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Banshees of Late Capitalism: War, Ecology, & Alienation

Abstract

This review essay explores the concepts of war, ecology/human-nonhuman relations, and alienation through a critical analysis of McDonagh's *The Banshees of Inisherin* (2022).

Keywords

war, ecology, environmental theory, animal studies, alienation, film studies

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Cover Page Footnote

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Introduction

Martin McDonagh's *The Banshees of Inisherin* (2022) may have had all the telltale signs of an Oscar-bait film, its failure at the Academy Awards should hardly serve as a fair judgment of the intellectual (and indeed political) value of the film. It is weird and simplistic on the surface while at the same time having a depth that is sorely lacking in much of mainstream film—a depth that seems to have overshot a majorly profitable audience (though the increased prevalence of streaming services continues to make comparisons of profit-margin from streaming to pre-streaming films difficult). *Banshees* may have even required its major stars (Colin Farrell, Brendan Gleeson, and Barry Keoghan) to take far lower pay (~\$3 million each—heaven forbid!) than they would otherwise earn to ensure the film was made and made profitably.¹ The casting and some well-deserved positive press drew enough of an audience for the film to roughly double its budget in revenue as of late March 2023.²

While there is much to appreciate in this film that will be explored and commented on in this review essay, all film fans and cultural critics must always remember that the character and quality of the films we get is a direct result of the perceived profitability of the film concept, proposed cast, etc.—not necessarily perceived artistic or intellectual quality in and of themselves. This doesn't diminish artistic successes when we are provided them, especially when a film offers something of a subtle metacommentary on the centrality of artistic production in human life over time. Beyond how art may relate to the experience of alienation, *Banshees* gives its audience glimpses of explications of broader alienation, particularly male (though not exclusively male) alienation, reflections on the harms of endless war, and humanity's relationship to our non-human living world. How *Banshees* deals with these three categories will be the focus of this essay.

War

In *Banshees of Inisherin* war is built into the setting. We learn early on that Inisherin is a (fictional) island off the coast of Ireland, while the war—presumably the Irish Civil War—remains on the mainland. Conflict between Catholics and Protestants are vaguely referenced at a few points in the film. What is particularly interesting about this film in relation to war is that there is basically no critical commentary on the war itself. The actual war is mere setting. It is the conflict between the story's main two characters Pádraic Súilleabháin (Colin Farrell) and Colm Doherty (Brendan Gleeson) that provides our critique of war. Parallel to the civil war raging on the mainland, on Inisherin, Pádraic and Colm enter into a seemingly meaningless conflict leading to the destruction of a friendship (or beginning with the destruction of a friendship), the terrible self-mutilation of a gifted musician, the death of a beloved pet donkey (more on this later), and the apparent suicide of an abused young man Dominic Kearney (Barry Keoghan). It might be hasty to say that the conflict between the two men was meaningless or trivial, but it was certainly avoidable—not unlike most wars in human history. When Colm, without much explanation beyond wanting to avoid meaningless conversations about nothing and focus on his music, breaks off his friendship with

¹ Blathin de Paor and Aakanksha Surve, “The Banshees of Inisherin cast 'may have taken large pay cut' for Oscar nominated film.” *Dublin Live*. Jan. 23, 2023. <https://www.dublinlive.ie/news/celebs/banshees-inisherin-cast-may-taken-26103518>.

² [https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Banshees-of-Inisherin-The-\(2022\)#tab=box-office](https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Banshees-of-Inisherin-The-(2022)#tab=box-office).

Pádraic, Pádraic is completely destroyed. He refuses to accept the end of the friendship, which leads Colm to cut off one of his own fingers (from his fiddle hand) every time Pádraic speaks to him. There is a dark comedic element here, but it also speaks to the stupid, self-harming aspects of war. Pádraic is reasonably confused by Colm's behavior, but why he also refuses to leave things alone, especially after Colm cuts off the first finger and throws it at Pádraic's door, also doesn't make much sense. Again, in war, all those who participate get wrapped up in the inhuman stupidity of it all.

