hayden's book *Personal Reflections on the Legacy of the Famine* (1998); for example, those by John Waters and Nell McCafferty. The legacy of fraught land ownership in the early twenty-first century is more recently, and particularly, implied in Fintan O'Toole's book *Ship of Fools – How Corruption and Stupidity Killed the Celtic Tiger* (2009), which reads land hunger in Ireland as an attempted reversal of fortunes.

History, Visibility and Voice

The methodology and theoretical framework of my work are necessarily shaped by the socio-economic context of the event that is the subject of my objects of analysis: the Famine. As in any history of poverty, the context and effects of the Famine were intertwined. The Famine started in 1845 when the potato blight arrived in western Europe. That year, between a third and a half of the Irish staple food crop was lost. The following year, with the blight's reappearance, the entire crop was lost in Ireland (Nelson 1995: 3). Unsurprisingly, the next year was widely known as "Black '47", when food shortages were more piercingly felt than before and the cumulative effects of deprivation were harshly in evidence. The blight persisted in Ireland until 1848. As historians and contemporary commentators point out, there had been earlier failures of crops in Ireland without such devastating consequences, but it is undisputed that the mismanagement of the situation before and after the blights of 1845 and 1846 effectively contributed to the extent of the Famine's outcome, heralding it the Great Famine relative to other Irish famines. Noel Kissane, for example, writes that earlier crop failures were partial and generally occurred for only one season (1995: 13).[2] By contrast, in the 1840s, the failure of potato crops following repeated blight infestations compounded widespread poverty, instigating hunger-related diseases and death among the cottier classes in rural Ireland on an unprecedented scale.

Many of these land workers were surviving in a precariously balanced subsistence culture and were working land they did not own. As Christine Kinealy outlines:

> In Ireland, by the 1840s over two-thirds of the labour force continued to depend on agriculture. The majority of these people held little or no land themselves but depended on a system of conacre, in which they would trade their labour for a small plot of land. (2002: 18)

This fragile economic system was underpinned by a persistent over-reliance on a single crop, the potato, as an affordable staple food and, importantly, one which could be stored during off-season months. Kevin Whelan describes a "great shifting underclass in Irish society in immediate pre-famine years", the cumulative effects of which were divisive social structures as more solvent tenants emigrated, a growing Irish economic depression and an increasing potato dependency on reduced varieties (1995: 26). James Donnelly points to the problems accrued by practices of

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[2] There was, for instance, a significant famine in 1741, following successive grain and potato crop failures, with nearly 250,000 people dying from a population of less than 2.5 million (Gray 1995: 16).

subdivision, or fragmentation of land holdings within families, which were further accentuated by a rapid increase in population prior to the arrival of the blight: "Under the acute pressure of the population explosion the subdivision of holdings had been carried to extraordinary lengths by the eve of the famine"(2001: 8).

Following the potato blights, local, national and voluntarily coordinated relief schemes were set up intended to temporarily counter the central dietary position of the potato, with the provision of grain-based meals, particularly Indian meal and corn, as well as maize and oatmeal.[3] Aside from soup kitchens, work schemes and access to workhouses were the mainstay of relief projects. The works were intended to supply a demand for labour and promote a culture of earning relief measures. The building of workhouses had begun in earnest in the late 1830s, but with the advent of the Famine many rapidly became overcrowded and incapable of adequately responding to the local situation, while also struggling to contain the illnesses spreading through their rooms. In Prime Minister John Russell's variation on relief works, the poor could only apply to work on various building schemes once the local workhouse was full. Thus, Kinealy argues that Russell was less lenient than the previous Prime Minister, Robert Peel, had been in implementing his relief policies - with terrible results (2002: 37-38).[4] The notorious Quarter Acre Law was implemented in the midst of these measures: a £4 Rating Clause meant landlords were responsible for holdings under £4, while the Gregory Quarter Acre Claim decreed that there was no relief for a cottier who held more than a quarter acre. Small farmers caught in-between these descriptors became "a parasitic encumbrance" for landlords - being neither self-sufficient nor usefully dependent (Whelan 1996: 59). This further complicated the heightening tensions between landlords and tenants, augmenting widespread displacement, eviction and, eventually, for many, emigration.

A consensus has emerged in retrospect, and was even acknowledged by some at the time, that the Famine was not simply a natural disaster but overwhelmingly a political one. Peter Gray writes: "By December [1847] the failure of the public relief

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[3] The purchase, distribution and effects of different types of food aid are discussed by James Donnelly in relation to the different tactics taken by, respectively, the Tory and Whig Governments (2002: 49-52, 67-70).

