Drawing Conclusions: Irish Animation and National Cinema

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Traditionally perceived as the unclassifiable stepchild of many national cinemas, animation has recently become recognised as a form capable of astutely articulating and reflecting a nation’s identity and concerns. In 2007, Persepolis (Vincent Paronnaud and Marjane Satrapi) was chosen to represent France in the ‘Foreign Language Film’ category at the Academy Awards. The film was adapted by Iranian expatriate Marjane Satrapi from her own graphic novel, and charted her turbulent childhood growing up in Iran during the Iranian Revolution and Iran-Iraq War. Although the film did not make the final shortlist, its effective use of simple black and white art to convey a child’s perspective of complex issues, did see it garner a nomination in the ‘Animated Feature Film’ category: a section ordinarily dominated by big budget family fare from Disney, DreamWorks and Pixar. The 2008 animated-documentary Waltz with Bashir (Ari Folman) also used surface simplicity to more deeply penetrate a complicated topic. The film’s examination of the 1982 Lebanon War achieved renewed piquancy by superimposing haunting, comic book-like graphics onto images that have become worryingly familiar in live-action. Like Persepolis, Waltz with Bashir has also become an international breakout ‘hit’ and was chosen to represent its country (Israel) in the Foreign Language Film category at the Academy Awards (2009).

Yet, it seems strange that animated features have taken this long to co-habit the privileged status of ‘national cinema’ automatically granted to live-action films. If one subscribes to Jean Cocteau’s belief that ‘film will only become art when its materials are as inexpensive as pen and paper’ then surely animation, while still beholden to budgetary concerns, is the form better positioned to reflect national interests, avoiding as it does, most of the vagaries of live-action production (stars, crew, locations etc.).

2008 found the Irish film industry on the cusp of achieving a consistent level of Irish animated feature production; but do the films of this burgeoning trend reflect their local origins, or do they yield to marketplace pressures demanding cultural ambiguity?

The animated form was first earnestly adopted by Irish filmmakers in the 1970s, with animators such as Aidan Hickey and later Steve Woods producing independent work. By the mid 1980s the form had become an industry, sparked by the arrival of Sullivan Bluth, an American animation studio run by former Disney animator, Don Bluth. Sullivan-Bluth was enticed to relocate from Van Nuys, California to a site near Phoenix Park, Dublin by substantial Industrial Development Authority (IDA) grants and lower wage costs. Although Sullivan Bluth’s productions, including The Land Before Time (Don Bluth, 1988) and All Dogs Go to Heaven (Don Bluth, 1989) bore a superficial similarity to the output of Bluth’s former employer Disney, the director’s newfound autonomy allowed for the exploration of darker themes, with these films proving considerable competition for Disney at the box office.¹

Sullivan Bluth’s impact on the Irish animation scene was game-changing and far-reaching. In order to develop the burgeoning studio, Sullivan Bluth established Ireland’s first animation course at Ballyfermot College in Dublin, which continues today under the banner of the Irish School of Animation.² Many of the graduates

from Ballyfermot College found work not only at Sullivan Bluth but also at Murakami Wolf, a production company that had expanded from Murakami films and was responsible for animating *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. Another company founded during this time was Emerald City, established by American Al Guest (clearly emulating the Sullivan Bluth model). This commitment to animation was echoed south of the city by the introduction of animation courses with a more experimental emphasis at the Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology (IADT).

This prolific period of American animated production in Ireland drew to a close in the mid-1990s when financial difficulties, exacerbated by under-performing releases, prompted the closure of Sullivan Bluth. Emerald City soon followed suit, while Murakami Wolf was downsized to Fred Wolf films. Yet, throughout the 1990s the number of experienced animators in Ireland continued to grow, as animation programs at IADT and Ballyfermot College produced filmmakers trained to a world-class level. There were intermittent attempts during this time to revive feature production. Most notably, Dublin-based Terraglyph Production released three animated co-productions: *Carnivale* (Deane Taylor, 2000), *Duck Ugly* (Emmanuel Klotz and Deane Taylor, 2000), and *Help! I’m a Fish* (Stefan Fjeldmark, Michael Hegner and Greg Manwaring, 2000). Yet these films failed to resuscitate the animated feature. During this fallow period many animators began to concentrate on short films, finding audiences at events such as the Irish Animation Festival. In time, the lobbying of Anamu (a collective of Irish animators) prompted the Irish Film Board (IFB) to introduce *Frameworks*, a scheme for financing animated shorts. *Frameworks* began in 1995 and early successes included *Midnight Dance* (John McCloskey, 1996), *Guy’s Dog* (Rory Bresnihan, 1997) and *The Last Elk* (Alan Shannon, 1998). Today, ‘Frameworks’ offers filmmakers budgets of up to €50,000 to produce animated shorts with a running time of less than six minutes.