Then of course there is the collateral damage. Beyond Colm's hand being cut off, the habit of throwing the sheared fingers at Pádraic's door leads to Pádraic's close animal companion, a pet miniature donkey named Jenny, choking to death on one of the fingers. Dark comedy emerges again here, but more importantly it speaks to the uncontrollable consequences of war that quickly spiral out of control. Colm cutting off all his fingers on one hand wasn't too far for him, but the unintentional killing of Jenny shifts his demeanor immediately. Colm accepts the consequences without complaint: Pádraic burning his house down. Colm escapes the burning home leading to one final conversation between the two men. After Colm comments that he hasn't heard gunfire from the mainland in a while, Pádraic responds saying, "Eh, they'll be back at it again soon enough...Some things there's no movin' on from. And I think that's a good thing." While the double-meaning is a bit on the nose in this instance, what this says about war more generally is less clear. Pádraic seems to be suggesting that it is good that people can't move on when terrible things happen, as if the inability to move on from horrific events is a sign of recognition that the horrific thing that happened was truly horrific—and that if we forgive and move on it somehow means the terrible thing wasn't so terrible after all. The audience needs to look beyond the view of this otherwise quite narrow-minded character and look at the damage caused by this kind of mentality. The history of perpetual war in the world over the past century, at least, speaks to the results of refusing to move on. Conversely, perhaps we all should be less willing to move on, with regard to our ethical judgment at least, from some egregious intentional harms that we participate in or witness from governments and corporations. Colm didn't intend to kill Jenny, or even to harm anyone but himself. However, we know that in war there are predictable "unintentional" harms that happen, but there are presumably plenty of actual mistakes. That is the horrible nature of war. The audience of *Banshees* is left feeling not hateful or angry at the characters for engaging in this pointless conflict, but instead we feel sad and pitiful, having witnessed a deeply tragic and unnecessary accident. While contemporary wars are surely unnecessary—except to maintain the profits of the arms industry—there is far more intentionality in them than we see in *Banshees*, with the exception of Pádraic burning down Colm's house (with a warning). This is where the war metaphor wears itself out: what we witnessed wasn't a war, not really.

Ecology

The collateral damage in *Banshees of Inishire* is both human and non-human. Throughout the film the audience is shown a variety of human/animal relations. We see livestock and dairy farming. We see pets and owners, and plenty of wild birds. The two central non-human characters are Pádraic's donkey Jenny and Colm's dog Sammy. Both men treat their animals with love and compassion, and this is part of what makes the film emotionally engrossing, despite the lack of deep character development (e.g., we don't really get back stories on the characters besides that

Pádraic's and his sister Siobhán's [Kerry Condon] parents died several years prior). Despite the conflict that emerges between the two main characters, their care for their animals (and respect for each others' relationships with their respective animals) never fades and is the strongest expression of compassionate humanity we see throughout the film. Even when Colm gets to the point where he has severed all his fingers because of Pádraic's refusal to leave him alone, once Colm learns that Jenny has died and died from choking on one of the severed fingers, the immediacy of the sadness makes all of Colm's concerns for time alone and his music appear insignificant. He wanted space from Pádraic, not to hurt him (or Jenny), even while he remained unconcerned for Pádraic's emotional well-being prior to Jenny's death. When the local police officer (who is, unsurprisingly, a vicious bully and child abuser) mocks Pádraic about Jenny's death, it is Colm who smacks the cop unconscious midsentence. In these moments the audience experiences the human connection between the men, but a connection rooted in the value of non-human life and their distinct importance to the humans who love them. While some may accuse the film of a soft anthropocentrism given that it could be interpreted as focusing on the importance of the animals to their humans full-stop, this would be a shortsighted view of what *Banshee's* actually shows. Yes, Pádraic tells his sister that he refuses to keep the donkey outside when *he* is sad, but earlier in the film he expresses his concern simply for Jenny's desire to not be lonely, even if the humans didn't necessarily want her inside all the time. After Jenny dies and Pádraic sets out to burn down Colm's home, when Pádraic warns Colm he also tells him to make sure the dog isn't inside because he has nothing against "that gom." While the house is burning Pádraic takes care of Colm's dog as he promised. In that last conversation after Pádraic sees that Colm fled his burning home, half of their conversation is about their animals. Colm again apologizes about Jenny and thanks Pádraic for caring for Sammy.

Our animal companions and our broader non-human ecologies have great potential to bring out the best in humanity. We see this literally in Sammy's attempt to take the shears away from Colm before he is about to remove more of his fingers, as if to say, "come on man, this is really dumb, don't do this." However, when humans get caught up in themselves too much, particularly over trivialities or even about important disagreements that could be resolved with more humility and effort, we too often lose sight of the non-human life we are failing to appreciate and even potentially actively harming. The wider lesson of *Banshees* in relation to human-non-human environment relations is that it takes more than just awareness and care to maintain a healthy relationship. Humans need to do a better job of taking care of each other, which our companions are often quick to assist with, but to have a just relationship with the non-human world we need to work harder at achieving just human societies. While it is certainly true that plenty of humans struggle or fail to try to treat non-human life with any degree of respect, we also know that it is easier for some people to treat animals with respect and love them than to extend that same care to their fellow humans (e.g., people who care about stray animals or animal abuse but care little for opposing war, exploitative labor practices, lack of accessible health care, or human homelessness, etc.). This is not meant to diminish or underemphasize the more serious and numerous overlaps between the kinds of people who are fine abusing animals and promote or participate in the abuse of other humans.