[4] Kinealy describes Russell's policies as follows:

> Russell also determined that more use should be made of the Poor Law than in the previous year and that alternative relief should not be offered until the workhouses were full [...] [T]he 100 per cent matched funding, provided under Peel, was to be reduced to 50 per cent under Russell. No special provision was made for areas which lacked a resident gentry to organize a local committee or to raise funds [...] Consequently, the two key figures in charge of relief provision were Sir Charles Wood, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and Charles Trevelyan, the Permanent Secretary at the Treasury. (2002: 37-38)

works was indisputable. Reports of mass mortality and inquests attributing deaths to the Board's [of Public Works] negligence became common" (1995: 51). Earlier the same year, a Temporary Relief Act known as the Soup Kitchen Act was prompted to alleviate the dawning failure of the public work schemes. This strategy, Kinealy discusses, was meant to provide safe, edible food for the starving as it had been identified that many people were dying as a result of inadequately cooked food (2002: 41). Soup kitchens, in particular voluntary ones, had another consequence, as even in the decades prior to the Famine religious tensions played a role in charity work where proselytizing became associated with relief efforts.[5] Regardless of the precise causes, soup kitchens during the Famine, both formally funded and voluntarily run, did not last long.

Meanwhile, an increase in the number of unions nationally, as a result of the Poor Law Amendment (Ireland) act of June 1847 (Jackson 1999: 75), redefined, at local levels, the allocations of workhouse places. Unfortunately, this positive shift with regard to the recognition of a differentiating population spread was dogged by the clause that collected local rates should cover the costs of running the local workhouse. This was subsequently recognized as untenable and there occurred a slow redress of the funding deficits through extended government loan schemes (Jackson 1999: 75-76).[6] Nonetheless, on the personal level of many tenants and their families, repayments on their rented land were impossible to maintain in the face of continued crop failure, with the added problem of the destruction and depletion of crop stores. Formal relief measures were not enough to counter the flow of displacement effected by localized forced evictions and countrywide attempts at emigration. And through it all, death from hunger-related illness, contagious diseases, fevers and outright malnourishment continued apace.

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[5] Irene Whelan discusses this as follows:
> As a result of the work underway at the colonies, the phenomenon of "souperism" of the doling out of material advantages in exchange for the transfer of denominational allegiance was already a familiar one on the eve of the Famine. Shortly after the onset of the potato blight and the threat of widespread starvation in 1845-6, however, a new wave of proselytism was unleashed which involved a more explicit and intense campaign of evangelism and the founding of a new organization, the Society for the Irish church Missions […]. (1995: 141)

[6] Jackson writes:
> In practice this outrageously parsimonious decision was inoperative, and the government had to support numerous unions from 1847 through to 1849: private charity, transmitted through British Relief Association, also helped to support impoverished areas. In May 1849 a measure was passed to permit the Poor Law Commission to transfer levies from the more prosperous east of the country to the devastated areas of the south and west; and in 1850 the Treasury advanced a loan of £300,000 to bail out the indebted unions. (1999: 75-76)

I explore these aspects of the Famine in greater detail throughout this study, at relevant points. Where my focus concerns the memory of particular phases and facets of Famine experience, I indicate the received histories, cultural contexts and social outcomes as needed. As a history, the Famine is controversial and contested. Subject to revision and interpretation, the story of the so-called Great Famine today comprises series upon series of internationally comparative readings, locally perpetuated emphases and retrospectively inclined clarifications. Some explanations converge; other understandings contradict each other. These versions will be indicated throughout my study where relevant, but it is not my concern to try to establish which stories might be more accurate. Instead, I acknowledge the colonially inscribed premise of the Famine and its initial manifestation in Irish life in order to focus on the contemporary readings that ensued from the first instances of Famine–related visual culture to the present day. While political realities shape perception and impact upon the languages and codes of visual and material culture, it is the underlying call for the visibility of cultural memory itself that is central in my study.

In terms of the Famine's visual legacy, the fact that there is no evidence of photographic images of the most severe effects of the Famine in Ireland renders the event potentially invisible in the modern imagination. The Famine in Ireland predated, by a whisper, photography's technological promise to evoke the seriousness of suffering on both intimate and immense scales. In Ireland any photographs taken outside of cities in the mid-nineteenth-century were more likely to be commissioned commemorative portraits of the landed classes than images reflecting a wider social descriptor. By the late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century some photographers and travelers provided a limited visual account of rural and small town life and even of social deprivation. Considering the cumbersome technology of photography at this time, with its requirement of duration, any such imaging was bound to be staged, without the possibility of today's instant picture rendering.[7] The surviving selectivity of such nineteenth-century photographic images of Irish life makes the gap in representation of Famine-era poverty all the more noticeable. Despite the fact that lens-based imaging has its problems with regard to representation, principally in its relationship to illusion,

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[7] For example, the Clonbrock (1860-1930), Poole (1884-1954) and Lawrence (1870-1914) Collections at the National Photographic Archive, National Library of Ireland, respectively image the life of a landed family, a market town and country-wide images of the periods described. These photographs were all taken for commercial use or by commission and are therefore selective in viewpoint. I am using the term "imaging" as a cover term for the range of means and types of visual images produced; two- and three-dimensional, as well as experientially imagined at certain locations and through ritual engagement with particular places.

photography and its allies in film and digital moving images have the ongoing capability to make modern and present-day wars, famine, environmental and socio-environmental disasters seem immediate and, importantly, unquestionably real.[8] Whether in the last century or this one, the camera lens has rendered mass traumas - World War II, mass hunger in Ethiopia, tsunamis, earthquakes and Hurricane Katrina, to name but a few - undeniably vivid to viewers all over the world.

