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"The Secret of Kells (2009), a film for a post Celtic Tiger Ireland?"

The Secret of Kells (2009) (dir. Tomm Moore) is a feature length animated film that plays with myth, truth and fiction to propose an originating story for the Book of Kells, a highly decorated 8th century insular book containing the four gospels of the Bible. The film was conceived and produced by Cartoon Saloon in Kilkenny, Ireland but due to the limited funding available in Ireland for feature length animation, the film was made with co-producers in Europe (including Les Armateurs in France, Vivi Film in Belgium, and France 2 Cinema) and animation teams in Brazil and Hungary; though still primarily in Ireland.

The film deals with organized religion and the church in a way that moves on from recent Irish fiction films that show an anti-clerical fixation (fuelled by an almost never ending series of clerical scandals) such as *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002) and *Songs for a Raggy Boy*, (2003) (Brereton, 2008); but shows the universality of nature as an inspiration for the creation of the Book of Kells. This move away from the organized church as a narrative focal point makes the film more accessible to international audiences, as evidenced by the film obtaining worldwide distributors, particularly a US distributor and nomination for an Oscar, but can perhaps be seen as a exploitation of Irish myths to obtain funding within Ireland and to export Ireland as a source of mythic origins to attempt to speak to a global viewer in universalist terms.

The Secret of Kells jettisons the linear conception of history and of the nation by freely playing with the truth in its mix of legend, fact and fiction. Fundamental to the construction of the nation of Ireland as a concept, is the telling of its stories that both represent the nation to its own people and others and are instrumental in constructing the image of the nation. Homi K. Bhabha, one of the most prominent post-colonial theorists, terms this the "narration of the nation" (Bhabha 1990a). For Bhabha, colonialism and post-colonialism are fundamental to an understanding of the shaping of modernity and thus the concept of the nation. Post-colonialism analyses the ideas and histories that have allowed the West to dominate so much of the world. David Huddart, in his analysis of Bhabha's theories, says that the margins of modern nations provide a privileged perspective on the apparently stable identities of modernity in general (Huddart 2006). Ireland, on the margins of Europe, and animation (considered often as on the margins of the film industry) come together in *The Secret of Kells* to interrogate ideas of the nation and Irishness within a world context.

By portraying the finishing and saving of the Book of Kells as the quest of a young hero (12 year old Brendan, aided by a younger fairy Aisling), the film can be seen as a romanticisation of Ireland and a sentimentalisation of youth. But in the film, while Brendan fulfils his quest, the people of Kells are not saved from the barbarian Viking invaders. Established tropes of religion and mythical Ireland are used throughout the film, which can be read as part of a global trend of romanticizing Ireland, yet there are subtle clues subverting many of these tropes through the narrative.

Brendan needs to defeat the snake, Crom Cruach, to steal his crystal eye to let him complete the Book of Kells but the presence of his dream icons leads us to understand that the battle with Crom Cruach is actually a dream. In analyzing this scene, I intend to show how the film subverts its religious origins by marrying pagan elements with more expected Catholic themes. Brendan needs to steal the eye of Crom to replace the one lost by Brother Aidan, Brendan's teacher and

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friend, during his flight from Iona escaping from the Vikings. Aidan carried with him the Book of Iona, an unfinished manuscript of unsurpassed beauty (later in the film renamed the Book of Kells) but no longer has the strength to finish it and now relies on Brendan ‘to turn darkness into light.’ Brendan enters the cave of ‘the dark one’ Crom Cruach, defeats him and steals his eye. We can read this as a simple battle between the forces of Catholic good and pagan evil. However, Brendan is aided by Aisling, a pagan fairy who has healthy disdain for the rich Abbey, and he in fact needs to escape from the confines of the Catholic Abbey to the forest to enable him to help Aidan complete the Book. In a further twist, there are visual clues that this epic battle between Brendan and Crom is in fact a dream; we see Brendan’s dream icons floating across the screen on his descent into Crom’s cave. The battle between good and evil is internalized within Brendan’s mind.