These various factors coalesced to foster the production of a wealth of animated short films, which began receiving the kind of international acclaim that escaped most Irish live-action efforts. 2002 proved a particularly successful year with two Irish works – *Fifty Percent Grey* (Ruarí Robinson, 2001) and *Give Up Yer Aul Sins* (Cathal Gaffney, 2001) – nominated in the ‘Animated Short Film’ category at the Academy Awards. Although a Pixar effort, *For the Birds* (Ralph Eggleston, 2000) took home the prize, the nomination helped propel *Fifty Percent Grey* director Ruarí Robinson into the director’s chair of the Leonardo DiCaprio-produced anime-adaptation *Akira* (2011), while *Give Up Yer Aul Sins* was expanded into a best-selling DVD anthology, suggesting that there was as much appetite for Irish animation at home as there was overseas. Yet, as in live action, the animated short can only achieve so much and in 2008 the potential for regular Irish animated feature production, hinted at in the shorts, finally began to be realised.

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2. [http://www.bebo.com/Profile.jsp?MemberId=4381094778](http://www.bebo.com/Profile.jsp?MemberId=4381094778)


4. Launched in 1994, the Irish Animation Festival was run out of the Irish Film Centre in Dublin. The festival initially ran for three years showcasing Irish shorts alongside international works.

5. From the ‘About Frameworks’ section of the Irish Film Board website [http://www.irishfilmboard.ie/funding_programmes/Frameworks/65](http://www.irishfilmboard.ie/funding_programmes/Frameworks/65) [Retrieved January 15, 2009]

6. Ironically for director Robinson, whose greatest success to date has been in animation, the adaptation of anime *Akira* will be in live-action.

7. For further information on the history of Irish animation and ongoing productions see:
Fittingly for a stratum of filmmaking bubbling just under the crust of public recognition, Galway-based Magma Films has been promoting animated feature production for some time. Magma Films is a prolific and diverse independent production company, creating everything from Irish language fashion shows (Paisean Faisean) to live action family films such as Summer of the Flying Saucer (Martin Duffy, 2008). It is also one of the greatest proponents of animation in Ireland, previously co-producing with European partners The Ugly Duckling and Me (Michael Hegner and Karsten Kiilerich, 2006), a feature film and television series that was a computer-generated twist on the Hans Christian Andersen tale.

2008 saw the release of Magma Films’ latest animated co-production, Niko & the Way to the Stars (Michael Hegner and Kari Juusonen, 2008), which like past efforts, was a family film, this time following a young reindeer who, believing his father to be one of ‘Santa’s Flying Forces’ traverses the dangerous wolf-invested wilderness to find him. In its story of anthropomorphic animals with abandonment issues, the film recalls some of the highlights from the Disney canon, particularly Bambi (David Hand, 1942) and The Lion King (Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff, 1994), while its use of computer-generated imagery (CGI) allows the film to compete with DreamWorks’ green ogre and Pixar’s talking toys.

Yet quality computer animation comes at a price, necessitating a larger budget that in turn demands the widest possible appeal if the film is to stand a chance of recouping its costs. This economic reality was cited in the film’s production notes, ‘Fairly soon it became clear that the budget goal had to be six million euros to invest and that the genre needed to be family entertainment’.8

Consequently, the film is a familiar blend of talking animals, musical interludes and comedy sidekicks (here a cowardly flying squirrel and a pampered, purple poodle), with animation that is competent, if a little rough around its digitally-rendered edges. However, the film does avoid the knowing cynicism of some of the celebrity-laden US efforts, and the computer-generated gamble seems to have paid off with Niko and the Way to the Stars selling to over 120 countries.9

The success of Niko & the Way to the Stars does raise a number of concerns about the future of not only Irish animation, but the larger field. As an international co-production Niko & the Way to the Stars migrates about a vague movie-land, displaying no traits that could be identified as specific to Ireland or any of its funding nations. Similarly, while the film had a significant number of Irish contributors, it must be acknowledged that most of the animation was handled overseas. Finally, as a computer animated film, Niko & the Way to the Stars joins a wave of digital efforts that have washed over the form since the success of Toy Story (John Lasseter, 1995), with the technique becoming the industry standard and drowning out more traditional styles.11 These concerns prompt a

http://www.stevewoods.ie/, Animation Ireland


10. The film’s voice track was recorded in Ireland and features many Irish actors including Andrew Mc Mahon (Niko), Morgan Jones (Dasher), Paul Tylak (Specks/Prancer) and Alan Stanford (Black Wolf), it was co-written by Irish-based Marteinn Thorisson, and Wicklow-based Stephen Mc Keon composed the score.