The challenge for the present day to remember a past event, such as the Famine, as a useful making of meaning through visual culture is perhaps more definitively apparent due to the absence of photographic evidence or substantial documents of witness. There are records of policy, parliamentary debate and fragmentary catalogues of workhouse entry, deaths and emigration statistics, but no cohesive collating of this incomplete information. The accounts are dominated by the mechanisms of political power and authority, with little content provided by way of the primary witnesses to the Famine: those who actually suffered its effects. The closest thing to a national repository of Famine testimony is the Folklore Commission Collection, housed at the Department of Irish Folklore, University College Dublin. This collection takes the form of orally recounted personal remembrances of Famine-era experiences, from some as close as one generation removed. The body of content was gathered through a number of strategies, outlined by Cathal Póirtéir (1995: 13-16), beginning in 1935, and including a questionnaire circulated throughout Ireland in 1945 to mark the centenary of the Famine. The elements of this collection form a fascinating series of accounts, but collectively can only be merely approximate in historical terms. Furthermore, the indicative nature of the information-gathering techniques has iterated a ruralized focus on the memory of Famine.[9]

The interconnections of contested histories, scarcity of material traces and few contemporary visual representations, as well as a resounding silence from those who experienced the worst effects of the Famine leave the memory of the event wide open to appropriation: from political construal to cultural interpretation. As a history of poverty, to invoke the poetics of inexpressibility in order to side-step addressing the deeper and more challenging issue of memory's materialism is not, I argue, an adequate response. Instead, I ask to what degree the latency of Famine visibility in

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[8] Susan Sontag discussed this dual disbelief and belief in terms of the modernist secular turn as an invigoration of the role of photography on personal and social levels: "The credence that could no longer be given to realities understood *in the form of* images was not being given to realities understood *to be* images, illusions (1979: 153).

[9] Though its main purpose is to house oral and textual recordings of the Irish Folklore Commission on Irish life, the Department also includes a collection of fine art and photographic images. Throughout my study I draw on some of these texts and also discuss some of the paintings and photographs in the collection.

remembrance – immediately after the Famine, now and in the interim – is an echo of the lack of voice that marked out its primary witnesses in the first place.

Representation

This question invokes the need to constantly rethink what is meant by representation. In Famine memory, the lack of material traces directly affects the nature of its representations. My study addresses how absence is configured variously through positivist representational strategies; the difficulties of moving between evocation of histories of collective suffering and conveying the experiences of individuals; the importance of the temporal, cultural and geographical sites of representation; as well as the role of active remembrance in representing the past and making history. The complex interrelationship between the singular experience of suffering and its wider mass recognition as a form of violence, pain or injustice engenders suffering, such as Famine-related suffering, as a potentially unwieldy subject for imaging. Mieke Bal has explored the difficulties of how suffering is imaged and how such images are read. In a dual consideration of Elaine Scarry's book *The Body in Pain* and the exhibition *Beautiful Suffering – Photography and the Traffic in Pain*, she writes:[10]

> [...] the question arises whether physical pain is easier to represent visually than to articulate verbally [...] I submit that pain can be, but is not systematically, visible; it is differently but equally hard to represent visually as it is to express verbally. Reversing the perspective and siding with the sufferer is necessary ethically but also intellectually if we are to further our insight on this question. (2007: 100)

In Bal's terms the exhibition focused the problem of looking on that of looking at pain (96-97). Consequently, through a consideration of representation and its relationship to suffering, Bal proposes that some of the works in the exhibition

> undercode the violence so that its visibility in the resulting work, which is partly representational and partly anti-representational, is all the more tenacious and acute. Their tool is "metaphoring" between the particular and the general for the sake of promoting – sometimes even enshrining – the singular. (104)

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[10] The exhibition was held at the Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, Massachusetts, 28 January – 30 April 2006.