The film can be seen as a return to an “old’ Irish cinema”¹, where obsessions with the church and the family are apparent, and by its obvious use of Irish symbols and music. The insular style of the film is inspired by the lush, now iconic, style of the Book of Kells including crosses, spiral and interlace patterns. The soundtrack, a mix of Irish traditional music by the Irish band Kila and haunting, neo-Celtic music by French composer Bruno Coulais, simultaneously celebrates Ireland’s musical heritage and acknowledges the global inspirations that form part of that heritage. However, by challenging the essence of the origin of an important Irish cultural symbol like the Book of Kells, and proposing a pagan universalist element, it cleverly sidesteps or even subverts religious origins, making it at once Irish enough to attract an overseas audience, but not too Irish or religious to distance such audience.

The inherent freedom in animation, as a form, to create a filmic world unrestrained by budgetary considerations in location, set design, or casting, should allow animators to address social issues relevant to a contemporary Ireland². On the surface, *The Secret of Kells* addresses outdated issues around the role of the Church in the State and hegemonic Catholicism, but in its nuanced subversion of the trope of religion and the church it can be seen to break new ground. The film attracted relatively significant Irish funding, of around €1,000,000 from the small pot available, from the Irish Film Board, (Bord Scannán na hÉireann) and from RTE, the national television company. The Irish Film Board, in its new guiding principles for funding, states that “strong preferences will be given to Irish initiation, Irish stories and Irish filmmaking talent” (Irish Film Board 2010, p.7) an aim that will perhaps only serve to make the Irish film industry more insular. Irish animation is a strong industry, buoyed up by tax breaks but it needs to carve out an individual voice in a worldwide industry. Like Irish live-action fiction films, it is beset by trying to escape from Irish tropes of historical nationalism, of the past as one of trauma, and the representation of the Irish as an exotic Celtic “other” (Barton 2004, p153). In the 1980’s a system of substantial tax benefits led to the establishment of a number of animation studios in Ireland, including Sullivan Bluth, with Don Bluth a former Disney employee, and Murakami Wolf, with Jimmy Murakami, who made the series *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. This led to the establishment of two stylistically different animation courses in Dublin, one in Ballyfermot producing classically trained animators and Dun Laoghaire IADT, with a more European experimental arthouse style (Clancy 2005). Until the release of *The Secret of Kells*, most successful feature length Irish animated films exploited digital methods of production. *The*

¹ The role of the Church in Irish society has been explored in such films as *The Magdalene Sisters* and *Angela’s Ashes* (1999), films that revisit the past in an effort to ‘work through the legacy of Irish history in its more traumatic formulations’ (Barton 2004, p.131). These films intertwine an examination of the social power of the Church with a critique of the family. See Barton 2004 for an in-depth analysis on cinematic representations of the past in Irish film.

² See Burke (2009) for a discussion on Irish Animation and National Cinema.

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Secret of Kells' confident use of 2D methods firmly places it visually in the European experimental art-house animation context; stylistically distinguishable from North American Disney-influenced 3D animation but successfully using a narrative that, in the words of A.O.Scott of the New York Times, "fits comfortably into the Hollywood mainstream" (Scott, 2010). It shows a stylistic and narrative hybridity that merges such art-house animation with mainstream storytelling.

The Secret of Kells aims to illustrate the importance of art and culture to the concept of Irishness by taking a cultural foundation stone, The Book of Kells, and narrating a fictional tale around its creation. This fetishised book will save the people of Ireland from barbarian invaders, the Vikings, not physically, but by keeping the Catholic religion alive through faith in the beauty of the book. The film depicts a struggle between the building of a wall by Brendan's uncle, the Abbot, and the creation of the book representing learning. Defeat by the barbarians is inevitable and only learning can keep religion and thus, the essence of man, alive.

Bhabha sees cultural rights in terms of the 'right to narrate' of a culture, saying,

"By the "right to narrate," I mean to suggest all those forms of creative behavior that allow us to represent the lives we lead, question the conventions and customs that we inherit, dispute and propagate the ideas and ideals that come to us most naturally, and dare to entertain the most audacious hopes and fears for the future" (Bhabha 2003 p.180).

