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ABSURDIST CINEMATIC LANGUAGE IN *IN BRUGES* BY MARTIN MCDONAGH

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Abstract

Martin McDonagh's In Bruges is a darkly comic crime film that doubles as an absurdist morality play exploring guilt and redemption. This paper argues that McDonagh's cinematic techniques such as disjointed editing, visual composition, tonal shifts, and surreal imagery construct a purgatorial liminal space to interrogate guilt, moral ambiguity, and redemption in absurdist terms. In doing so, it addresses a gap in In Bruges scholarship by situating the film's absurdist aesthetics within a tradition more often associated with literature and theatre. Drawing on frameworks from absurdist literature and philosophy, such as Beckett's Theatre of the Absurd and Camus's philosophy of the absurd, to visual art, like Bosch's grotesque iconography, and performance theory, incorporating the Heiner Müller's concept of sensory "flooding", the paper illustrates how absurdist aesthetics inform the film's narrative structure and tone. This approach illuminates In Bruges' unique blend of black comedy and existential drama, underscoring its significance as a cinematic critique of violence and simplistic moral binaries.

Introduction

Martin McDonagh's *In Bruges* is a darkly comic crime film that doubles as an absurdist morality play. Through its cinematic language, from disjointed narrative editing and visual composition to sound design and tonal shifts, the film crafts a purgatorial, liminal setting in which questions of guilt, morality, and redemption are examined with absurdist irony. On the surface, the plot follows two Irish hitmen, Ray and Ken, laying low in the medieval city of Bruges after a botched job. Yet McDonagh uses this premise to critique traditional notions of sin and penance, blending absurdist black comedy with existential drama. *In Bruges* employs fragmentary storytelling and *theatre of the absurd* techniques, including purposeless waiting, abrupt tonal blackouts, and pregnant silences, reminiscent of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Visually, Bruges itself becomes a character. A liminal space "somewhere between heaven and hell", rendered through gothic architecture, winding corridors and foggy canals that evoke a sense of purgatory. Cinematography and framing reinforce the characters' moral and psychological limbo, often positioning them against religious iconography such as churches, paintings and altars that *quietly judges* them. In the climactic sequence, McDonagh even stages a nightmarish pageant of Boschian imagery that nearly "brings a Judgment Day painting to life" on screen. An aesthetic *flooding* of overwhelming grotesque visuals echoing Heiner Müller's concept of "inundating the audience's senses" (*Theatremachine* 15). Throughout, the film's tonal juxtapositions, oscillating between bleak despair and irreverent humor, mark it as an absurdist black comedy rather than slapstick. The result is a film that uses cinematic form to place both its characters and the audience in a state of moral limbo, *critiquing simplistic binaries of good vs. evil and asking if redemption is even attainable in a seemingly absurd world*. The chapter examines these aspects in detail, drawing on academic commentary and specific scenes to show how *In Bruges* achieves its unique blend of the profane and the profound.

In Bruges eschews a straightforward linear narrative in favor of a slightly fragmented, character-driven structure that aligns with Absurdist tradition. The film's story feels episodic and unpredictable, "a never-ending string of surprises, some pleasant and others rotten," (Caballero)

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as one critic notes, reflecting an absurdist sensibility where events seem to happen arbitrarily or by fate rather than by conventional plot logic. This unpredictability is underscored by how the film withholds crucial backstory and then reveals it via flashback. For example, Ray's tragic mistake, accidentally killing a child during a hit on a priest, is shown only in fragmented form, through a brief flash-cut and later exposition, rather than in a linear prologue. By breaking the narrative chronology, McDonagh creates disjointed emotional beats. The audience is thrust into Ray and Ken's banter in Bruges without full context, mirroring the absurdist technique of *in medias res* confusion and delayed exposition, as Beckett shows through confusion in *The Unnamable* and Camus describes as the "absurd" clash of search and silence (Beckett 134; Camus 28). Roger Ebert observed that the film *"seems to happen as it goes along, driven by the peculiarities of the characters"* rather than by a telegraphed plot. This aligns with Absurdist theater's disdain for neat causality. Scenes flow into one another in an almost haphazard way, often punctuated by tonal blackouts and silences that leave the viewer momentarily unmoored.

Visually and editorially, McDonagh uses fades to black and abrupt cuts as a kind of "negative space" of silence, absence, and emptiness (Bordwell and Thompson 118) in the narrative, suggesting the emptiness or uncertainty between episodes. Notably, several scene transitions in *In Bruges* end by cutting to black, a technique that recalls the blackouts between vignettes in an absurdist stage play. These black pauses give the viewer a moment to register the often incongruous emotional shifts. For instance, after Ken prevents Ray's attempted suicide, the film cuts to black, then resumes the next morning with an entirely different mood. Such disjointed editing emphasizes the fragmentary, stop-and-go rhythm of their purgatorial wait. Even the ending with its famous closing line and cut. After Ray's final voiceover, "I really, really hoped I wouldn't die. I really, really hoped I wouldn't die", the frame lingers on Ray's half-conscious gaze in the ambulance and then *fades to black*. This blackout ending pointedly refuses narrative closure, an absurdist flourish leaving Ray's fate literally unknowable, and forcing the audience to sit with the ambiguity of whether he lives or dies. As one analysis notes, the open ending is *"not about whether Ray lives or dies"* (Khairy) at all, but about the fact that he has finally found the will to live, a personal revelation amid unresolved external events. Ending on darkness and an unfinished thought underscores the film's existential stance. Life is fragmentary and meaning is elusive, with no comforting resolution handed down.

Silence is another key tool in the film's editing to evoke the absurd. McDonagh's script, known for its crackling dialogue, also isn't afraid of pauses and quiet beats that heighten the uncomfortable mix of comedy and tension. A striking example is the long moment of silence during Ken's phone conversation with Harry. When Harry asks how Ray likes Bruges, Ken mentions it's not really Ray's "cup of tea," after which there's a deadly pause, and in that brief silence, the viewer anticipates an explosion, which promptly comes as Harry erupts in fury. The comedic timing here relies on silence and abrupt tonal shift, a hallmark of absurdist humor. The scene's mundane civility blackouts into sudden rage. Similarly, there are quieter poignant silences, as when Ray, overcome with guilt, falls wordlessly into despair in his hotel room or on a bench at night. These visual/verbal silences echo the *Absurd Theatre* tradition (Beckett's "pause" in *Waiting for Godot* (32) or Pinter's "pregnant silence" in *Writing for the Theatre* (11)) where what is not said or shown is as important as what is. The emptiness of Bruges at night, long, still shots of deserted cobbled streets or Ray sitting alone in a playground at 2 AM, visually communicates an existential void. In one sequence, Ken wanders the nighttime streets after deciding to spare Ray's life. No dialogue is spoken, and the editing lingers on Ken's contemplative face amid the dimly lit

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alleyways. Such stretches of quiet, punctuated only by the distant chime of a bell tower or the soft nocturnal soundscape of the city, create a meditative, purgatorial mood that aligns with the film's absurdist atmosphere of waiting and uncertainty.

