Catholic Iconography, Cultural Memory and Imaginaries

The Sacred Heart in Irish Emigrant Identity

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Disentangling Memory and Imaginaries

This paper focuses on the use of images of a Catholic devotional object, specifically the Sacred Heart image, to communicate a collective ‘cultural memory’ of Irish emigrant identity in the photographic novel I Could Read the Sky. I am interested in considering the potentially varied reception of this image by the readership of this photo-text. How might a reader’s interpretation of this image be altered if s/he is cognizant of resonances of the Sacred Heart image in Irish literature? Alternatively, how might a reader’s interpretation of this image differ if s/he is cognizant only of the Sacred Heart image as a kitsch item in popular culture? Accordingly, I will offer two potential readings of the Sacred Heart image in I Could Read the Sky. The first will propose a reading based on an awareness of the Sacred Heart image in Irish cultural memory, informed by the novels of James Joyce and John McGahern. The second will propose a reading of the image in western popular cultural imaginary, informed by the presence of the Sacred Heart image in contemporary art, taking the example of Damien Hirst’s New Religion exhibition (2005).

The overall aim of this test-case study is to tease-out some of the continuities and discontinuities between ‘cultural memory’ and ‘cultural imaginary’. What role does memory play in the creation of cultural imaginary? How, and to what extent, does ‘cultural imaginary’ differ from ‘cultural memory’? Is the former a more expansive category that includes aspects of ‘cultural memory’, or is there a greater degree of overlap and synonymy between these terms? It is imperative to begin with a working definition of both terms before teasing out further nuances as the analysis progresses.

1 O’Grady/Pyke 1997.
Entangled Definitions

Cultural Memory

The working definition of ‘cultural memory’ that I will utilize is derived from the studies of Jan and Aleida Assmann. These scholars provide a nuanced analysis of individual and collective memory, scrutinizing transitions between these categories as well as defining sub-types of individual and collective memory. Aleida Assmann refers to four ‘formats’ of memory (individual memory, social memory, political memory, cultural memory), which breaks down a more simplistic dichotomy between individual and collective memory. A crucial aspect is the shift between ‘embodied’ memory, and ‘mediated’ memory:

To move from individual and social memory to political and cultural memory is to cross a threshold in time. Individual and social memory is embodied; both formats are grounded in lived experience; they cling to and abide with human beings and their embodied interaction. Political and cultural memory, on the other hand, are mediated; both are founded on the more durable carriers of external symbols and material representations; they not only rely on libraries, museums and monuments, but also on various modes of education and repeated occasions for collective participation.

In this regard Aleida Assmann emphasizes that one of the distinctive facets of cultural memory is its ‘archival’ quality: cultural memory includes both an ‘active’ memory, “what a society consciously selects and maintains as salient and vital items for common orientation and shared membership” (eg. monuments, exhibitions, ‘canonized’ works of art), as well as symbols, texts, images, and monuments that lie dormant – forgotten, but not lost – in the voluminous ‘archival’ memory of a culture, affording the potential for transformation and retrieval of memory.

‘Cultural memory’ denotes the dynamic process by which a society communicates its own identity, its own shared memory of itself, across generations, mediated in texts, images, symbols, and performance. The archival breadth and diversity of such media afford the potential for transformation and change, over time, as certain images and texts are selected and foregrounded as ‘active memory’, whilst others are passed over or neglected as ‘archival memory’.

Cultural Imaginary

How does such a conception of ‘cultural memory’ compare with ideas of ‘cultural imaginary’? The latter term is variously defined, but the working definition that will be used in the present study is informed by Charles Taylor filtered through the lens of Claudia Strauss. Taylor defines

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4 Assmann, Aleida 2006, 220–221.
the term ‘social imaginary’ in conversation with Richard Kearney, highlighting the concept as a shorthand way of referring to the ‘background understanding’ of a society implicitly shared by the majority of its members – basic presuppositions as to how a society understands itself and how it operates:

KEARNEY: We call this ‘imaginary’ because large parts of this process are tacit and prereflective?

TAYLOR: Yes, because it is embedded in all kinds of paradigm stories, images, and ideologies that we carry around with us.

KEARNEY: Forming a kind of habitus or tradition or communal memory?

TAYLOR: Indeed, and the term social imaginary captures and covers all of these media of transmission while also denoting the specific potential for creative reinterpretation of the past in light of some new or future project. What I’m trying to get at with this term, social imaginary, is something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged way […] I speak of imaginary because I’m talking about the way ordinary people ‘imagine’ their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms; it is carried in images, stories, legends, and so on.