For Bhabha, narrative is a moving sign of civic life and if it is stifled or if a unified truth is insisted upon, then the result is the monolith, the holistic total sociological explanation, or the authoritarian political culture (Huddart 2006, p. 140).

The Secret of Kells takes the religious founding myth of a culturally superior Catholic Ireland, represented by the use of the Book of Kells within the narrative, a culturally and historically important artifact that symbolizes Ireland's projection of itself within Europe and international context as the Land of Saints and Scholars, and shows it to be permeated with paganism and suffused with nature. Brendan, despite being brought up in the Abbey amongst the monks, does not look within for inspiration to complete the Book. He must escape to the forest and see the beauty of the natural world outside the walls of the Abbey. This is illustrated in the film in the first scene in the scriptorium where Brendan dips his goose quill into his inkwell. His first picture is not of any Catholic icon, but of flowers he saw in the forest, white bells that to him represent Aisling. Brendan and Aisling are shown playfully sliding down a fern that curls across a screen showing a page from the Book of Kells, an interaction with a religious icon that could perhaps be interpreted as irreverent. I prefer to interpret it as showing the symbiotic relationship between the Book of Kells and the natural world. This relationship is continuously portrayed in the film by its visual style. The forest is full of plants and animals that move in concentric swirls, inspired by the Book of Kells, and the drawings created by Brendan forming part of the Book within the film are inspired by these forms from nature. This reliance by Brendan on the natural for inspiration, rather than his religion, undermines the purity of religion symbolized by the use of the Book of Kells.

In keeping with this subversive version of the inspiration for the Book of Kells, the film undermines the purity of the origins of the nation of Ireland. An historical narrative like *The Secret of Kells* upsets the horizontal logic of the nation as a self-created monolith, symbolized by the Book of Kells, but shows that in fact the nation is a mongrelized, hybridized form that both inspires and is comprised of a myriad of influences. The film features a group of multi-cultural monks, Brother Tang, Brother Assoua, and Brother Leonardo and shows the repeated invasion of

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Ireland by the Norsemen, the barbarians in search of gold. In this way, the film nods to Ireland's past both as a haven and plundering bowl for other nations. Most importantly, the film happily mixes pagan rituals with religious issues, giving rise to what Moore, the director, has called 'a very unique kind of Christianity', a 'Celtic Christianity' (Clarke 2009, p2). By enabling different narratives to co-exist, the film illustrates the multiplicity of elements that are required to form the concept of the nation.

In "Nation and Narration", Bhabha introduces this collection of essays on the concept of the nation and nationness by saying:

"Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realise their horizons in the mind's eye. Such an image of the nation-or narration- might seem impossibly romantic and excessively metaphorical, but is from these traditions of political thought and literary language that the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea in the west. An idea whose cultural compulsion lies in the impossible unity of the nation as a symbolic force." (Bhabha 1990a, p.1).

What Bhabha is doing is moving the concept of the nation away from a linear historical model to a temporal dimension, highlighting the ambivalence of the nation as a narrative strategy. The space inhabited by the people of a modern nation is never simply horizontal but involves an element of temporality. Bhabha is applying his theories mostly to a migrant population, but I believe that this approach is fundamental to an understanding of the Irish nation as it functions today.

Bhabha uses Freud's concept of the uncanny, and particularly the figure of the double; the figure most frequently associated with the process of the uncanny, to undermine the simple sense of identity claimed by real political forms, most obviously nations, by "questioning the homogeneous and horizontal view associated with the nation's imagined community" (Bhabha 1990b, 206). The nation is narrated, often by an official narrative which dominates all other stories. Bhabha, like many other theorists, uses Benedict Anderson's concept of the nation in *Imagined Communities*, in which Anderson suggests that the modern nation is often understood as a matter of horizontal simultaneity (Anderson 1983, p.26). However, Bhabha undermines the insistence on a simultaneity that tends to exclude those that do not fit. By removing the Book of Kells from its Christian origins, there is a space for those that do not fit, to claim it as theirs through allegiance with its inspiration; in the film portrayed as nature and the cosmos. By mixing in the pagan elements, whether historically accurate or not, the dominant narrative of Ireland as an Island of Saints and Scholars is undermined. Huddart suggests that "like colonial authority, the power of a national narrative seems entirely confident of its consistency and coherence, but is all the while undermined by its inability to really fix the identity of the people, which would be to limit their identity to a single overpowering nationality" (2006,p.10).