Crucially, *In Bruges* structures its first hour around waiting, an "in-between" interval with little conventional action, strongly evoking *Waiting for Godot*. In fact, critics and scholars frequently compare Ray and Ken to Beckett's Estragon and Vladimir. Like those tramps, the two hitmen fill their time with trivial bickering, storytelling, and philosophical tangents while awaiting a call from their boss Harry, their figurative Godot. This narrative of stasis is broken up by seemingly disconnected episodes. Sightseeing at a cathedral, a comical run-in with overweight American tourists, a surreal encounter with a dwarf actor filming a dream sequence, that at first glance appear as absurd non sequiturs. The film's fragmentary narrative structure thus mirrors absurdist literature where meaning is not immediately apparent and events feel only loosely concatenated. Yet, by the film's conclusion, McDonagh brilliantly retrofits these stray pieces into a kind of twisted moral puzzle. Many of the earlier vignettes, the obese tourists, the dwarf, the medieval art, resurface in the climax with ironic significance, suggesting a hidden pattern or fate at work beneath the disjointed surface. This structural technique, "apparent randomness resolving into dark irony", (Esslin 23) reinforces the absurdist theme that life may seem fragmented and pointless, until perhaps some final "judgment" retrospectively imposes meaning. In *In Bruges*, that judgment comes in the violent final act, which retrospectively makes *purgatorial sense* of the waiting. Ray and Ken's idle purgatory abruptly ends when Harry arrives to deliver retribution, tying together the loose threads of their limbo. The film thus manages to be both circular and open-ended. It has a meticulous internal symmetry. For instance, Ray's accidental killing of a child at the start is grimly mirrored by Harry accidentally killing a "child", the dwarf, at the end, triggering Harry's own self-execution. But it also refuses neat resolution. Ray's ultimate fate remains unknown, and moral absolution is uncertain. This delicate balance between structural payoff and unresolved ambiguity is a hallmark of the film's absurdist narrative design.

Ray (Colin Farrell, left) and Ken (Brendan Gleeson) sit in bored purgatory amid the Gothic beauty of Bruges. McDonagh frames the duo as spiritually "stuck," dwarfed by a city that seems to judge them.

Physical space in *In Bruges* is engineered to evoke a liminal realm, a purgatory on earth. Bruges, with its preserved medieval architecture, looming belfry tower, and labyrinthine streets, serves as a visual metaphor for an in-between state where souls await judgment. The characters themselves explicitly reference this. Ray jokes that *"Purgatory's kind of like the in-betweeny one. You weren't really shit, but you weren't all that great either,"* while gazing at a painting of *The Last Judgment*. That description could just as well apply to Bruges in the film. *"On the one hand it's a fairytale town. On the other it's a shithole. Maybe it's in-betweeny,"* as Wael Khairy observes, noting how the city oscillates between enchanting and oppressive in the eyes of the characters. McDonagh amplifies this liminality through setting and mise-en-scène (Bordwell and Thompson 112). The film repeatedly places Ray and Ken in threshold spaces. Under archways, on doorsteps, at the door of a church confessional, on a hotel staircase, or standing at the edge of a misty canal. These are transitory zones rather than destinations, visually reinforcing that the hitmen are spiritually *"neither here nor there."* For example, the men's cramped hotel room has a narrow doorway that Ken often hesitates in, hovering between entering and exiting, symbolizing his moral hesitation about executing Ray. Likewise, alleyways and corridors abound in the film's staging, evoking the sense of being *"stuck in a passage"* rather than free in an open field.

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Bruges' geography itself embodies liminality. Upon their arrival, Ray and Ken step off the train into a town that immediately feels like "some sort of nowhere" to Ray, *"a sort of nothing-place,"* as one scholar describes it (Yanar 10). The film emphasizes the idea that Bruges is *hard to escape*. This is literalized when Ray attempts to flee the city by train mid-story. He almost succeeds in leaving purgatory, only to be arrested and hauled back, as if fate/Bruges refuses to release him. As *Film Cred* wryly notes, *"Ultimately, it's hard to leave Bruges in this film, it's hard to escape the confines of this purgatory that these characters are trapped within"*. The city's layout even thwarts Ray in a maze-like chase. He runs down winding medieval streets only to end up back where he started, a visual echo of the *circular trap* of purgatory. Ken, too, cannot leave Bruges. He climbs the bell tower, a symbolic attempt to ascend toward heaven or at least get perspective, but ultimately falls back down to the streets in a sacrificial act. The very skyline of Bruges, full of spires and crosses reaching upward, juxtaposed with its dark, narrow alleys below creates a vertical tension between aspiration and damnation that the film's camera often captures. Cinematographer Eigil Bryld's shots frequently place the characters at ground level with towering cathedrals or towering stone gates above them, visually suggesting their *dwarfed*, penitent status below the heavens.

Critics have pointed out that Bruges functions as a *character* and antagonist in the film. Its oppressive quaintness and "quiet beauty" acts almost like a moral mirror. Ken is charmed by Bruges' ethereal canals and golden-lit plazas, finding a sense of peace, "better angels of his nature", in its atmosphere. Ray, in contrast, finds the city's stillness torture, the silence and church bells force him to confront his guilt, which is why he seethes that Bruges is *"a shithole"*. McDonagh harnesses this contrast by shooting Bruges in two moods. At times the city is bathed in a "hazy golden glow" that soothes Ken, and at other times it's draped in damp gray fog that compounds Ray's depression. In one sequence, Ray wanders the foggy cobbled streets at night, the lamplight diffused by mist, and remarks that he *"feels like he's in a dream"*. The line is telling. Bruges is "dreamlike" and unreal, a liminal dreamspace where normal rules don't apply. The *dream* quality also connects to Hieronymus Bosch's surreal imagery. Bosch's work was often described as depicting "extraordinary and horrible dreams" (Gibson 35). Thus, the city's oneiric feel hints that Ray and Ken are moving through a Boschian dream-purgatory, not quite alive to their normal world, not yet dead to the next. *"Bruges is a liminal place, a foreboding entity waiting to cast its judgment upon them, sending them in one of two directions"*, either toward some kind of redemption (heaven) or toward violent doom (hell).

The film makes extensive use of liminal imagery of transit (Turner 94) to underline this. Canals snake throughout Bruges, and McDonagh pointedly includes a scene of Ray and Ken on a tourist boat ride. On the surface it's a comic bit, Ray sulking on a guided tour, but scholars note that this canal journey symbolically evokes "the journey across the Styx down to Hades". In classical mythology, the souls of the dead are ferried across a river to the underworld. Here our protagonists glide quietly on Bruges' waterway as if being taken deeper into their personal hell/purgatory. The fact that immediately after the boat tour they visit the Groeninge Museum to view Bosch's *Last Judgment* triptych reinforces that they are, in effect, tourists in the afterlife, hovering on the brink of damnation or salvation. Additionally, thresholds like doorways and arches recur in key moments. Ken stands under a stone arch on the bell tower when he decides to sacrifice himself. Ray awaits his fate under the arched doorway of the hotel at the climax, gun in hand, framed by Gothic stonework as if on an altar. Even the parks and open areas in the film carry liminality. The park bench where Ray nearly ends his life is situated by a canal and a half-dead

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tree, a purgatorial tableau of a man poised between life (the city around him) and death (the gun to his head).

