

## Cognitive Film Theory—A Bordwell-ian Analysis of ‘Banshees of Inisherin’

In *Banshees of Inisherin*, writer-director Martin McDonagh illustrates life on a small Irish island during the Irish Civil War in 1921. The story follows two friends who have seemingly arrived at a crossroads within their friendship. Therein, one of the (Colm) seems to have cut off all contact with his, formerly, best friend (Padraic) for the sole reason that he finds him “dull”. Since its release, the film has often been lauded for its unique story and novel dialogue. Another popularly observed quality of the film is its unpredictability and potential for multiple, variable interpretations.

There is a theme running throughout the film—death. Death of both people and animals is often foreshadowed, talked about, and outright showcased. Such cues, and this is one of many, are crucial to the spectators’ perception of the narrative. Applying David Bordwell’s constructivist film theory to this film, the factors of the spectator’s narrative comprehension is greatly affected by these cues. *Banshees of Inisherin* relies heavily on the cognitive activities of its receiver that Bordwell elucidates as critical to “making sense of the narrative”. In *Narration and the Fiction Film*, Bordwell contends that the viewer makes “assumptions”, draws “inferences”, applies “memory”, and creates “hypotheses” and uses all of these mental procedures in order to *construct* a narrative (Bordwell 37).

Effectively, the spectator becomes a subject and is invited to complete the job of the film—making a narrative. Evidence of this theory can be found in the film at multiple occasions. The entire feud between the two protagonists seems awfully trite, yet, McDonagh allows the story to play out organically and effectively allows the audience to rely on their prototype, template, and procedural schemata. Since we are not explicitly told about the characters’ prior relationships and nature of existence on the sequestered island of Inisherin, we are led to

generate assumptions about them using our prior knowledge—”identifying individual agents, and [their] actions, goals, and locales” (Bordwell 34). This is indicative of a comprehensive application of our ‘prototype schemata’, wherein we take at face value whatever we are shown on screen about the elements of the film, and then create a prototypical paradigm for all of them. Coming to ‘template schemata’, *Banshees of Inisherin* deliberately omits and passes over important narrative beats at various occasions in order to push the spectator into ‘filling in the gaps’. Writing about less intelligible narratives, one such being *Banshees*, Bordwell holds that “basic structural principles continue to serve as reference points for the identification of ‘less intelligible narratives’” (Bordwell 35). One such salient application of the ‘template’ schemata’ comes in play when the spectator attempts to reconcile the past relationship of Padraic and Colm, a crucial task since so much of the film’s emotional anchoring, narrative tension and stylistic motivation is born out of the fatal conflict that plagues this relationship.

So much of the film relies on such mental and cognitive activities that the spectator must undertake, it is hard to believe that the film is able to successfully accomplish what it sets out to. Yet, McDonagh trusts his audience and sprinkles so many interesting and covert narrative wrinkles into the movie that it is difficult not to gain something by the end of it. The explicit message of the movie is definitely two-fold—loneliness and grief—yet it is a way more enjoyable experience for the receiver to craft their own *meaning* since the film allows itself to be open to so many variable interpretations and hypotheses—whether they are confirmed or not, is also something that can influence the enjoyability and meaning-extraction of a film.