The nation does not exist independently of its people. For Bhabha, there is a double time, a splitting, with the people of a nation seen as historical objects of a nationalist pedagogy and simultaneously considered subjects of a process of signification. By seeing the people as historical objects this gives a cultural discourse "an authority that is based on the pre-given or constituted historical origin or event" (Bhabha 1990b, p.297) but by seeing them as subjects of a process of signification this erases any originary presence to see people as a continuous repeating reproducing process. "The scraps patches, and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpolates a growing circle of national subjects" (Ibid). We can no longer assume that the nation is a fixed bundle of characteristics that can be accurately reflected on screen. Ann Anagnost states that the nation is "an 'impossible unity that must be narrated into being in both time and space,'" and that

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“the very impossibility of the nation as a unified subject means that this narrating activity is never final.” (1997, p2). Anagnost is writing on modern China, but this doubling is evident in any modern nation’s quest for identity. *The Secret of Kells* questions the very origins of The Book of Kells and questions, like Bhabha does, the view of a nation as a temporal collective experience that is always moving forward. Thus the present is questioning the impossibility of an homogeneous past.

Bhabha rejects the stable identity associated with the national form, not rejecting national identity entirely, but wanting to keep such identity open. *The Secret of Kells* rejects the dominant narrative of Christian Ireland, and portrays the pre-Christian elements as inspirational and essential to the survival of the people of Ireland and, by implication, Christianity. In the film, nature must be mediated to save the people from a descent into barbarianism. By tying the film to the universality of nature and the cosmos, it removes it from trope of anti-church that has been a feature of recent Irish cinema, gives it authentic pagan roots, and makes it a narrated tale more accessible to international elements, underlined by receipt of various international awards, nominations, and worldwide distribution.

Irish film, like in *The Secret of Kells*, has an ambivalent attitude towards religion. Religion is seen as both an oppressive and liberating power. Ruth Barton says that *The Magdalene Sisters*, and other films of its genre,

“...perform a public function of enabling their viewers to work through the legacy of Irish history in its more traumatic formulations. At the same time, such works satisfy expectations that Ireland is a country absorbed by its past and many of them rehearse the signifiers of Irishness that outside audiences expect from Irish fictions” (Barton 2004, p.131).

The Secret of Kells does this by its use of such signifiers of Irishness, and its use of expected tropes of church and childhood innocence, but it shows that the religion had room for nature and inspiration. Perhaps it can be categorized as part of a cinema of compromise, of which Barton says, “the commercial exigencies of international funding have resulted in a cinema of compromise. These extend from plot choices to casting and location decisions, to a bastardisation of dialogue” (Barton 2004, p.109). This is not the cinema of old Ireland, obsessed with the church, nor is it the cinema of a Celtic Tiger era Ireland, like *About Adam*, which deliberately sought to create a culturally ambiguous space (Barton 2004, pp.110-112). Rather it is part of a cinema for post-Celtic Tiger era Ireland, at once able to exploit its Irishness and simultaneously able to interrogate ideas of the nation as fluid and hybrid.

To conclude, this paper has established how the constructed space of *The Secret of Kells* is a hybrid space that borrows elements from myriad sources. An examination of the tropes in the film through the microscope of Bhabha’s theories on the constructedness of the nation reveals a hybrid self-identity which both embraces and exploits elements of Irishness. Hybridity is a process of negotiation between groups and cannot be unquestioningly celebrated, but must be interrogated. While memory is “crucial to identity” and “identification with a past is the key to creating the nation, because only by ‘remembering the past’ can a collective identity come into being” (Anthony D. Smith 1996, quoted in Barton 2004, p138), this memory is not unified but subjective. *The Secret of Kells*, ostensibly a simple animated film about a copy of the four Gospels of the Bible, in fact reveals much about the meaning of stories that construct our idea of the ideas of nation of Ireland.



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