7 Taylor 2007, 29–30, the conversation took place on 30th April 2002 in Montreal.

8 Taylor 2007, 41.

9 Strauss 2006, 323.

10 Strauss 2006, 323.

Taylor does not consider that there is a single ‘global social imaginary’, but rather a plurality of social imaginaries, that overlap and differ, and often sharply diverge: “[…] the social imaginaries of various cultures in the world are still significantly heterogeneous […] A position where the majority of one’s social imaginary can converse with the majority of another would be a huge achievement.”

Claudia Strauss highlights the near parallel between Taylor’s model of social imaginaries and the anthropological concept of shared cognitive schemas or ‘cultural models’, that is, “presupposed, taken-for-granted models of the world that are widely shared”. As a result, Strauss indicates ways in which Taylor’s model may be nuanced by studies in this field, notably by avoiding cultural abstraction and turning to a more person-centred approach: “This means talking, not about ‘the imaginary of a society’, but of people’s imaginaries.”

There is evidently a high degree of overlap between the concepts of ‘cultural memory’ and ‘cultural imaginary’ (or cultural model), as interrelated ways of denoting a society’s implicit self-understanding, mediated in images, stories, and rituals. A crucial disjunction may potentially occur, however, when attention is paid to a particular group within a society, rather than focusing exclusively on a more abstract sense of ‘the imaginary of a society’ as a whole. The present test-case will focus on the imaginary of a minority group (Irish Catholics) within a broader society (western European cultural imaginary). Here there is potential for a fissure to open-up
between a minority group’s own self-understanding, communicated in images, stories and legends (cultural memory) and the pre-understanding of those same images, stories and legends in the cultural imaginary of a broader culture (e.g. western European cultural imaginary).

The test-case will focus upon Irish-Catholic emigrant identity, as communicated in the photo-text, *I Could Read the Sky*. How is a viewer’s interpretation of the Sacred Heart image altered by a pre-understanding of this image in Irish-Catholic cultural memory, as this is mediated in ‘canonical’ texts of Irish literature? Alternatively, how might a viewer’s pre-understanding differ if it is shaped by the resonances of this image in western European cultural imaginary, as this is reflected in contemporary art?

**Bleeding Love: The Sacred Heart-image in *I Could Read the Sky***

The photographic novel *I Could Read the Sky* (1997) is a collaborative work between the Chicago-born author Timothy O’Grady and the British photographer Steve Pyke. Memory lies at the heart of *I Could Read the Sky*: two semi-independent memory streams flow through the work. The coherence of the prose narrative, grounded on oral histories of Irish emigrants to London collected and refashioned by O’Grady, is provided by the narrator, an elderly Irish emigrant recalling fragments of his life, shifting back and forward both temporally and spatially. The images more often cluster: there are groups of images of family members; of farmland; of building-sites in England, which weave in and out of the narrative flow or provide static counterpoints.11

The mutual integrity of image and text echoes *A Note to the Reader* in John Berger and Jean Mohr’s study, *A Seventh Man* (1975), which inspired the genre of O’Grady and Pyke’s work.12

The book consists of images and words. Both should be read in their own terms. Only occasionally is an image used to illustrate the text. The photographs, taken over a period of years […] say things which are beyond the reach of words. The pictures in sequence make a statement: a statement which is equal and comparable to, but different from, that of the text.13

The aspect that most immediately strikes a reader of *I Could Read the Sky* is the predominance of memories of people and landscapes that shape the affective sense of ‘home’. The photo-text contains just under ninety black and white photographs, of which the largest proportion (twenty-seven) are striking portraits of Irish men, women and children, often grouped into dense clusters.14 Such portraits do not serve as a direct illustration of characters within the novel, but rather conjure-up a sense of fractured connections, of people left behind, perhaps

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11 The novel was subsequently adapted into a film by screenwriter and director Nichola Bruce (IE/UK 1999).
13 Berger/Mohr 1975, 7.
Catholic Iconography, Cultural Memory and Imaginaries

living now only in memory. The portraits intersect with the narrator’s own small well-thumbed collection of family photographs, which transport him back to his Labasheeda childhood.\textsuperscript{15} The photographic images have an affective function, stimulating a viewer’s own set of memory images, transporting him/her back ‘home’.

The dense agglomerations of landscape photos (sixteen) have a similar effect, neither illustrative nor specific, the images are taken from an array of geographical locations across Ireland (Belfast, Clare, Cork, Donegal, Dublin, Kerry, Sligo) from 1987–1994.\textsuperscript{16} As was the case with Berger and Mohr’s study, the aim is evocation rather than illustration. Thomas O’Grady in his recent critical essay highlights this anti-representational character of the images in this work, drawing parallels with the Photo-Texts of Wright Morris (\textit{The Inhabitants} (1946) and \textit{The Home Place} (1948)).\textsuperscript{17} The series of landscape clusters\textsuperscript{18} evoke unspecified fields enclosed by stone-walls, turf bogs, and cliffs, which transcend the specific locale in which they were taken.