What she calls the "double take on representation", performed through some of the works on display, recognizes that suffering is always a singular experience. Further, her proposition is founded on the understanding that representation stylizes and in doing so questions itself.[11] Representation can thus bring into focus the singularity of suffering. Bal outlines this as a threefold process, occurring on the levels of content, aesthetic practice and the image, which she demonstrates in relation to a chosen image, *Nan one month after being battered*, 1984, by Nan Goldin, that takes as its subject a personal experience of domestic violence (104-105). Critically she distinguishes the process in question as an act of translation, which avoids particularity and denies "vicarious identification", while encouraging accessibility and understanding of the experience portrayed: "Thus, through these three, insistent forms of singularity, the image 'metaphors' the now-generalized notion of domestic violence into something uniquely singular" (105).[12]

Bal demonstrates that it is possible to address the subject of pain by means of representational awareness. Supplemental to this, however, as Scarry infers and Bal has acknowledged, is the eventuality that catchall terms also have a potentially reductive power, "generalizing" in lieu of promoting understanding. This poses a threat to the visibility of suffering, where codes of massification replace the potential for comprehension. The Famine, and other famines, can be described, as subjects for representation, as subjects primarily defined by their derivation from poverty. Poverty, like domestic violence or famine, is also a widely deployed generalized term that often depletes the singularity of its contexts. In representing the subject of poverty in the nineteenth-century, literature has, arguably, fared better than much visual culture through an awareness of singularity, even in fictive accounts. The success of Charles Dickens, for example, in conveying the slow social suffocation of England's underclass lay in his characterizations: the memorable, literally *unforgettable* individuals of his stories contrived a convincing and affective series of singular portraits of urban poverty. It is hard to find sustained contemporary equivalents in art or illustrations that, to borrow Bal's verb, "metaphor" Irish rural poverty as convincingly as Dickens did in his fictionalized representations of English urban poverty. Like domestic violence or poverty, famine is also readily described in a big term: a word that allows for virtually universal recognition and immediate, if easily distancing, validation of the suffering subject.

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[11] She writes: "[...] stylizing can serve many different purposes, one of which is to question - not naturalize - itself"(104). This notion is developed from addressing Theodor Adorno's critiques on aesthetic practices of art. In relation to the term "undercode" Bal refers to the work of Umberto Eco.
[12] In relation to translation, Bal draws on Walter Benjamin's definition of good translation as one that maintains difference.

The impact of representational means and historical conventions is integral to addressing Famine memory in the reflexive relationship between the imaging and nomenclature of suffering. Notably, it is discussion on the difference between viewer and viewed that most directly engages a politics of looking that shapes how the Famine, and famines in general, are now named and perceived. This is, in part, the cumulative result of how it was imaged at different times. Margaret Kelleher writes on the prevalence of images of catastrophe in visual mass media in the 1980s and 1990s, drawing attention to what she sees as their demeaning nature: "images of emaciation and of suffering, of helplessness and hopelessness, suggesting victims' powerlessness and inability to help themselves", which "also reinforces a division between spectator and scene, with significant consequences" (1997: 227). For Kelleher, this is connected to the promotion of namelessness in representational strategies and, by extension, implies that the representation of famine, for example, can dehumanize by turning individuals into an anonymous dependent mass.[13]

Here, difference is less useful than in Bal's reading, as it is tied to undoing the singularity of suffering. Instead of a sympathetic model of difference, the type of images that Kelleher alludes to constitutes an example of how photography's immediacy can overwrite its own subject. Uncritical of its representational system, such an image type sponsors an undermining of what images and imaging might do. I argue that a failure to analyse the history of imaging the Famine as a site of representation has contributed to our arrival at a restricted and tentative understanding of the Famine; a limited appreciation of the poverty that fostered it and a reticence to think through the suffering it constituted.

Cultural Analysis and Cultural Memory

In order to address this suggestion and redress the subsequent lack of cultural presence of co-suffering, my methodology for this study is cultural analysis and my focus is premised on the advent of cultural memory. Bal describes the practice of cultural analysis as follows:

> The field of cultural analysis is not delimited, because the traditional delimitations must be suspended; by selecting an object, you question the field. Nor are its methods sitting in a toolbox waiting to be applied; they too are part of the exploration. You don't apply one method; you conduct a meeting between several, a meeting in which the object participates, so that,

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[13] Kelleher's work is concerned with the way famines (Irish and Bengali) are presented in literature and in particular how "feminization" occurs through literary representations.

together, object and methods can become a new, not firmly delineated field. (2002: 4)

As is clear from this statement, interdisciplinarity is both the means of articulation and perpetual challenge of cultural analysis. The objects of (and with) which cultural analysis speaks are conceptually considered and reconsidered in negotiations of meaning that cultural analysts forge and forage through. One set of such objects can be the visual culture surrounding a historical event. Cultural analysis promotes a dialogue (of equivalence and discordance) between varied elements of what can be collectively termed "cultural artefacts" (Bal 1999: x) or "cultural objects" (Bal 2002: 21). All of these are addressed in and from the present day - as cultural memory in the present - though where relevant with a shaping cognizance of the relationships between (possible) intentions, contexts of production, initial readings and even cumulative practices of mediation. The purpose of engaging with concepts as a method of decoding histories and, ultimately, both reflecting and producing knowledge is critical as a means to begin to adequately address the range of visual and material culture attendant to Famine memory.