Overall, Bruges is presented as *both* a tangible location and an allegorical limbo. It is the "in-between place" where, as the script and scholars note, Ray and Ken must *"await their judgment in an unknown land"*, much like souls in purgatory. By making Bruges "not a final destination… but rather an in-between place that takes Ray… on a reflective journey", McDonagh uses setting as a canvas for existential uncertainty. The beautiful medieval corridors and thresholds of Bruges externalize the characters' internal state. They are *trapped between worlds*, seeking a way out, but every path in this city seems to loop back on itself. This spatial circularity intensifies the film's critique of redemption. In a city of endless circles and dead ends, can one truly move forward morally, or is one condemned to wander haunted by one's sins? *In Bruges* ultimately suggests that the answer is ambiguous, as the city's walls confine the characters until the bitter end, indifferent to notions of "deserving" escape.

McDonagh and cinematographer Eigil Bryld deploy visual composition and camerawork to subtly reflect the characters' psychological and moral conditions. The film's framing, lighting, and camera angles are not only aesthetically striking but carry *thematic weight*. Far from the rapid, gritty style of typical hitman thrillers, *In Bruges* often uses classical, deliberate cinematography, "continuity editing" and composed shots, which anchors its absurd events in a kind of somber realism. This formal restraint allows visual details to speak volumes. For example, Bryld frequently frames Ray and Ken together in wide two-shots against the Bruges scenery, emphasizing how *mismatched and out-of-place* they are in this environment. The sight of two scruffy, uncomfortable Irish hitmen plunked in postcard-perfect Bruges is inherently comic, and the film milks this with framing that gets laughs purely from contrast. *"The framing gets laughs on its own,"* as *Film Experience Blog* argues in *Unsung Heroes: The Cinematography of In Bruges*, by highlighting how absurdly these men "don't belong" in the idyllic compositions of the city. In one setup, Ray and Ken trudge through a miniature archway beneath an ancient stone bridge, bickering. The camera holds at a distance, dwarfing them against the massive bridge and canal, visually accentuating Ray's complaint that he feels like he's in "a fairy tale" he wants no part of. Such shots underscore the black comedy of the premise through composition. The hitmen look like unwitting participants in a tableau vivant of medieval Bruges, their modern vulgarity clashing with the serene backdrop.

Beyond humor, Bryld's cinematography adds "depth and texture to the story, implying things left unsaid and underlining the film's themes". One notable visual motif is the use of enveloping light around Ken's character. As Ken explores Bruges, the camera often catches him bathed in warm light, whether the golden glow of a church interior or the late-afternoon sun in the town square. We see Ken gazing, almost wistfully, at artworks and scenery. In one beautifully composed shot, Ken pauses outside a cozy home window, watching a local family inside share a quiet moment decorating a Christmas tree. The camera places Ken *outside looking in*, reflected on the glass, with the family in a warm lamp-lit room on the other side. Visually, this communicates Ken's yearning for innocence or redemption. *"A picture of perfect happiness that his occupation will never allow him to experience,"* as the cinematography analysis describes (Michael C). The gentle light on Ken's face in these moments, and his peaceful expression, signal that Bruges is affecting him spiritually. *"Bruges envelops him in its hazy golden glow,"* and we see *"looks of peace wash over Gleeson's face"* as Ken listens to his better angels. By contrast, Ray's shots are more often in shadow or harsh light, reflecting his inner turmoil. When Ray is alone wrestling with

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guilt, the camera moves closer. Several intense *close-ups* show Ray's face contorted with remorse or wet with tears. Colin Farrell's raw expressions fill the frame. In a pivotal confessional scene of the flashback of Ray killing the priest, McDonagh uses a tight, slightly low-angle shot on Ray's anguished face as the stained-glass light falls on him, visually aligning him with a penitent sinner in a Caravaggio painting. Immediately after the shooting, we get a brief high-angle glimpse of the altar boy's body and Ray's horror-stricken reaction, then a jarring cut. This quick mix of low-angle on Ray (in over his head), then high-angle looking down on the tragedy conveys how literally *morally low* Ray feels after the act.

Camera angles also accentuate power dynamics and character arcs. When Harry finally appears in Bruges, many shots of him confronting Ray are done from a low angle, making Harry loom large as a wrathful force almost like an avenging angel or demon towering over Ray. Conversely, as Ken pleads for Ray's life atop the bell tower, the camera looks *down* from Ken's perspective at Harry on the street, foreshadowing the reversal to come, Ken's sacrifice toppling that power dynamic. The most dramatic use of camera perspective is during Ken's fall from the belfry. McDonagh intercuts a long shot of Ken's tiny figure plummeting against the tower emphasizing the full vertigo and sacrifice with Ken's subjective viewpoint of the ground rushing up, and finally a close-up, as described by Wael Khairy, of Ken's face in his last moments, *"Notice his eyes. They stare, struggle to roll, and then return… the pupils dilate and all his facial muscles relax"* in death. By focusing on these grim details in an unflinching close-up, the film forces us to inhabit the *physical and moral impact* of Ken's act. It's a visual gut-punch that counterbalances the film's lighter scenes. The gravity of a man's self-sacrifice is made viscerally real by the camera's attention, reorienting the audience from comedic distance to intimate tragedy.

Another way the visual language reflects the characters' inner states is through blocking and distance. In early scenes, Ray and Ken are often filmed together in two-shots, but with visible space or misalignment between them. For example, one will be foregrounded in profile while the other lags behind or faces away. This visual separation emphasizes their divergent attitudes. Ken awestruck by Bruges, Ray sullen and disengaged. As the film progresses and their bond deepens, McDonagh brings them into more shared framing. By the time Ken smiles at Ray during the fateful phone call with Harry, the two are quietly framed in a fraternal two-shot at the pub, indicating a newfound closeness which makes the subsequent tragic turn more impactful. Similarly, McDonagh uses wide establishing shots vs. close-ups to toggle the tone. Wide shots of Bruges' town square with the two men as small specks serve to underscore the absurdity and *cosmic insignificance* of their squabbles, dark comic tone, whereas tight close-ups of Ray crying on the hotel bed, and Ken's stern gaze as he resolves to defy Harry bring us into the characters' souls, dramatic tone. This interplay is seamless due to classical shot-reverse-shot techniques (*Film Art* 240–41) that maintain spatial coherence even as tone changes. Irina Melnikova notes that *In Bruges* largely adheres to "continuity editing, i.e. classical cutting, and handheld camerawork" to guide the viewer, meaning the film isn't flashy in a way that would break the absurd illusion (*Journal of European Studies* 44–59). Instead, the absurdity comes from what is within the frame. An interplay of tranquil Old World beauty and bloody, farcical crime.