Whilst the dominant sets of images concern people and landscapes, there are a smaller subset of religious images and symbols contained within the work. With regard to the photos, eleven images contain religious motifs:

\begin{itemize}
  \item Iconography: rosary beads (5); religious statues (Mary 97, 106; Jesus 107; Infant of Prague 97); crucifix (148).
  \item Devotional images: icon of Mary (148); Sacred Heart (148, 153); St Francis (155).
  \item Sacred space: church interior (75); gravestones (103, 105); grotto (106).
  \item Religious apparel: communion dress (66).
\end{itemize}

This paper will select two images for closer scrutiny, each depicting the Sacred Heart image, clustered towards the end of the novel (148, 153). The image on page 148 of the novel is ambiguous, as it may be interpreted by the reader/viewer as the sole image of the narrator’s Kentish town bedsit (fig. 1).\textsuperscript{19} The empty bed may hint at the absent presence of the narrator’s wife, Maggie, set in a chapter that constitutes an extended eulogy that attempts to conjure her into being, “I try to bring her here.”\textsuperscript{20} Alternatively, the room depicted may reside in the interior of the narrator’s memory, a pre-exilic glimpse of a Labasheeda bedroom, his own double-bed shared with his brothers, or perhaps that of his parents. A cluster of devotional objects dominate the image: just off centre a crucifix adorns a holy-water font set on the mantelpiece; to the left is a framed image of an icon of Mary with a prayer at its base; to the right, a larger painting of the Sacred Heart, a devotional image of Jesus pointing to his visible heart. The spatial positioning of these images is significant: the Sacred Heart dominates the space with its

\textsuperscript{15} Cf. O’Grady/Pyke 1997, 23.
\textsuperscript{16} Cf. O’Grady/Pyke 1997, Picture Information, 164–5.
\textsuperscript{17} Cf. O’Grady 2013, 108.
\textsuperscript{18} Cf. O’Grady/Pyke 1997, 16–20, 30–37.
\textsuperscript{19} The Picture Information identifies this bedroom as in Inishmann, however, not London, cf. O’Grady/Pyke 1997, 165.
\textsuperscript{20} O’Grady/Pyke 1997, 147.
greater size and higher elevation, visually superior in this interior celestial hierarchy to the image of Mary, whose intercessory function is hinted at by her closer proximity to the resident’s reclining heads once in bed. The little snow-scene on the mantelpiece may also contain Marian imagery, although the white porcelain cat has a less obvious place in the gradations of holiness on display.

Fig. 1: Steve Pyke, Bed, Inishmaan, 1991 (O’Grady/Pyke 1997, 148)

The familiarity of the devotional objects in the bedroom image is starkly contrasted with the ruined interiors depicted in the next photo, an artfully arranged collage of photographs (fig. 2). Snapshots of abandoned objects are organized into a schematic design: footless shoes point away from one another on a grubby floor, devoid of locomotion; an infantless bottle filled only with air, a postcard delivering greetings to long absent occupants. In the central panel is positioned a portrait of Jesus, gesticulating to his compassionate heart, despite his shattered glass. Whereas the placement of the comparable object in the previous image afforded a glimpse into its occupants’ perception of the celestial hierarchy, in the present image, the design is attributable to the photographer, highlighting the poignancy of a blessing on the occupants of an empty dwelling.

Fig. 2: Steve Pyke, Deserted house, County Kerry, 1994 (O’Grady/Pyke 1997, 153)

How might a reader’s/ viewer’s interpretation of these two images be altered as a result of his/her pre-understanding of the Sacred Heart image? Two alternative pre-understandings will be considered. First, a ‘cultural memory’ of the Sacred Heart image evoking national self-identity in Irish literature. Second, the Sacred Heart image as a kitsch devotional object in popular western European ‘cultural imaginary’.

Heart of Europe: The Sacred Heart Image and Irish-Catholic Self-identity

Devotion to the heart of Jesus, as a symbol of divine love, had some limited precursors in medieval piety, but the predominant characteristics of this popular devotion in early-modern Europe was shaped by visions attributed to the French mystic and Visitationist nun, Margaret Mary Alacoque (1647–1690). She is recorded as having received a series of apparitions of the Sacred Heart from 1673–1675, which encouraged the promotion of devotion to the Sacred Heart through veneration of the image.