This is also related to the greater project of the study of visual culture. Bal outlines that a key - and urgent - task of visual culture studies is: "to understand some of the motivations of visual essentialism, which promotes the look of the knower (Foucault) while keeping it invisible" (2003: 22). Bal gives three reasons why she considers this task urgent:

The first is because the impervious "objects first" that art history and elements in visual culture studies share distracts from the primacy of understanding; but understanding comes first, followed by the perception it guides. In this view, the relationship between individual looking and interpretative communities changes. The second is because of the gendering of vision [...], which results from the primacy assigned to looking. And the third is because of the compelling need to expose the operations of the rhetoric of materiality. (22)

In the history of the Famine, the lack of artefactual inheritance lends further urgency to the matter of cultural analysis: in generating the memory of a history of poverty, the primacy of visual, or even material, vocabularies of discipline histories (or history accounted via traditional disciplines such as economic, art or cultural histories) must be explored and challenged. The experiences of loss are not necessarily suitably described or invoked by recourse to things through the conventional modes of

museum display, art exhibition, geographical mapping or heritage conservation. Therefore, as my central subject is an inquiry into how the memory of poverty might be facilitated in contemporary material cultures of history-making I draw upon a range of disciplines and interrogate the usefulness of a number of concepts. Postcolonialism, museum studies and art history are the major binding theoretical disciplines of my analysis, while the main concepts that will be used to explore the intersection between these disciplines and the Famine are: hunger, authenticity, narrativity, active tourism and remembrance. These disciplinary modes and conceptual interests arise out of my assessment of what currently exists in relation to Famine memory, in various cultural contexts, particularly in Ireland, and as a result of a retrospective view on earlier visual culture relating to the Famine.

It is on account of this linkage between the present and the past that the premise of cultural memory arises. Cultural memory, Bal writes, "signifies that memory can be understood as a cultural phenomenon, as well as an individual or social one" (1999: vii). This makes it particularly apt for my study as the methods of Famine representation I analyse traverse links between individual experiences at the sites of representation and the formation of collective, culturally inscribed, histories through active forms of remembrance. Bal also emphasises cultural memory's nature as a connection between the past, the present and the future: "Neither remnant, document, nor relic of the past, nor floating in a present cut off from the past, cultural memory, for better or for worse, links the past to the present and future" (vii). Therefore, it is not a question of reconstructing the Famine as it happened, but of tracing how its memory has been made in visual and material culture and assessing the influence of its memorialization in the present and for the future.

In this way, my inquiry also assesses the production of meaning in the exchange between object, image, viewer and cultural canons. The assessment of this interrelationship was formulated within the proposition that imaging as an activity, in the widest sense, is engaged by its vigilant nature with a politics of proxy. The function and potential of art in this proposition is enormous and often under-acknowledged in institutions of history. Homi Bhabha writes:

> Art produces stories and pictures, historical or personal, which survive and seduce because they continually raise alternatives and *agonists* to their own existence, spectres of memory, phantoms of the future, proxies for the present. (Bhabha 1996: 15)

Bhabha's words reflect his assertion of the importance of art, in particular, as a cue to understanding the present day (at any time) by means of stories and pictures -

narratives or images - that question perceptions of knowledge, destabilize comprehensions of social reality, and disrupt the production of conventional cultural value. Bhabha's concern in his use of proxy is connected to his discussion of negotiating rapture as an interpretative function of the space and time between the agora and aura of art. He proposes that a consideration of interpretation as intervention (13); a process which "turns the work inside out" (12), creates a new way of being in-between the expectation of aura as mediated in rapture and agora comprehended through narrative negotiation.[14] Instead he suggests that authorship is invalid in the usual terms because "[i]nterpretation, as an act of intervention, opens up the necessity of relating art as representation, a mimetic and metaphoric practice, to the wider institutional issues of the social regulation of culture" (14). My use of proxy draws on Bhabha's sensibility, and in addressing previous negative events, I understand the present as always concerned with the past. It is in the present that history is conjured and memory forged, and from this vantage point prospects for the future are envisioned. From looking at the cultural memory of the Famine and its relationship to material and visual culture, it is apparent that so-called artefacts and art act in vigilance over manifestations of cultural memory more effectively than they function as finite cues to past events. My term "history by proxy" is an acknowledgement of the moment in which personal experience in the present is linked to ideas of a collective past in the formation of cultural memory and, as such, is a call to constantly provoke the means by which we imagine history. Because cultural memory is an active, performative process, it assigns a collective power to re-appropriate the past. Where events remembered are already at a significant distance from the present-day generation, as is the case with the Famine, which is today, for most, some three or four generations removed, shared address to the past is an essential component of how memory is understood. This implies that an investigation of how history is performed collectively, as well as individually, through processes of its imaging, lies at the heart of my agenda. Since history is selectively renegotiated for and by each generation and conflicting interpretations can also emerge within a single generation, the interplay between agency and performativity necessarily adds to the healthy perfusion of claims and counterclaims over memory. The establishment of a National Famine Commemoration Committee reflects these concerns and in January 2009, it was agreed by the committee that an