Light and color also contribute. The film's visual tone is muted and wintry, lots of browns, grays, and dark greens in the color palette of Bruges' stone and canals, combined with the warm golden interiors of taverns and churches. This subdued color scheme sets a melancholic mood that undercuts any potential for cartoonish comedy. Even when hilarious dialogue is flying, the visuals remain *gloomy yet strangely promising*, as Caballero puts it, a "bittersweet desolation" pervades

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the imagery. This ensures that the comedy always feels embedded in a real, sorrowful world. In effect, the cinematography helps distinguish absurdist black comedy from mere slapstick by grounding the humor in a tangible emotional and moral landscape. Unlike slapstick, which might use bright lighting and fast, exaggerated camera moves to highlight the gag, *In Bruges* keeps the camera measured and the lighting often mournful. For instance, the scene where Ray and Ken do cocaine with the dwarf actor and prostitutes could have been shot like a zany montage. Instead, McDonagh films it in medium shots with dim pub lighting and a somewhat somber score underneath, so that even this wild night has an undertone of sadness or transience. As scholar Geoff King observes, *In Bruges* blends "markers of distinction" like irony and detachment with moments of genuine emotional engagement (King 140). Visually, this translates into camerawork that sometimes observes the characters ironically from afar detached wide shots letting humor play out and other times embraces them in empathetic close-up or gentle pans, encouraging the audience's emotional investment.

All in all, the visual composition of *In Bruges*, its framing, angles, and lighting, works on two levels. On one level, it celebrates the beauty of Bruges. The film often looks like a storybook come alive, with Bruges as a photogenic jewel box while simultaneously using that beauty as ironic counterpoint to Ray and Ken's ugly deeds and foul language. On another level, the visuals serve as a kind of moral barometer, subtly indicating where each character stands on their path to damnation or redemption. Ken's alignment with light and symmetry hints at his redemption and inner peace. Ray's alignment with shadow, imbalance, or entrapment in frames hints at his turmoil and pending judgment. As Michael C. writes, *"Bryld's filming of In Bruges gives [us] as memorable a picture of a place as we've had in recent years"*, and crucially, that *picture of Bruges* is not empty scenery, but laden with symbolic resonance that enhances the film's absurdist exploration of guilt and salvation.

One of McDonagh's most striking strategies is the woven tapestry of Catholic and medieval imagery that runs throughout *In Bruges*. The film is *"dripping with religious iconography,"* deliberately making Bruges into a kind of open-air church or purgatorial altar on which Ray and Ken's souls are scrutinized. This is both narrative and visual. McDonagh wrote the script to include specific religious symbols, churches, paintings, a priest and an altar boy, a relic of Christ's blood, that constantly remind the viewer of sin and judgment, and Bryld's camera ensures we see these symbols integrated into the mise-en-scène.

Early in the film, Ray and Ken act like tourists and visit the Groeninge museum, where they encounter an art triptych that pointedly foreshadows their fate. They see *Death and the Miser*, *The Judgment of Cambyses*, and Hieronymus Bosch's *The Last Judgment*, one after the other. McDonagh basically spells out the film's moral arc through this sequence of paintings, crime (sin), judgment, and punishment. The camera lingers on Bosch's *Last Judgment* in particular. In a noteworthy bit of cinematography, as Ray and Ken stand in front of the triptych, Ray's body blocks the Heaven panel of the painting while Ken partially obscures the Hell panel, leaving the central panel, depicting Earth and purgatory, fully visible. This visual detail subtly suggests that Ray, burdened by unconfessed sin, cannot see heaven, he has no hope/faith in salvation, while Ken, the more moral of the two, stands between Ray and utter damnation literally blocking hell, as he later will by sacrificing himself. The film then cuts to panning close-ups across Bosch's nightmarish imagery. A birdlike demon devouring sinners, a brothel symbolized by a lecherous detail, and a tortured nude figure. The camera stops at the edges of the central panel, emphasizing that we are focused on the realm of Purgatory. These detail shots are not arbitrary. They "invite viewers to

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introspect on the sights and characters we've already seen and foreshadow the same". Indeed, as Yanar observes, "the grotesqueries in Bosch's painting" parallel figures and fates in the film (Hieronymus Bosch's Purgatory in *In Bruges, 15)*. For instance, one Bosch image shows a gluttonous man overindulging and being punished, which prefigures the absurd mini-story of the American tourist who, despite Ray's warning about the tower's steep stairs, insists on climbing, and later *"died of a heart attack at the top, betrayed by his own body"*, a modern glutton literally felled by overindulgence. In Bosch's Vienna *Last Judgment*, a sinner is *"roasted in his own fat"* for the sin of Gula, gluttony (Gibson 72). In *In Bruges*, McDonagh mirrors this with the overweight tourist family's ordeal. Such correspondences reinforce how Bruges becomes a living moral allegory.

Likewise, other characters Ray meets seem to embody the Seven Deadly Sins as if orchestrated by the city. A pair of rude Canadian tourists at a restaurant ignite Ray's temper. Their irrational *wrath* at Ray's smoke leads to a scuffle, wrath meeting wrath. The film explicitly jokes about pride and racial slurs. Ray's pride is wounded when Jimmy the dwarf scolds him for saying "midget". Chloe's ex-boyfriend Eirik, a skinhead criminal, could be seen as personifying *envy* or *greed*. He tries to rob tourists and later comes after Ray for revenge out of envy over Chloe. This almost medieval morality-play structure is made somewhat covert by the film's naturalistic style, but the symbols are clear if one looks. *In Bruges* is populated with "angels and demons" in modern clothes. One could even view Ken as a figure of *charity*, caritas, and Harry as a figure of *justice* twisted into *wrath*. The film's climax drives the religious symbolism home unmistakably. Harry pursues Ray through Bruges and their gunfight spills into a set where a film is being shot. A set dressed with costumed figures straight out of Bosch's hellish visions, people in grotesque masks and medieval garb. It is as if the Bosch painting from the museum has come to life around them. In this phantasmagorical scene, Ray is wounded and staggers through the nightmarish masquerade. "The film's climax is literally staged in a Bosch painting of Judgment Day come to life". This hyper-symbolic environment underscores that final judgment is at hand. Ray is experiencing a sort of personal apocalypse amid firecrackers, fake fog, and ghastly costumes. The religious iconography is omnipresent, as Bryld's cinematography article notes from start to finish, the look of the film is suffused with church spires, crucifixes, and paintings such that *"any symbolism is able to hide in plain sight"* (Michael C.). We accept the visuals as part of Bruges' scenery, but collectively they exert a subconscious influence, reminding us that a moral reckoning is due.