The devotion gained particular prominence in the second half of the 19th century with the feast day (first Friday after Corpus Christi) celebrated throughout the Roman Catholic Church

Catholic Iconography, Cultural Memory and Imaginaries

(1856), the beatification of Alocoque (1875), and the practice of Catholic nations formally dedicating themselves to the Sacred Heart (with Ireland being the first in 1873 and France soon after in 1875). In the early 20th century both Pope Pius XI (Miserentissimus Redemptor) (1928) and Pius XII (Haurietis Aquas) (1956) wrote encyclicals promoting the devotion, and prominent theologians, notably the Jesuit Karl Rahner, wrote articles reflecting on the underlying theology. The early sketches of the image of the Sacred Heart in the 17th century depicted an emblematic heart encircled by a crown of thorns surmounted by a cross (fig. 3).

Fig. 3: Engraving of Alacoque holding Sacred Heart drawing, after Savinien Petit; reproduced in The Messenger of the Sacred Heart of Jesus 25, no. 10 (October 1890), 720.

The iconography shifted in the 18th century, following formal approval of the devotion with the establishment of a liturgical feast of the Sacred Heart (1765), to an image of Jesus serenely holding his own heart, now visualized more physiologically, with Christ fixing the viewer in a penetrating gaze (originating with the painting by Pompei Batoni, 1767, fig. 4).

Fig. 4: Pompeo Batoni, The Sacred Heart of Jesus, 1767, oil on copper, Chiesa del Gesù, Rome.

Weber summarizes the multifaceted elements of this popular devotion in its developed form in the 19th century:

1) an image of the Sacred Heart ritually installed in the home with flowers and a candle or lamp;  
2) observance of the feast of the Sacred Heart on the Friday after Corpus Christi, of the month of June, and of the first Friday of each month with Mass attendance, decoration of the shrine, recitation of the litany of the Sacred Heart, and personal acts of asceticism and love;  
3) belief in the ‘twelve promises’, the last of which assures salvation to the one who receives communion on nine consecutive First Fridays; and  
4) formation of societies of the Sacred Heart to promote the practice of the devotion.

These devotional practices were prevalent in 19th and early 20th century Ireland, owing in no small part to Jesuit promotion of this devotion, led by Fr. James Cullen, who established an extremely popular monthly magazine, The Irish Messenger of the Sacred Heart (1888), to promote

24 Cf. Weber 1998, 244.  
this devotion, principally amongst women.\textsuperscript{29} The publication was distributed by volunteers across the parishes, and sales of the \textit{Messenger} reached 73,000 by 1900, and peaked at 248,000 in the 1930s.\textsuperscript{30} Crucially, the Sacred Heart picture was not simply purchased and hung like any other painting, but rather was set up as part of a formal blessing of the house and its occupants:

The image [of the Sacred Heart] was introduced into the home – actually the term used by the clergy was ‘enthroned’ – via a religious ceremony whereby the house and all who lived in it were dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. In return for promising devotion to the heart of Jesus, twelve promises of help and protection were inscribed on the picture along with the names of all those living in the house. One promise specifically tied the image to the family and the home: ‘I will bless the home in which the image of my Sacred Heart shall be exposed and honoured’. With the custom of placing a red light in front of it the picture was set aside and given an honoured and special place within the home.\textsuperscript{31}

The ubiquity of the Sacred Heart image and related devotional practices is frequently alluded to in 20\textsuperscript{th} century Irish literature, notably by Joyce in \textit{Dubliners} (1914) and \textit{Ulysees} (1922). In the short story \textit{Eveline} in \textit{Dubliners}, set in 1895, the protagonist, a nineteen year old woman on the brink of eloping with her lover to Buenos Ayres to escape a life of drudgery and violence at the hands of her father, reflects on the ‘home’ that she will be forsaking and its familiar imagery:

Everything changes. Now she was going to go away like the others, to leave her home. Home! She looked round the room, reviewing all its familiar objects which she had dusted once a week for so many years, wondering where on earth all the dust came from. Perhaps she would never see again those familiar objects from which she had never dreamed of being divided. And yet during all those years she had never found out the name of the priest whose yellowing photograph hung on the wall above the broken harmonium beside the coloured print of the promises made to Blessed Margaret Mary Alacoque.\textsuperscript{32}

In Eveline’s memory-image, attention is focused away from the central image of the Sacred Heart itself, and focused instead on the familiar twelve promises that surround it, which include familial peace (promises II and IX) and divine mercy (promise VI).\textsuperscript{33} These ingrained promises, though broken like the associated harmonium, are a catalyst for Eveline’s loss of nerve in the