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[14] Bhabha draws on Hannah Arendt's use of "in-between" (Bhabha 1996: 14). This text is part of a catalogue for an exhibition titled *Negotiating Rapture*: *The Power of Art to Transform Lives* held at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, July-October 1996. The exhibition's thematic agenda is described by the then director of the museum, Kevin E. Consey as: "[...] how diverse artists [...] through the artmaking process [...] attempt to satisfy a universal human desire for a heightened physical and emotional experience, to achieve at transcendent or spiritual state" (1996: xi).

annual Famine commemoration day would revolve between the four provinces of Ireland, with Cork as the location in 2009 and Mayo in 2010 (Prescott 2009).[15] The Famine, while at first glance seemingly quiet in museums and visual art in Ireland, is, on closer reading, a negative history subtly and variously remade on the terrain of individual artistic and collective commemorative, heritage and tourism practices. Cultural analysis as a methodology of exposing and imploding strategies of cultural agency, and cultural memory as an active performative mode of making history thus coalesce usefully in my exploration of how the Famine has been and is imaged.

Place and Memory; Time and Remembrance

Focus on my objects of analysis is located within the histories, contexts and sites where Famine memory has been formulated and is currently generated. How the landscape has been marked contrasts materially with a noticeable reticence, at a national level, to fully embrace the potential of visualization of the Great Irish Famine in both institutional and artistic representations for 150 years. The time period from the 1840s up to the 1990s describes the emergence of what is retrospectively described as Modern Ireland, along with twenty-six of the thirty-two counties on the island gaining political independence from Britain in 1921. This has led to a post-colonial Republic of Ireland, with six counties constituting Northern Ireland. The subsequent outpouring of cultural production in remembrance, from the moment of the 150-year commemorations in the mid 1990s to today, coincides with the assertion of Ireland as having made the transition from a post-colonial nation to a multi-cultural European state. This was the era of the Peace Process in Northern Ireland, culminating in the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. Ideas of place in Ireland, as in many post-colonial countries, are thus inherently tied up with political conflations of memory and identity re-forged in relatively recent times. In this way, critical systems of cultural differentiation between rural and urban sites, and national and foreign destinations, come into play in the ways the Famine is remembered.

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[15] On 25 May 2008 a Famine Commemoration Day was marked in Dublin, when an official reception was held at the Custom House by the then Minister of State at the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, John Curran, following a community-organized walk in Dublin city centre that day. This led to the establishment of the National Famine Commemoration Committee, on a two-year rotational basis (Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs 2008). On the organizing committee were "representatives of the departments of the Taoiseach and Foreign Affairs, heads of Third World charities [...] as well as individuals with particular interests [...] such as historians, and other academics and a retired diplomat" (Prescott 2009). Much larger in scope and more formally inaugurated than the commemoration day held in 2008, the 2009 government-supported commemoration was comprised of eight days of events in Skibbereen. There was also a related commemoration in Canada (Toronto and Grosse Île) at this time.

Examples of visualizations of Famine can be found in museums; some with dedicated exhibitions on the Famine, others harboring more obliquely defined parameters of its effects. All have a strong representational link to their site - location or context - and within their interior displays, spatial mapping and visual relativities between objects, images and text are key. Imaging of the Famine has occurred variously in temporary exhibition projects. Some of these, or parts of them, remain observable in institutional and private art practices including public art, commemorative commissions and individual artistic projects, but all were shaped to some degree at the outset by the environments in which they were developed and initially shown. Throughout Ireland there are small cottages and remnants of buildings such as workhouses and sites of soup kitchens now dedicated as places to recount localized histories of the Famine. Along with the displacement and death of so many people, significant physical alterations of the landscape were instigated during the Famine. Cottages were emptied; relief works oversaw the building of walls, roads and piers; new workhouses were rapidly populated, then over-populated; mass graves were dug and filled. These traces as well as the artistic visualizations and imaginings of Famine experiences are the focus of my study. Across my chapters the relation between place and memory, and its experience in time and by performed remembrance link my diverse objects of analysis, otherwise so different.