McDonagh doesn't stop at visual art. He uses actual church settings and rituals to heighten the purgatorial feeling. The film's opening crime happens in a Catholic confessional, of all places. Ray performs a hit on a priest at the very altar of a church. In that scene, he literally *confesses his sin (intending to murder) moments before committing it*. An absurd, pitch-black irony that encapsulates the film's critique of religious morality. The tragic twist is that Ray's penance for that sin comes instantly and unintentionally. He kills an innocent boy, an altar boy, along with the priest. Thus, the very altar of sacrifice becomes the site of Ray's greatest guilt. This idea of *spiritual accounting* carries through later, when Ray contemplates suicide, he is seen sitting on a park bench in front of a playground where children play, a painful reminder of the child he killed. The bench itself is next to a stone alcove with a Madonna statue, and Ray distributes his remaining money to a Belgian mother and kids nearby before putting his gun to his head, as if attempting a final act of charity or penance. These religious visual cues, Madonna statue, charitable alms, silently frame Ray's attempted suicide as a twisted form of seeking absolution. Ken's character arc similarly gets religious framing. He climbs the Bruges belfry, which is akin to climbing a

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penitential staircase or a mount of purgation. When he decides to sacrifice himself for Ray, he crosses himself. In some scripts, Ken is described as making the sign of the cross before jumping, though the film shows him resolute but peaceful. Ken's death plunge ends with his body broken on the cobblestones. Notably, when Ray cradles Ken's dying body, it is strongly reminiscent of a Pietà tableau(Gibson 118). The camera angle and blocking evoke Mary holding Jesus after the crucifixion. This visual is fleeting but potent, positioning Ken as a Christ-like martyr who gives his life to save Ray's soul. Fittingly, Ken's final words instruct Ray to take his gun, effectively arming Ray for a chance at *redemption* or at least survival in the final showdown.

Arches and Gothic architecture likewise serve as recurring purgatorial metaphors. The pointed arches of Bruges' medieval constructions appear in frame whenever moral weight is in play. When Harry and Ken meet face-to-face under the bell tower just before Harry executes Ken, they are standing under an archway with a crucifix relief above them, visually suggesting an altar or the gate of judgment that Ken is about to pass through. Later, Harry chases Ray through the arched cloisters of a garden. At one point, Ray leaps through a window a literal threshold to escape, only to burst through another door onto the Boschian film set. Symbolically leaping from one plane of judgment to another without ever leaving the overarching "church" of Bruges. The Basilica of the Holy Blood (Rick Steves 202) in Bruges which houses a vial of Christ's blood is also briefly featured during Ken's sightseeing. The editing cuts from Ken reverently climbing the steps to the basilica's altar to Ray outside ridiculing the city. Ken's face inside the basilica is calm, bathed in colored light from stained glass, reinforcing his spiritual mindset, while Ray's face outside is restless. Though these moments pass quickly, they imbue the film with a constant aura of religiosity. In effect, McDonagh has overlaid a Catholic morality play atop a crime comedy, using the city's art and architecture as the stage-set for grace and damnation. This aligns with the observation that the film *"transforms the town of Bruges into a narrative embodiment of Purgatory"* through medieval symbolism and themes of sin and repentance.

Even the film's *diegetic references* (Bordwell and Thompson 118) reinforce the purgatorial theme. Harry's sense of honor, "You can't just kill a child and expect to get away with it", is a skewed moral code that he enforces like an Old Testament God. When Harry arrives, he essentially plays judge, jury, and executioner in Bruges, determining that Ray must pay with his life. Not by accident, Harry's wrath is triggered in a museum *when he learns Ray has been appreciating Bruges*. Ken lies that Ray said *"it's like a dream"*, which placates Harry briefly. But earlier, when Harry hears Ray doesn't like Bruges, he explodes *"How can a fairy-tale town not be somebody's fucking thing?!"* Harry's comically intense attachment to Bruges hints that he too views the city in mythic terms. To him, it *must* be loved as a sanctuary of innocence. It's as if Bruges' purity is so sacrosanct that Ray's disavowal is blasphemy. This foreshadows Harry's own twisted morality leading to his end. When he mistakenly believes he has killed an innocent boy in the final shootout, he immediately applies his code to himself and commits suicide. That suicide occurs in the middle of the mock-Last Judgment pageant, completing the metaphor that Bruges has rendered final judgment on all three men. Ken dies a self-sacrificing death arguably finding redemption. Harry dies by his own rigid righteousness, a sort of demonic pride consuming itself. And Ray remains in limbo, literally being carried off on a stretcher between life and death. The last line Ray narrates is *"…and I really hoped I wouldn't die. For all the bad things I've done – for that to be the thing that got me, me bleeding to death in Bruges, of all places…"* (paraphrased) which reiterates Bruges' role as an agent of fate. The church bells toll softly as the screen fades out, as if marking the end of a requiem. We, like Ray, are left to wonder if Bruges was hell, heaven, or purgatory for

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him. As Catherine O'Brien's article title suggests, the film persistently asks *"In Bruges": Heaven or Hell?* with the answer being neither and both, i.e. Purgatory (O'Brien 93). Through arches, altars, paintings, and relics, *In Bruges* constructs a dense network of religious signs that enrich its absurd scenario with allegorical depth. The film ultimately uses these symbols to *critique* the very idea of binary morality between heaven vs. hell and good vs. evil. Life and afterlife for these characters is shown to be far more complicated, an absurd *"in-between"* where redemption is unclear and judgment comes from fallible, even comic, sources.

If much of *In Bruges* is subtle in layering absurdism, its climactic sequence throws subtlety out the window and embraces full surreal chaos. The nighttime showdown between Ray and Harry unfolds during the filming of a pretentious art movie, a movie-in-a-movie, that provides a carnivalesque *Boschian* (Bakhtin 31) backdrop. In this sequence, McDonagh practices a form of sensory excess akin to what Heiner Müller described as "Flooding" (*Theatremachine* 15). An aesthetic strategy of overwhelming the spectator with a flood of images and stimuli to induce a kind of disoriented, reflective state. On the streets of Bruges, this translates to an almost hallucinatory combat where dream and reality blur. Ray, wounded and delirious, stumbles through narrow alleys and into a procession of people wearing grotesque masks, eerie costumes, and makeup, a visual echo of the demons and tortured souls from Bosch's *Last Judgment*. Fireworks explode in the night sky, imparting an otherworldly strobe of colored light. The editing accelerates, cutting between Ray's bloodied face, the blank stare of the dwarf actor Jimmy dressed as a schoolboy, and Harry in relentless pursuit with handgun drawn. For a few minutes, Bruges truly becomes a *theater of the absurd*. A literal pageant of death and judgment being played out on multiple levels.

This aesthetic oversaturation is carefully constructed. As noted, McDonagh had earlier seeded images from Bosch and discussions of Judgment Day so the audience's mind is primed for these parallels. When the "dream sequence" film shoot engulfs Ray, it feels like a nightmarish *payoff* to those earlier elements. A flood of symbolic imagery crashing down in the narrative's final act. The use of Bosch-like costuming and extreme visuals serves to disorient the audience much as it does Ray. The spectator is suddenly not sure. Are we seeing Ray's subjective hallucination as he loses blood, is this his personal hell, or is this diegetically just the film crew's elaborate costume party? The effect is intentionally uncanny and overwhelming. Film scholar Ágnes Pethő, in analyzing cinematic adaptations of Bosch, might call this a form of intermediality where the film medium absorbs the painting's imagery to create a "garden of earthly delights" on screen (Pethő 29). In *In Bruges*, this intermedial moment is nightmarish. Masked characters loom out of fog, one figure wears a plague-doctor style bird mask reminiscent of Bosch's bird-headed demon and another wears black wings, as if a fallen angel. Meanwhile, Carter Burwell's music, which until now has been "restrained" and melancholic, shifts dramatically. Burwell himself notes that *"by and large the music maintains a Belgian restraint… until the arrival of Ralph Fiennes. Then things start to boil and explode in gunfire, at which point electric guitar makes a surprising appearance"* (Burwell). Indeed, at the climax the score abandons its gentle piano theme and erupts into distorted electric guitar riffs and percussive elements as bullets fly. This sudden sonic onslaught complements the visual overload, together forming a barrage of sensation that stands out sharply from the earlier quiet, measured tone.