\textsuperscript{29} Cf. Bhroiméil 2011.
\textsuperscript{30} Cf. Fuller 2008. The \textit{Irish Messenger} is still in circulation, and available online, with sales of circa 95,000 per month, cf. http://messenger.ie/.
\textsuperscript{31} King 2010, 30.
\textsuperscript{32} Joyce 2000 [1914], 29–30.
\textsuperscript{33} Cf. Torchiana 1968, 25: “[The] promises made to the Blessed Margaret Mary […] radiate clockwise from a figure of Christ standing with his arms outstretched; beneath Him is a space for the signatures of father, mother, children and presiding priest, all to be signed under the caption Consecration of the Family to the Sacred Heart. The promises read as follows:

[...]II I will establish peace in their families
[...]VI Sinners will find in my heart a boundless ocean of mercy
[...]IX I will bless the houses in which the image of my Heart shall be exposed and honoured.”
concluding scene on the quayside, as she finally abandons her potential saviour (“Frank would save her”) to return to the Sacred Heart in her family home – privileging the “boundless ocean of mercy” (promise VI) to her vision of drowning if she elopes with her human saviour: “All the seas of the world tumbled about her heart.”

The image of the Sacred Heart recurs on a number of occasions in *Ulysses*, most strikingly in the Hades and Circe scenes. In the former passage, Harold Bloom describes an image of the Sacred Heart on a gravestone in Glasnevin cemetery, explicitly noting the significance of the image for the national psyche: “Ireland was dedicated to it.”

This verbal image foreshadows the apparition of the emaciated corpse of Stephen Daedelus’ mother in the Circe scene, set in Bella Cohen’s brothel, appealing for her son to return to the faith to save his soul:

THE MOTHER: Who saved you the night you jumped into the train at Dalkey with Paddy Lee? Who had pity for you when you were sad among the strangers? Prayer is all powerful. Prayer for the suffering souls in the Ursuline manual, and forty days indulgence. Repent, Stephen. […] (Wrings her hands slowly, moaning desperately.) O Sacred Heart of Jesus, have mercy on him! Save him from hell, O divine Sacred Heart!

STEPHEN: No! No! No! Break my spirit all of you if you can! I'll bring you all to heel!

THE MOTHER: (In the agony of her deathrattle.) Have mercy on Stephen, Lord, for my sake! Inexpressible was my anguish when expiring with love, grief and agony on Mount Calvary.

STEPHEN: Nothung! (He lifts his ashplant high with both hands and smashes the chandelier. Time’s livid final flame leaps and, in the following darkness, ruin of all space, shattered glass and toppling masonry).

The apparition of Stephen’s mother is a hallucinatory re-envisioning of the image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Identifying herself with the crucified Christ his mother’s apparition refracts the lamp in Bella Cohen’s brothel into an image of the perpetual lamp in a Dublin church sanctuary, against which Stephen violently lashes out.


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34 Joyce 2000, 34. “To dark night and dust Eveline will return, a prisoner in the heartless sanctity of the Irish home.” Torchiana 1968, 27.
35 For a tabular representation of parallels between scenes in *Ulysses* and Homer’s *Odyssey* see Appendix A in Joyce 1993, 734–739.
37 These lines echo “An Act of Reparation to the Sacred Heart” contained in the Ursuline manual (1830, 371–372), to be made “in presence of the Blessed Sacrament” (parallels in italics): “Inexpressible, we know, was the bitterness with which the multitude of our sins overwhelmed thy tender heart; […] insurmountable thy anguish, when expiring with love, grief, and agony on Mount Calvary […]”
38 Joyce 1993, 539–542.
offers a closely-observed study of the interior-life of a middle-aged woman, Elizabeth Reegan dying from breast-cancer in 1950s rural Ireland. Elizabeth reflects on her fractured past and sense of dislocation and isolation from her surroundings and family: she is the second wife of a frustrated Garda sergeant, step-mother to his three children who insist on addressing her by her Christian name, caught in a repetitive and stultifying existence of domestic routine. The novel traces the rhythm of her life during her final months: her inner fears and hopes and spiritual insights overlaid onto a more mundane pattern of domestic chores and daily devotions. The exterior pattern, notably the monotonous daily devotion of the rosary, replicated in the structural design of the novel, initially appears to do little more than reinforce the ossifying routine of her existence, lacking meaning or significance. The unending routine of the family rosary is closely connected with a sense of encroaching darkness, interlinked with the attendant nightly ritual of the lighting of the oil-lamp which bookends the novel:

The bright golds and scarlets of the religious pictures on the walls had faded, their glass glittered now in the sudden flashes of firelight, and as it deepened the dusk turned reddish from the Sacred Heart lamp that burned before the small wickerwork crib of Bethlehem on the mantelpiece. [...] The wind and rain rattling at the window-panes seemed to grow part of the spell of the long darning-needle flashing in the woman’s hand, and it was with a visible strain that the boy managed at last to break their fear of the coming night. ‘Is it time to light the lamp yet, Elizabeth?’ he asked.40

The focus lies not on the image of the Sacred Heart itself or the subjects of the other religious pictures, but on the illumination provided by the red oil-lamp that sanctifies it, bathing the room in the “ghastly blood-red of the Sacred Heart lamp.”41 The Sacred Heart lamp is associated with fear of the encroaching darkness, nightly dispelled by the illumination of the oil-lamp. This metaphorical association may initially suggest a somewhat crude dismissal of Catholic devotional rituals, but the picture is more complex than this as noted by Mary Ann Melfi:

A growing paradox in the text is that, in spite of McGahern’s association of the Sacred Heart lamp and the Catholic religion with an inspiring yet darkly ominous light, the religious story of Christ’s journey on the road to Calvary becomes something Elizabeth increasingly identifies with: ‘Christ on the road to Calvary, she on the same road; both in sorrow and in ecstasy; he to save her in Him, she to save herself in Him–both to be joined for ever in Oneness.’42

Elizabeth’s spiritual journey is not a simple rejection of exterior devotional practices (rosary, Sacred Heart devotion) in favour of inner spiritual enlightenment, but rather a growing

40 McGahern 1963, 7.
41 McGahern 1963, 72.
Catholic Iconography, Cultural Memory and Imaginaries

appreciation of a deeper sense of the mundane world, setting the rhythms and rituals of Catholic devotion in a wider ecological frame.\(^{43}\)

How might a reader’s/viewer’s interpretation of the Sacred Heart images in *I Could Read the Sky* be enriched by a pre-understanding of the role of this image in Irish-Catholic *cultural memory*? I will suggest three possible layers of additional resonance. The first aspect concerns the collective significance of the image. The ubiquity of prints of the Sacred Heart image in Irish-Catholic homes is a cliché, such that the image in fig. 1 may initially suggest little more than a stock image, a short-hand reference to Catholic piety in 1950s/60s rural Ireland. Yet, the wide dispersal of the image in Catholic homes in Ireland also constituted a visual expression of the collective dedication of the entire nation to the Sacred Heart (1873). In this way the ‘enthronement’ of the Sacred Heart picture in fig. 1 evokes not simply a particular family’s private devotion, but simultaneously evokes aspects of a collective ‘cultural memory’ of Irish Catholic identity. This flows into the second aspect: the image of the Sacred Heart carries with it resonances of the twelve *promises* to Margaret Mary Alacoque, principally of blessings on the whole family (usually named on the image) who live in the house where the image is placed. This aspect is highlighted succinctly in Joyce’s *Eveline*. Recollection of the image of the Sacred Heart simultaneously carries with it attendant promises of family peace and blessing, however imperfectly maintained. The third, interrelated aspect is that the Sacred Heart image was itself a symbol of a broader web of *devotional practices* (first Friday Mass attendances, feast days etc.) that the recipients were obliged to maintain. In this regard, the desolate image of the Sacred Heart, with shattered glass in fig. 2 may evoke not simply an individual family’s abandonment of a devotional object, but suggest a broader abandonment of Catholic devotion in Ireland. The desolate image of the Sacred Heart – to whom Ireland was dedicated (1873) – may simultaneously evoke the socio-political changes that were then occurring in ‘Celtic-tiger’ Ireland (and its disastrous economic aftermath), as well as the evidence of abhorrent clerical sexual-abuse, with the complex after-effects on Irish self-identity, collective memory and Catholic observance.\(^{44}\)

A Different Beat: *Sacred Heart* and western European popular culture

A striking contemporary re-interpretation of the Sacred Heart image is provided by an artwork created by Damien Hirst in 2005. *Sacred Heart* was produced for Hirst’s solo exhibition, *New

\(^{43}\) Cf. Maher 2010 for an exegesis of the Catholic devotional resonances in McGahern’s final novel *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002).