My first chapter is an examination of how the Famine has been imaged at the conventional modernist site of historical representation, the museum. Focused on the problematic positivism of exhibition practice as a means of collective remembering, I begin my assessment of the implications of strategies of representation within post-colonial discourses. Starting with the primary museum dedicated to the Famine, the Strokestown Famine Museum in County Roscommon, I analyse how strategies of identity and alterity formation form the basis for presenting a history of difference in this microcosmic approach to Famine memory. Though at other museum sites in Counties Kilkenny, Mayo and Wexford the Famine is less overtly remembered, the event is nevertheless presented as a significant motivation to comprehend political incidents, national identity and international situations of hunger. Across these examples, tensions within methods of representation, which correlate the past to the present and generate transgeographical cultural comparisons, are the subject of my analysis. What emerges from this discussion is how the paucity of artifactual evidence gives rise to varied strategies of negotiating the past in the present. It is in my final object of this chapter, the Famine Room at Cashel Folk Village, County Tipperary, that the potential of recognizing artificial memory is most persuasively embraced in the efforts to make past suffering appear to the present-day viewer.

In the second chapter I question the authority of historical voice assumed in and through temporary commemorative exhibitions on the Famine, and explicitly raise the issue of time and perspective in shaping how we engage in retrospective views. The negotiation of social art history is central to this chapter as a method to account for the significance of five key commemorative exhibitions. Firstly, I look at the imperative behind the 1946 exhibition in Dublin, *Exhibition of Pictures of Irish Historical Interest*, which reflected on some contemporary debates about art of the time, as well as attitudes to remembrance. On the surface, the centenary of the Famine was marked by a reticence to overtly scrutinize such a dark period of Irish history in lieu of a more celebratory tone on the subject of political independence from Britain. However, on individual levels, some artists did appear interested in addressing the Famine as subject in its own right.

The time of the 150-year commemorations bred a different sort of interest and I place cautious government attitudes within the context of occasionally bitter revisionist discussion. However, there were a number of exhibition projects that presented crucial contributions to the field of commemoration through temporary exhibitions. I explore four of these from the mid to late 1990s, organised by different groups with diverging agendas and outcomes. From my reading of these exhibitions it is clear that formal institutional reticence to address the Famine through visual and material culture in temporary formats became fodder for tentatively experimental approaches to how art and artefact might interact in exhibition practices that represent a negatively formed history of loss. Even so, the political climate of Ireland at this time greatly influenced the type of representations at play in these projects, reflecting further on the effects of the slow negotiation of the past by a post-colonial culture.

Chapter Three is developed around an assessment of the most common motif in Famine art, illustration and commemorative public works: the hungry body. To understand the complexities of this iconography, employed as a symbolic visualization of specific pain and as a metaphorical idiom for suffering, I look at works from different times, in various media and derived from a range of creative imperatives. This approach stresses the importance and usefulness of considering representation differently in connection with each work described. The issues raised by the use of the body in imaging the Famine are framed by a consideration of how pain is expressed and read, through the theories of Susan Sontag and Elaine Scarry. The correlation of their ideas provokes questions about whether it is possible to express pain at all and the relativities involved in looking at the suffering of another.

In relation to mid-nineteenth-century painting, both visualized context and perceptual notions of position, between artist, subject and viewer, have shaped and

continue to shape the location of the body in pain, and, by extension, have influenced the reading of hunger in representations of Famine. To address this period's colonially inscribed ideas of Irishness, and related primitivistic readings of images, I focus on images by contemporary individual illustrators and artists, which variously or in combination imply sympathy; reinforce stereotypes; subvert these stereotypes; render suffering as locally specific; and promote dispossession as universally readable. In these examples, artistic intentions raise aesthetic and ethical conundrums for imaging suffering, while appeals to the viewer can be manipulated or digressed by political interpretative positioning. The historically specific visual and textual languages are shaped by the impact of geographical place and social positioning on generating and reading representation. The last part of this chapter looks at more recent presentations of the hungry body in art in the realms of privately motivated works and public art commission. Works by Alanna O'Kelly, Edward Delaney and Rowan Gillespie provide an update on the place of the hungry body in art remembering the Famine, though are also significantly influenced by considerations of cultural context.

The dispossession alluded to in Chapter Three is the focus of Chapter Four, where evocations of experiences of Famine-era eviction, home abandonment and emigration are the representational focus of my objects of analysis. Traversing the realms of artefact replication, art and artefact, I consider postmemory as a necessary concept for the understanding of cultural memory through a critique of the discourse of authenticity in remembrance. The first part of this chapter lays out the intricacies of the relationship between a mobile, and now missing, subject - dispossessed masses made up of individuals - and the objects used to symbolize associated histories. I look at two commemorative artworks. One is situated in New York and made up of an actual Famine-era cottage; the other is a sculpture in County Mayo. These memorial works raise the idioms of the cottage and ship respectively in representing departure from the Famine. The chapter is structured around these double counterpoints of reality and representation; a cottage and a ship. Starting with eviction, I look at paintings from the nineteenth-century up to today, before analyzing the modes of representation in play at actual cottage sites in Counties Kerry and Mayo. The ship idiom is negotiated in a similar pattern, though concerns of replication are more explicitly relevant in this section. Cumulatively, these analyses suggest that a triangular relationship between postmemory, the search for authenticity in heritage cultures and ideas of modernity in postcolonial discourse is integral to enunciating the cultural memory of dispossession.