This approach aligns with Müller's idea of flooding in that the audience is momentarily "drowned" in stimuli, loud gunshots, fast cuts, bright flashes, grotesque faces, creating a deliberate sense of chaos. Out of this chaos emerges dark comedy and savage irony. Harry's moral absolutism

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triggers him to shoot the dwarf Jimmy mistaking him for a child due to the costume and then, upon seeing the child's head blown apart, Harry immediately turns his gun on himself. The audience must process this shocking yet absurd turn of events in real-time, with the sensory overload still peaking. In a way, McDonagh forces us to experience the grotesque *excess* of his story's moral conclusion much like a Bosch painting that one could gaze at for hours, noticing new horrifying details in every corner. The difference is the film medium's temporality. McDonagh's flooding is quick and visceral, then swiftly withdrawn. After Harry's gruesome suicide depicted unsparingly, there's a moment of near silence as Ray collapses. The cacophony ceases, and we're left with Ray's internal monologue and the distant toll of bells. This abrupt ebb of the flood, from overload back to quiet, leaves the viewer in a stunned, reflective space, much as Artaudian (The Theatre and Its Double 15) or Müller-esque (*Theatremachine* 15) theatre would after an intense climax. It confronts the viewer with the absurdity of what just happened. The "rules" of Harry's moral universe led to an unthinkably silly yet tragic outcome, a crime boss blowing his own brains out over a mistaken principle. We are disoriented, perhaps darkly amused and horrified all at once, which is precisely the emotional cocktail absurdist art often seeks.

The *Boschian flooding* (Müller 15, Gibson 72) of the climax also serves to externalize Ray's internal judgment. Throughout the film Ray has been carrying overwhelming guilt. Symbolically, his mind is already flooded with gruesome images. He repeatedly flashes back to the boy's bloody body. In the end, it is as if Bruges manifests Ray's inner hell outwardly. The excess of gore and bizarre imagery around him is a purgatorial trial by fire and brimstone, and gunpowder. When Ray is finally carried away, he literally passes through a portal, the ambulance doors, while still in this Boschian nightmare space. The neon lights of the ambulance interior bathe him in red. The last shot fixes on those *"bright neon lights… then the screen fades to black"*, a symbolic image of possibly hell or perhaps a secular salvation. Ambulance lights can mean rescue. It's telling that Wael Khairy interprets the neon glow as ambiguous but notes the real resolution is Ray's change of heart, not whether he dies (Khairy). In other words, after the storm of images (flood) subsides, what matters is the existential revelation. Ray *wants* to live and atone now, even if the decision might be too late.

All in all, the climactic sequence of *In Bruges* showcases McDonagh's ability to tonally escalate absurdity to a fever pitch, aligning with an absurdist aesthetic of excess, yet still maintain control over meaning. By invoking Hieronymus Bosch's iconography and pushing the film's visual style briefly into surreal, hyper-theatrical territory, McDonagh ensures the themes of judgment, sin, and retribution are communicated not just through dialogue but viscerally through *spectacle*. It's a high-risk move. Lesser films might have collapsed into incoherence here, but *In Bruges* earns it because the groundwork was laid carefully and the humanity of the characters remains front and center. The *flood of absurd images* in the finale ultimately forces both Ray and the audience to confront the grotesque consequences of the film's moral logic. It's a bravura example of absurdist cinematic language. Meaning is delivered through shock, irony, and sensory overload, leaving us as conflicted and contemplative as a good absurdist play would.

A defining feature of *In Bruges* is its mercurial tone, which swings from profane comedy to sincere tragedy in an instant. A difficult balance that McDonagh navigates expertly. The film's humor is deeply absurdist. It arises from existential discomfort, cultural incongruities, and moral paradoxes, rather than from conventional gags or physical slapstick. As *RTÉ* reports in its Irish Times review, *"thankfully, given the mix of pathos and humour in In Bruges, the film never comes close to crossing the line into absurdist slapstick"* (Dwyer). Instead, the comedy always carries an

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undercurrent of pain or introspection, distinguishing it as *black comedy* in the absurdist vein rather than simple farce.

One key device is pair dynamics. The interactions between characters that produce humor through contrast and philosophical banter. Ray and Ken function as an odd couple with a dark twist. One is suicidal and guilt-ridden, the other paternal and yearning for redemption. Their dialogues are laced with caustic wit and Irish colloquialisms, but often they're debating moral questions in the guise of silly arguments. For instance, an absurd conversation about whether it's okay to punch someone in the eye evolves into Ray admitting his deep guilt to Ken, which then flips back to an irreverent joke. This tonal whiplash is *intentional*. It reflects how, in absurdist storytelling, heavy themes are juxtaposed with banal or comic elements to highlight the incongruity of human existence. McDonagh's background in theatre especially the influence of Irish absurdists like Beckett and Martin McDonagh's own stage works comes through strongly here. The script uses blackly comic dialogue as a veil over genuine existential dread. In one scene, Ray blithely asks Jimmy the dwarf about dwarf suicide rates, an outrageous, insensitive joke on the surface, but the subtext is Ray's own suicidal ideation, projected in this inappropriate way. The viewer laughs and cringes simultaneously, recognizing the absurd coupling of comedic setup and tragic subtext.

The tonal shifts are also evident in the Ken/Harry and Ray/Harry pairings. When Harry is introduced in person, the film hits some of its funniest beats. Harry's volcanic temper causes him to hurl a telephone and drop constant F-bombs even as his wife and kids decorate a Christmas tree in the background. A scene both shocking and comical in its domestic absurdity. Yet Harry also embodies a kind of twisted honor that the film treats seriously in the end. The Ray/Harry confrontation oscillates rapidly. Harry chases Ray with homicidal intent, tense action-thriller mode, but when Ray, cornered, leaps onto a passing canal boat to escape, Harry stops to politely apologize to a startled American couple on the boat that he's pointing a gun at, *"Terribly sorry, I apologize"*, before resuming the chase. This bizarre civility in the midst of a deadly pursuit is pure absurdist comedy, reminiscent of Monty Python or Coen brothers' humor where characters momentarily adhere to social niceties in absurd circumstances. It gets a laugh, but it also underscores the film's theme that even violent men have remnants of decency and routine behavior. A point that makes Harry's final decision both ridiculous and oddly poignant.