\(^{44}\) Cf. Cahill 2011, who considers issues of memory and identity in the recent fiction of Anne Enright, Colum McCann and Éilís Ní Dhuibhne. For a reflection on Catholicism in post-modern Ireland see O’Brien (2009) and the cathartic, redemptive, cinematic meditation on the ‘state of the nation’ in the wake of the clerical abuse scandal provided by McDonagh’s *CALVARY* (IE/UK 2014).
The gallery press-release summarises the content and layout of the exhibition as follows:

The 44 silkscreen prints, and four sculptures that make up ‘New Religion’ work like a fresco cycle – moving from Creation of the World, through the Stations of the Cross and towards the Last Judgement – that surrounds an altarpiece holding a cedar cross studded with gem-like pills, a child’s skull and a heart wrapped in barbed wire and pierced by needles and razor blades all cast in silver, and a large carved marble pill. Surrounding this tabletop votive display is the print cycle that confirms Hirst’s vision as a marriage of the sacred to the profane.46

The Sacred Heart is afforded prominence in the exhibition as one of only four sculptural designs displayed on a narrow white altarpiece surrounded by the ‘frescoe-cyle’ of prints. Even more strikingly, the entire contents of the exhibition, the sculptural objects plus a complete set of prints, were subsequently housed in ‘reliquaries’ that were installed at a variety of locations, including All Hallows Church, London (2007, fig 5).

Fig. 5: Damien Hirst, New Religion (2005), Leather, mdf, glass, silk and gold blocking, 790 x 1100 x 1600 mm47

The exhibition represented a stark fusion of science and religion, re-designing stock Christian devotional iconography to provide a medical reinterpretation. This underlying objective proved the driving force for the exhibition:

I was thinking that there were four important things in life: religion, love, art and science. At their best, they’re all just tools to help you find a path through the darkness. None of them really work that well, but they help. Of them all science seems to be the one right now. Like religion, it provides the glimmer of hope that maybe it will be all right in the end[…]. I wanted people to think about the combination of science and religion basically. People tend to think of them as two very separate things, one cold and clinical, the other emotional and loving and warm. I wanted to leap over these boundaries and give you something that looks clinical and cold but has all the religious, metaphysical connotations, too[…].48

In the context of the New Religion exhibition the stock Christian image of the Sacred Heart, surrounded by the crown of thorns, is reimagined: a bull’s heart, plated silver, is mounted and pierced with a series of surgical instruments and razor blades, encircled by barbed-wire (fig. 6).


Catholic Iconography, Cultural Memory and Imaginaries

Fig. 6: Damien Hirst, *The Sacred Heart*, Silver, 310 mm (440 mm including base) x 370 mm (2005)\(^{49}\)

The piece has a visceral power, with its depiction of this non-living organ punctured and skewered by an array of steel implements. Although medical objects reorient traditional Catholic iconography, the brutality of the image with the inclusion of barbed-wire and razor blades, may hint at an ambivalent stance towards medical progress. Nonetheless, the brutal stabbing of the Sacred Heart suggests a very literal *Death of God* image, divine mercy rendered inoperative.\(^{50}\)

Hirst’s work evokes a world in which the heart can still be used as a metaphor, though it has been drained of its old meanings and now struggles to accommodate new ones. The symbol has become utterly secularized. The sacred heart of Alacoque’s vision was pierced by the sins of humankind; Hirst’s is punctured by the implements of human healers. It is no longer the repository of divine redemption and grace, but the object of earthly intervention and technology.\(^{51}\)

The *Sacred Heart* is displayed in a reliquary with attendant objects that hint at the usurpation of religion’s role by science. *The Crucifix*: the crucified Christ is absent from the cedar-wood cross, replaced by inlaid medical pills. *The Eucharist*: the host is transformed into an oversized, white paracetamol pill. Similary, the surrounding ‘fresco cycle’ (*The Apostles, The Stations of the Cross*) principally consist of images of various prescription pills.

How might a reader’s/viewer’s interpretation of the Sacred Heart images in *I Could Read the Sky* be informed by a pre-understanding of this image in contemporary art? I will suggest three particularly striking aspects. The first aspect is the ease with which the particularized context of the novel (evocations of 1950s/60s rural Ireland) is transcended by the global signification of the image. The Sacred Heart image is a globally recognized symbol, a brand-icon for Christian piety in western European cultural imaginaries. Accordingly, the localized temporal and spatial boundaries of the novel are transcended by the universal resonance of the image. Regardless of any pre-understanding of the specific function of the Sacred Heart image in Irish-Catholic cultural memory, the image carries with it an easily transferable connotation of Christian piety. This flows directly into the second point: the transference of significance to alternative referents. In this regard I disagree with the interpretation of Hirst’s *Sacred Heart* by Amidon/Amidon. The symbol is not straightforwardly ‘secularized’, but rather sacred and profane are interconnected. Medical Science is itself *sacralised* by being clothed in the garments of this readily-explicable symbol of soteriological efficacy. The Sacred Heart image is not neutered or emptied of its power, as otherwise it would be simply abandoned, but rather its force is transferred, as a visually affective symbol of science’s predominance over (Christian) religion.\(^{52}\) This leads into perhaps the most striking aspect of all: the *stripping-back of the image* to its essentials. In contrast to the ubiquity of the mass-produced reproductions of the Sacred Heart picture, Hirst’s image


\(^{50}\) A variant image was included in Hirst’s 2006 *Death of God*-exhibition.