An evolving interrogation of the connection between evidence and voice in the first three chapters forms the agenda of Chapter Five. Concentrating on

functional discrepancies between statistical accounts, which emphasize numbers and names, and evocations of the past through narrative devices, I explore how representations of workhouse experiences and access to food relief are positioned in the visual and material culture of Famine memory. The Dunfanaghy Workhouse Heritage Centre in County Donegal and the Donaghmore Workhouse Museum in County Laois constitute the main hub of my discussion. Both sites promote an individual female narrative in their wider accounts of life in nineteenth-century rural Ireland, which indicates an interest, with subtle differentiations, in certain kinds of narrative structures as a means of addressing the past. In the last part of this chapter, an examination of how food aid is remembered is centred on reading objects in the Skibbereen Heritage Centre in County Cork. The interaction between artefacts from the past and the context of their mediation in the present accentuates the key position of agency in accounts of Famine reflected in my reading of selectively narrated figures in the workhouse museums. The making of history, and cultural memory, thus struggles in the gaps created between numerical descriptions of suffering, the naming of witnesses and the interpretative value of material objects.

The relationship between Famine histories and active tourism is the subject of Chapter Six. The features of heritage tourism surrounding the Famine are presented with a view to understanding the impact and reach of both formal touristic sites of Famine memory and incidental, or even unacknowledged, aspects of traces of the Famine on the land. In this chapter I examine representations occurring at the annual walk at Doolough in County Mayo, where international affiliations are rehearsed through universal notions of suffering and acted out in the ritual of walking. My analysis of heritage trails in Counties Cork, Donegal and Kerry allows me to further investigate the promise of active tourism as a means to perform history across these tourist-oriented sites of general Famine representation. These concerns of active remembrance are highly pertinent to considering the memory conjured by less overtly commemorated remaining structures of relief works in Ireland. Hannah Arendt's conception of time is a core concern in how I read Famine walls in Counties Tipperary/Waterford and Cork, and a Famine road in County Cork. The interplay between uncertainty over accuracy of origins, layering of historical relativities and responsible readings of these artifacts in the landscapes of Ireland heightens the importance of considered interpretation and active engagement in the construction of cultural memory.

This interest in active forms of memory is extended to Chapter Seven, in which the memory of burial is my primary subject. I consider the implications of so-called morbid or dark tourism for Famine memory to articulate the powerful potential of reconstituting witnessing in the present through remembrance of past

poverty and in particular its outcome in death. Sites commemorating Famine burial in Ireland and abroad are in some instances symbolically announced - such as cemeteries that contain mass graves - while other sites in Ireland are less explicitly acknowledged, but are locally and silently remembered, such as fields where no cattle grazes and ditches left overgrown. The juxtaposition of a soldier's cemetery with a Famine burial ground in Fermoy County Cork suitably raises a number of complexities inherent in visiting, reading and leaving burial sites as a form of cultural memory. The comparison reveals the tension between codes of visibility attendant to marked remembrance and less ostensibly visible sites.

I analyse how Famine burial grounds and remembrance of death cover a wide terrain of significations and symbolism; massification and individual contemplation, from heraldic cemetery systems of visibility through to a subtle recodifcation of rural Ireland. The usual primacy of historic visibility is queried in my assessment of how presence and imagination can conjure remembrance at mass graveyards in Counties Kilkenny and Cork. The issues raised by the representations of burial at grave sites are expanded in my reading of two photographs of unmarked burial grounds, which lead me to extrapolate what history by proxy might do for the remembrance of negative histories. Finally, reflections on a crucifix made from the base of a sliding coffin and two recent artworks, by Alanna O'Kelly and Paddy Graham, give rise to a recognition of a poetics of remembering that proceeds from and towards the realization that even events defined by loss must have a place for articulation in cultural memory.

Through readings of these various and contrasting images, objects and sites, I assess the difficulties for representational practices in pointing to negative or bad history and the tensions between the physicality of cathartic signs and the ambiguities of continuous remembrance. I explore the implications of the transition between representation and the real, with a persistent focus on how both the site of suffering and place of representation ordain meaning in remembrance. By framing my exploration of the imaging of the Great Irish Famine in this way, I propose that there is critical potential for art to intervene between the fragmented remnants of the past and the literal traces of time at the real sites of history, where methods of historical analysis have restricted both the representation of history and the understanding of representation itself. In this way, poverty can illuminate the case for history by proxy.