Where *Banshees's* engagement with ecological thought falls short is on how human behavior affects the non-human life we don't form close personal relationships with: the algae, the microbes, the slugs. All central to the maintenance of all life on the planet, but harder to appreciate in the

same emotional ways. The writer who conceives of the narrative that leads to the film that can capture that human-ecological relationship with emotional hooks is an artist we desperately need.

Alienation

Both pre-COVID-19 pandemic and since we have been seeing a consistent rise in animal ownership (mainly cats and dogs). Forming close relationships with our non-human companions is one of the ways that humans within late capitalism attempt to resolve the deep feelings of alienation they experience. I've heard countless stories of homeless people in the US talk about the importance of their pet dog in keeping them going, day-to-day despite the inhumanity they experienced on a daily basis. Pádraic and Colm both lean on their animals; they do, in a sense, keep them going. These relationships however do not solve their sense of alienation. Colm in particular, who sees himself more as an intellectual, falls deeper into an apparent existential crisis, probably clinical depression as well, all while Sammy is in his life. Colm even shares a dance with Sammy when he completes an important piece of music. *Banshees* shows that these relationships can be a lot in our lives, but they can't be everything. This is also true of our human relationships. Alienation can be alleviated by good friends and loving pets, but unless the structural bases of alienation are addressed, alienation will not abate, nor will its broader harms. Colm becomes fixated on creating a legacy for himself that matters, that will be of global significance. He wants to feel meaningful in a way that will be remembered, because he produced something meaningful that outlives him. Pádraic disagrees. In part because of his own ignorance (which Colm ironically shares by incorrectly stating the century that Mozart lived), but also because of his value of immediate human bonds Pádraic doesn't see the significance of wanting to be remembered instead of potentially fading into obscurity because he focuses on being a nice person. This powerful interaction is somewhat fleeting given where the plot goes shortly thereafter, but it is worth considering, given how many of the great people of history (mostly men but not too few women) were "terrible people" on a personal level. Pádraic is too dependent and in-the-moment. He cares nothing for world significance; he also doesn't seem to care for what people need intellectually or creatively if it isn't also what he wants. In that sense, *Banshees* is also a commentary on some of the more subtle manifestations of contemporary toxic masculinity—maybe not the worst forms but certainly ones worth reflecting on and moving past.

Banshees also speaks to the particular alienation of the social media/Internet age, despite taking place long before such things were ever conceived. We see people trying to make a difference in the world—for better or worse. They want to get noticed because it lets them know they are alive. Even to be hated is to be real. This is in no small part why social media can be so toxic, because it provides a venue for recognition that people are pervasively lacking in the "real world." And what do we see as a result? Self-harm, cruelty, and collateral damage. Colm wants to create something that will last and be appreciated long after he dies, but what we fail to appreciate too often is that that is not really in the cards for most people—no matter how rich or poor (though of course being rich does seem to significantly increase the odds in contemporary society). Colm should have every opportunity to create the great art he wants to, but he doesn't seem to primarily care about the quality for quality's sake, but instead Colm too is focused on the recognition of others. Pádraic cares about the recognition of his friends, family, and community. Both men are denied in different ways—as are so many people around the world today. In the Global North in particular, there has

been a troubling rise of masculinist influencers who prey on young men's aspirations for recognition, power, and success—while offering them nothing but snake oil and a wake of destruction.

Banshees of Inisherin is at its core a portrayal of struggles against alienation. The setting is an isolated island. The characters are all in their own ways isolated. Siobhán has to leave the island entirely in order to fight her own sense of alienation. She tries to bring her brother along, but he refuses. Her character, like I argued about Belle's character in *Beauty and the Beast* (apparently controversially), is a kind of heroic figure in that she does the hard thing to make progress—and tries to include others in her effort to help them improve too.³ But her role could never be to force anyone to make steps to improve themselves or their situation, but she makes a loving effort to persuade. Siobhán moves to the mainland to work in a library where she will have more opportunities to read more books (her passion), but implicitly, she will also have greater opportunity to engage with the wider world. And it is this aspect of her move away from Inisherin that opens up the possibility for de-alienation.

³ Bryant W. Sculos, "We Are the Beast: Toxic Masculinity and Social Responsibility in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*," *Class, Race, and Corporate Power*. Vol. 5, Iss. 2., Aug. 2017.
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