Visual tone plays a role in balancing these shifts. As discussed earlier, the film's look remains relatively somber even during comedic scenes, which keeps the stakes feeling real. This is a conscious separation from slapstick, where violence typically has no lasting consequence. In *In Bruges*, *every violent act carries weight*. The film never "resets" the damage. For example, when Ray punches the Canadian tourists, it's played for a shocking laugh. The obnoxious tourists certainly deserve comeuppance in the audience's eyes, but then we see Ray immediately regret it because it draws police attention and nearly foils his escape. The consequences roll forward and entangle the plot. Another instance is Ray's blanks-loaded pistol prank on Eirik, blinding him temporarily, is darkly comic in the moment, but that too has consequences when Eirik later returns with real fury. By ensuring actions have effects, McDonagh distinguishes the humor as moral and situational rather than cartoonish. Slapstick often works in a vacuum of consequence. Think of Wile E. Coyote falling off cliffs and reappearing unharmed. *In Bruges* pointedly does not do this. When Ken later finds Eirik still blinded and stumbling, he mercifully helps him. This small follow-up scene takes what could have been a throwaway slapstick gag, criminal gets blinded by his own

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gun and turns it into a beat of human empathy and ironic alliance. Ken and Eirik momentarily bond in trying to warn Ray. Such touches elevate the material beyond gag-based comedy.

The film's dialogue-driven humor also sets it apart from visual slapstick. Many of the funniest lines are essentially existential jokes. For example, when told Bruges is a fairy-tale town, Ray snaps *"Well, it's turned out to be a bloody fairy-tale, hasn't it? Just not the kind with a happy ending."* In another scene, during their first night, Ray inquires *"What's Belgium known for?"* and Ken replies, *"Chocolates and child abuse, and they only invented the chocolates to get to the kids."* This line is outrageously dark, but it encapsulates the film's ability to tackle horrific subjects, the corruption of innocence, a nod to Ray's crime, in a way that startles a laugh out of the viewer. This is absurdist black comedy par excellence. Humor emerging from the shock of truth and the breaking of taboos, not from pratfalls or buffoonery. McDonagh's script has been likened to Tarantino's early work for its profane wit, but it is arguably closer to Harold Pinter or Beckett in the way it uses seemingly trivial conversations to probe moral themes. McDonagh's dialogue *"might seem like superficial conversation"* yet carries *"a rich underlayer of subtext and nuance"*, delivered with a distinct rhythmic bite. The effect is that the audience often laughs at the surface quip while absorbing a deeper unease underneath.

Another aspect of tone is the film's "mix of pathos and humour". There are scenes of genuine emotional pathos that are played straight, without any undercutting joke. For instance, Ray tearfully confessing *"I killed a little boy"* and Ken comforting him. McDonagh gives these moments space, which lends gravity to the narrative. Immediately following, he might inject a humorous beat, but crucially, it's never to mock the emotion, only to reflect the absurd inconsistency of life. A prime example is the scene where Ray, at his lowest, is about to shoot himself on the park bench. Ken intervenes with a gun of his own, leading to a tense confrontation that resolves with Ken choosing to spare Ray. In the aftermath, as this heavy life-and-death moment sinks in, Ray asks Ken if he can *"go on holiday"* instead of being executed. Ken, bemused, says yes and even gives Ray some cash. This unexpected gentle humor after a potential suicide creates a poignant, almost uplifting tonal shift. The absurd relief of two hitmen treating a botched execution like a canceled errand. The audience is moved by Ken's compassion and simultaneously charmed by the bizarre normalcy with which they handle it. Ray cheekily apologizes for not saving any candy for Ken earlier, a non sequitur that signals he's going to be okay.

This blend of tones has led many to call *In Bruges* a "human comedy" despite its darkness. It uses absurdist comedy to *humanize* these criminals, not to turn them into caricatures. Colin Farrell's performance in particular grounds the absurd humor in a very vulnerable humanity. His comedic outbursts like drop-kicking a phone or karate-chopping a racist Canadian come from a place of deep frustration and self-loathing, which makes them both funny and pitiable. In traditional slapstick, violence is painless and purely for laughter. In *In Bruges*, violence always stings. When Ray karate-chops the Canadian man, he actually hurts his own hand and later gets arrested for it. The laugh quickly curdles into "uh-oh, this is bad." The film's "biting, absurdist humor" coexists with a *"gloomy yet strangely promising mood"*, achieving an "unwavering, bittersweet desolation" in tone. It's a mixture that few films manage. One minute we chuckle at an expletive-laden rant about Bruges, the next we're feeling the existential weight of guilt on Ray's shoulders. This tonal complexity is a signature of absurdist black comedy as opposed to simple dark humor or parody.

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Finally, the circular plot structure contributes to the tonal effect. As discussed, the film loops elements from beginning to end, the accidental child-killing motif, the waiting leading to judgment, which gives a sense of ironic fate. A common trait in absurdist narratives which often end where they began, highlighting the futility or cosmic joke at hand. In *In Bruges*, the circularity is spiritual. Ray starts the film with no will to live wanting to die for his sins and ends the film fervently wishing to live perhaps to atone or just to not die "in Bruges". This 180-degree turn is the closest thing to a *redemptive arc*, yet it's delivered ironically amidst bloodshed and uncertainty. The last lines, hovering between hope and despair, echo the first act's juxtapositions of dark and light. The structure thus reinforces the film's tonal DNA that *life is both tragic and absurdly comic in its symmetry*. As Roger Ebert notes in his review, *"two of the final deaths are ethical choices"* and the irony of Harry's demise *"has an undeniable logic, showing that even professional murderers have their feelings"* (Ebert). The tonal stance of the film is encapsulated in that observation. *In Bruges* finds the grim logic hence, a kind of humor in the emotional convictions of killers and in the idea of honor among thieves, without ever hand-waving the genuine tragedy of their lives.

At its core, Martin McDonagh's *In Bruges* presents morality as ambiguous and redemption as inherently absurd. The characters, Ray, Ken, and Harry, embody competing moral philosophies, yet the film consistently subverts any straightforward ethical conclusions, aligning with absurdist ideas of existential uncertainty and chaos. This narrative ambiguity is reflected cinematically through deliberate use of disjointed editing, visual contrasts, and surreal imagery, techniques rooted in absurdist theatre traditions pioneered by dramatists like Beckett and Heiner Müller.

Ray's moral struggle, visualized through tight, claustrophobic framing, evokes a profound Camusian dilemma. For instance, when Ray nearly commits suicide in a park, McDonagh employs a static, medium close-up shot with desaturated color grading, reinforcing Ray's sense of entrapment and despair. The cinematography here highlights Ray's isolated mental state, as does the sound design. Ambient noises of children playing nearby create a harrowing aural irony, underscoring Ray's guilt.

Ken, contrastingly, symbolizes mercy and potential redemption. His confrontation with Ray in the park uses symmetrical framing that visually balances the moral tension between violence and compassion. McDonagh shoots Ken from a slightly lower angle, subtly elevating his moral authority when he chooses mercy over execution. This compassionate decision is punctuated by visual silence, creating a poignant moment devoid of dialogue, amplifying Ken's internal ethical turmoil.