\(^{51}\) Amidon/Amidon 2011, 179–180.

\(^{52}\) Cf. Hirst 2006, xi, commenting on the Sacred Heart sculpture: “The scientific and clinical juxtaposed with the emotional and the bloody. It’s all just juxtaposition.”
strip’s back the symbol to its core: the Sacred Heart is depicted in isolation, minus the gesticulating figure of Christ. Re-reading the image of the shattered picture of the Sacred Heart in *I Could Read the Sky* (fig. 2) against this western cultural imaginary of the power of the symbol in itself, may hint at the ongoing resonance of this image despite the abandonment of earlier devotional practices.

Disentangled Threads? Cultural Memory and Cultural Imaginary

There is evidently a high degree of overlap between cultural memory and cultural imaginary, as interconnected ways of denoting a culture’s implicit self-understanding, mediated in images, stories, and rituals. On the basis of the present study, I would suggest that a crucial distinction concerns the identity of the group under scrutiny: who’s cultural memory or cultural imaginary is being discussed?

In this regard the present study, somewhat artificially, drew a distinction between the resonances of a particular image (Sacred Heart) in the cultural memory of a specific group (Irish, Roman Catholics) compared with the significance of the same image in a broader cultural imaginary (western European cultural imaginary). From the perspective of this particular group (Irish, Roman Catholics) the Sacred Heart image has particular layers of meaning that are integral to this group’s own self-identity, mediated, for example, in culturally valorized authors (eg. Joyce, McGahern). The image is bound-up with a particular self-understanding (dedication of the nation to the Sacred Heart) and attendant devotional practices that were widespread in the 19th and first half of the 20th century, notably in rural Ireland. This image forms part of this group’s own self-identification – ‘who we were’ – that remains part of the active memory of this group (selected from its archival memory). Contemporary self-understanding, in post-Celtic tiger Ireland, engages with and re-negotiates itself in dialogue with this cultural memory, whether nostalgic for a lost innocence or relieved at a mature progression beyond an insular past.

The significance of this image for the self-identification of a particular group was then compared with broader resonances of this same symbol in a more expansive cultural imaginary, namely a western European cultural imaginary. Against this panoramic canvass the specificity of Irish Catholic self-identity was diluted, constituting the cultural memory of one marginal group within a diverse multi-ethnic and religiously pluralist federation of states. Nonetheless, certain facets of this symbol retain a global significance as an internationally recognized icon for Christian piety, frequently parodied as a kitsch object. The representation of this image in Hirst’s *New Religion*-exhibition depicts this symbol stripped to its soteriological core: a punctured and encircled heart; deliverance at an emotional cost.

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53 It is noteworthy that this marks a return to the original 17th century iconography of Alocque’s vision, prior to Batoni’s influential representation (1767) (cf. fig. 3 and 4).

This study has maintained a somewhat artificial distinction between a group’s own self-identity, communicated in images and texts (‘cultural memory’), contrasted with a broader shared reservoir of images and texts that transcend a marginal group’s own mediated history (‘cultural imaginary’). Such a sharp distinction is, in the final analysis, unsustainable, due to the multiplicity of cultural groups to which each individual belongs and thus the competing sets of cultural imaginaries that shape his/her pre-understanding. Yet, it is precisely by remaining attentive to the presence of such fluid and overlapping boundaries within broader cultural imaginaries – to remain group-centred rather than focus on abstractions – that the creative potential for transformed self-identities may be traced. The photographic novel, *I Could Read the Sky*, encourages all its readers – regardless of cultural or ethnic or religious identity – to enter imaginatively into the memory-images of its fictive narrator, to share the evocative monochrome images of exile and lost Catholic piety, as constitutive of his/her own cultural imaginary. It is in this way that the ‘cultural memory’ of a marginal group may become constitutive of the ‘cultural imaginary’ of a broader society.

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Catholic Iconography, Cultural Memory and Imaginaries

**Filmography**

*I COULD READ THE SKY* (Nichola Bruce, IE/UK 1999)
*CALVARY* (John Michael McDonagh, IE/UK 2014)