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History by proxy: imaging the great Irish famine

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Title: History by Proxy: Imaging the Great Irish Famine**Summary**

This thesis explores the range of visual and material representations of the Great Irish Famine to be found in heritage, art, and memorial and tourist practices. It focuses on the histories, contexts and sites where Famine memory has been formulated and is currently (re)generated. The Famine began in 1845, triggered by repeated potato blights, which devastated crops of the primary staple of the Irish diet at the time. The direct effects of the Famine were acutely felt for at least six years, with ongoing ramifications for cultural, political and economic life in Ireland. Some historians and cultural analysts argue that the shadow of the Famine lingers today as an inadequately addressed aspect in the forging of modern Ireland. The population in 1841 was more than 8 million. By 1851, over a million had died while in the region of one and half million had emigrated. As a history of poverty, the Famine functions as a case study for what I term “negative history”; histories defined by absence and loss.

Visualizations of the Famine can be found in museums: some featuring dedicated exhibitions on the Famine, others harboring less definitive parameters of its effects. Imaging of the Famine has also occurred variously in temporary exhibition projects. Whether it concerns public art, commemorative commissions or individual artistic projects, all were shaped 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 buildings of walls, roads and piers, so as to provide the poor with work and a meagre income; workhouses were rapidly populated, then over-populated; mass graves were dug and filled.

The relation between place and memory, and its experience in time and by performed remembrance, links these diverse objects of analysis. Through my study I take into account the colonially inscribed premise of the Famine and the Famine’s initial manifestation in Irish life in order to understand the early examples of Famine-related visual culture. I also explore its sustained effects in relation to more recent elements of commemoration and representation. While political realities shape perception and impact upon the languages and codes of visual and material culture,

it is, nonetheless, the underlying call for the *visibility* of cultural memory itself that is central in my study. Ideas of place in Ireland, as in many post-colonial countries, are inherently tied up with political confluences of memory and identity, the latter re-forged in relatively recent times. As a result, critical systems of cultural differentiation between rural and urban sites, and national and foreign destinations, come into play in the ways in which the Famine is remembered.

How the Famine has been imaged at the conventional modernist site of historical representation, the museum, is examined in Chapter One. Focusing on the problematic positivism of exhibition practice as a means of collective remembering, I assess the implications of representation within post-colonial discourses. Strategies of identity and alterity formations form the basis for generating a history of difference in one museum's microcosmic approach to Famine memory. At other museum sites the event is presented as a significant motivation and even means to comprehend political incidents, national identity and international situations of hunger. Across these examples, friction within methods of representation, which correlate the past to the present and produce transgeographical cultural comparisons, is the subject of my analysis. What emerges from this discussion is how the paucity of artefactual evidence gives rise to varied strategies of negotiating the past in the present and further, that recognizing the artificial nature of memory can be persuasively employed in efforts to make past suffering appear to the present-day viewer.

In Chapter Two I question the authority of conventional modes of historical representation assumed in and through temporary commemorative exhibitions on the Famine, and explicitly raise the issue of time, or perspective, in shaping how artists, curators and viewers engage in retrospective views. The negotiation of social art history is central as a method to account for the significance of five key commemorative exhibitions. Firstly, I look at the imperative behind an exhibition held in 1946, which reflected on some contemporary debates about art of the time, as well as attitudes to remembrance. These debates were marked by an institutional reluctance 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—though, on individual levels, some artists did appear interested in addressing the Famine as subject in its own right. I then explore four exhibitions held in the 1990s, organised by different groups with divergent agendas and outcomes. From my reading of these exhibitions it is clear that the formal institutional reticence to address the Famine through visual and material culture in the format of temporary exhibitions laid the foundations 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 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. In this chapter I stress the usefulness of considering representation differently in connection with each work described. In relation to mid-nineteenth-century painting, both visualized context and perceptual notions of relative social 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 works 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. 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 commissions. 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, provoking questions about whether it is possible to express pain at all, as well as about the relativities involved in looking at the suffering of another.

Dispossession 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 who emigrated or died—and the objects used to symbolize associated histories. The chapter is structured around the double counterpoints of reality and representation: a cottage and a ship. In relation to eviction, I look at paintings from the nineteenth century up to today, before analyzing the modes of representation in play at cottage sites. The ship idiom is negotiated in a similar pattern, though concerns of replication are more explicitly relevant in this discussion. 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 enunciate the cultural memory of dispossession.

An interrogation of the connection between evidence and voice 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 Famine memory. A focus on narratives pertaining to individual females within wider accounts of nineteenth-century rural life in Ireland at two key workhouse museums indicates an interest, with subtle differentiations, in certain kinds of narrative structures as a means of addressing the past. In this chapter, I also examine how food aid is remembered through a reading of objects in a Famine heritage centre. 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 of 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, traces of Famine experience left on the land. I examine representations occurring at an annual charity walk where international affiliations are rehearsed through universal notions of suffering and acted out in the ritual of walking. My analysis of heritage trails 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. Concerns of active remembrance are keenly pertinent to considering the memory conjured by less overtly commemorated remnants of relief works in Ireland, as explored in my reading of two Famine walls and a Famine road. The interplay between the uncertainty over accuracy of origins (such as a lack of absolute clarity on which existing structures are in fact relief works), the layering of historical relativities and the promotion of considered experiential involvement with these artefacts in the landscapes of Ireland heightens the importance of thoughtful interpretation and active engagement in the construction of cultural memory.

The memory of burial, mostly undertaken in haste to mass and unmarked graves, is the primary subject of Chapter Seven. 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 burial. Sites commemorating Famine burial are in some instances symbolically announced—such as official cemeteries that contain mass graves. Other sites are less explicitly acknowledged, but are locally and silently remembered—such as fields where no cattle graze and ditches are

overgrown. Focussing on the gap between codes of visibility attendant to marked remembrance and less ostensibly tangible sites, the usual primacy of historic visibility is queried in my assessment of how presence and imagination can conjure remembrance at mass graveyards. The issues raised by the representations of burial at cemeteries 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 Famine era coffin and two recent artworks give rise to a recognition of a poetics of remembering that proceeds from and towards the realization that events defined by loss must have a place for articulation in cultural memory.

In my conclusion I suggest that the limitation of literally mapping history is indicative of the struggles undertaken by practices of remembrance to variously configure absence through positivist representational strategies, and underlines the difficulties associated with commemorative shifts between evoking histories of collective suffering and conveying the experiences of individuals. This highlights the significance of temporal, cultural and geographical sites of representation, as well as the role of active remembrance in conjuring the past and making history. Therefore, I propose, there is critical potential for art to intervene between the fragmented physical remnants of the past and the ephemeral 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”.