Harry, embodying rigid retributive justice, is depicted through absurdist exaggeration. Harry's introduction, shot from sharp, low-angle positions, heightens his menacing presence, yet his frequent childish tantrums undermine his intimidating facade, visually manifesting the absurdity of his uncompromising morality. This is exemplified when Harry irrationally smashes a telephone. The absurd juxtaposition of domestic tranquility Christmas décor in the background with violent outbursts emphasizes the ridiculousness and emptiness of his moral code.

Throughout, McDonagh integrates absurdist cinematic techniques such as Müller's concept of "flooding," where overwhelming sensory experiences challenge viewer coherence. The climactic sequence on the Boschian film set epitomizes this method. A rapid montage of grotesque masked figures, explosive gunfire, and disorienting strobe lights visually saturates the screen, disorienting both Ray and the audience (Pethő 473). This sensory bombardment is heightened by

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Burwell's chaotic score, contrasting sharply with the previously restrained musical themes, thereby intensifying the surreal absurdity (Burwell, Composer's Notes).

Further emphasizing the absurdist aesthetic, McDonagh uses fragmented editing patterns, cutting abruptly between intense close-ups of Ray's panicked expression, disjointed wide shots of the chaotic Boschian masquerade, and fleeting glimpses of the accidental violence that befalls Jimmy. This editing underscores the randomness and futility of moral certainty in the film's universe (Buckland 52).

Additionally, repeated visual motifs, like the recurrent image of corridors and arches, serve as symbolic passageways of judgment. For instance, Ken's final moments atop the belfry, framed through an arched window overlooking Bruges, visually encapsulate his liminal position between redemption and doom. The subsequent shot, a vertiginous, downward perspective of Ken's sacrificial leap, underscores his tragic transcendence through spatial and visual design.

Blackouts and abrupt cuts punctuate narrative episodes, a technique echoing absurdist theatre's disruption of conventional storytelling rhythms. After Ray's failed suicide attempt, the screen abruptly cuts to black, then fades in again, leaving viewers momentarily disoriented. A visual reflection of existential uncertainty (Esslin 29). This editing approach prevents viewers from settling comfortably into narrative expectations, mirroring the characters' moral confusion.

The film's refusal to provide clear redemption is visually and narratively reinforced in its ambiguous ending. The final image, a slow zoom-in on Ray's wounded, bewildered face bathed in neon-red ambulance lights, suggests neither damnation nor salvation, but continued purgatorial limbo (O'Brien 101). The uncertain soundscape of distant, echoing sirens further heightens the existential uncertainty of this final moment.

McDonagh's critique of moral absolutism is most explicit in his ironic portrayal of Harry's demise. The absurd visual irony, Harry mistakenly killing Jimmy, dressed as a child, triggering his self-inflicted punishment, is captured with darkly comic immediacy through stark lighting contrasts and rapidly intercut reaction shots. The grotesque visual detail of Harry's headless body collapsing amid the surreal Boschian costumes starkly ridicules his rigid morality (Caballero).

Ken's merciful act is visually framed with an aura of sacrificial dignity. His death scene, filmed from a poignant low-angle as he instructs Ray to take his gun, positions him symbolically as a martyr, a visual echo of religious iconography and moral grace within the absurdist chaos (Norcott). The sound design further enhances the scene's emotional resonance, an echoing silence punctuated only by Ray's quiet sobs as Ken dies, reinforcing Ken's moral courage.

In *In Bruges*, Martin McDonagh harnesses absurdist cinematic language to construct a rich black comedy that simultaneously operates as a modern moral fable. Through its fragmented narrative structure, disjointed editing, blackouts, and surreal mise-en-scène, the film disorients the audience, reflecting the protagonists' existential limbo. Bruges itself is transformed into a liminal purgatory, its cobbled streets, shadowed alleys, and misty canals serving as a visual metaphor for moral ambiguity and spiritual suspension. Against this in-between setting, Ray, Ken, and Harry enact a darkly comic passion play where traditional binaries of sin and redemption collapse. The characters' self-made moral codes repeatedly clash with Catholic guilt and the absurdity of chance, leaving the audience uncertain whether redemption is even attainable.

Crucially, McDonagh distinguishes absurdist comedy from mere slapstick through his commitment to tonal juxtaposition with meaning. The comedy in *In Bruges* is never detached from character or theme. Instead, it is the laughter of recognition at life's incongruities suddenly stifled by sobering reminders of guilt, mortality, and moral consequence. This delicate dance of tones

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draws the viewer in deeper. We laugh, then feel uneasy about laughing, only to laugh again at the next twisted turn, all the while growing more attached to these flawed, human characters. In this way, *In Bruges* embodies what the best absurdist works achieve. It uses humor as both an escape valve and a mirror, making us confront uncomfortable truths about guilt, justice, and the search for redemption precisely in the moments when we are most disarmed.

By the time the Bosch-inspired climax arrives, McDonagh unleashes an almost Müllerian flood of overwhelming imagery. A hallucinatory tapestry of grotesque figures, violent irony, and symbolic excess that forces both the characters and the viewer to confront the moral absurdity of their actions. The streets of Bruges become a visual Last Judgment, staged amid carnival masks and gunfire. Yet even in this most chaotic sequence, the film maintains a humanist core. Ray's final realization, captured in extreme close-up with minimal sound, offers neither easy redemption nor narrative closure, but rather a moment of existential choice. The will to live, however fraught with guilt and uncertainty (Camus 123). The film's final ambiguity, Ray hovering between life and death, unsure if Bruges is heaven or hell, thus encapsulates the absurdist perspective that moral judgment is both necessary and impossible in a world devoid of easy answers.

Ultimately, *In Bruges* uses absurdist black comedy not to declare life meaningless, but to critique simplistic morality in a world of contradictions. Its fragmentary storytelling, liminal visual framing, symbolic overload, and tonal juxtapositions suggest that pure good and evil, heaven and hell, are insufficient categories for understanding flawed human experience. Ray, Ken, and Harry exist in a morally gray purgatory, where personal codes, guilt, and chance converge with tragicomic results. Through his cinematic craft, McDonagh enacts the Theatre of the Absurd on film. He strands his characters in a space both mundane and metaphysical, makes them perform darkly comic routines, and ends without a clear resolution. Thereby forcing both characters and viewers to grapple with profound questions of forgiveness, agency, and the impossibility of moral closure.

In the process, *In Bruges* validates the absurdist notion that laughter and despair often go hand in hand. And, that by embracing this fragile duality, art can more honestly interrogate the human condition. The film's final gesture is not a neatly moralizing lesson, but a humanistic affirmation. Perhaps genuine moral redemption lies not in achieving purity or absolution, but in choosing to persist, in continuing, however uncertainly, in the face of chaos, guilt, and absurdity. By crafting such a work, McDonagh invites the audience to confront the limits of morality and the complexity of redemption in a world where no clear answers await.

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