11. Evidence of computer animation’s dominance of the field is apparent by Walt Disney Animation Studios current focus on computer animated films, with the studios last theatrically-released, traditionally animated film being 2004’s Home on the Range (Will Finn and John Sanford). Similarly Aardman Animations, which built its reputation on stop-motion films such as the Wallace and Gromit shorts, released its first computer-animated feature in 2006, Flushed Away (David Bowers and Sam Fell).
three fold question: Is it possible to animate a traditional, hand-drawn film in Ireland that maintains a national interest and succeeds at the box office? As if anticipating such concerns The Secret of Kells (Tomm Moore, 2009) answers these questions – Yes, Yes and time will tell.

The Secret of Kells, due for release in March 2009, is the first feature length production from Kilkenny-based animation studio Cartoon Saloon. The company was founded in 2000 by Ballyfermot College graduates Tomm Moore, Paul Young, Ross Murray and Nora Twomey, and has since secured a reputation as a world-class production company through the international success of its Skunk Fu! television series.

Directed by Kilkenny-native Moore, The Secret of Kells features the voices of Brendan Gleeson and Mick Lally, with music provided by Irish folk group Kíla. Like Niko & the Way to the Stars, The Secret of Kells is a co-production, which sees Cartoon Saloon partnering with Les Armateurs in France and Vivi Film in Belgium. However in a change to the usual strategy, the majority of The Secret of Kells’ key animation took place in Ireland, with 35 animators working from Cartoon Saloon at the peak of production. Also unusual for the field, is the film’s rejection of CGI in favour of hand-drawn animation, allowing The Secret of Kells to adopt a highly-stylised and intricate look.

Yet, The Secret of Kells’ Irish interest extends far beyond the nationality of the person putting pen to paper or the geography of its studios. Taking its inspiration from what is considered Ireland’s greatest national treasure; The Secret of Kells tells the story of Brendan, a 12 year-old boy living with his uncle, the Abbot (Brendan Gleeson), who strives to protect his monastery from Viking invaders by building an impenetrable wall. Brendan’s life is turned upside down by the arrival of Brother Aidan (Mick Lally), a survivor of a Viking strike on Iona Island and the protector of the yet-to-be completed Book of Kells, a manuscript whose detailed beauty is a testament to a way of life under attack.

It may be too much to see the film’s story of safeguarding a fading national artform from foreign invaders as an analogy for hand-drawn Irish animation in a global marketplace, but there is something commendable about the film’s adherence to a more traditional style employed in a national interest. Film academic Paul Wells notes that ‘many studios worldwide have insisted upon using their own indigenous fine arts traditions, mythologies and cultural imperatives in order to differentiate their own work from what may be regarded as a diluted form of American artistic and cultural imperialism’. In this vein, The Secret of Kells is far removed from the textured polygons of computer animation, telling its story in curves and swirls that mirror the insular style of the eponymous book, and makes one nostalgic for the more ornate designs of pre-Euro Irish currency.

Given the inevitable difficulties Irish animated features face competing in a global box-office dominated by pixel-powered American productions with mammoth budgets, The Secret of Kells suggests an alternative route. In looking to the past for its style and inwards for its inspiration, The Secret of Kells does not invite unfavourable comparisons with overseas ventures, allowing it to achieve successes and failures all of its own. It will be up to the box office to see whether this film becomes a standalone achievement, or the future tactic of Irish animated feature production.

In a 2007 report submitted to international economic consultants Indecon by the Irish Film Board, it was noted that, ‘The Irish animation sector has recently established itself as a credible international player’. The report cites Magma Films and Cartoon Saloon alongside other Irish producers of animated content Jam Media, Monster, Boulder Media, Kavaleer and Brown Bag as the key practitioners of the form. The same report also noted that ‘There lies great potential to build a real “industry” in Irish animation’ – an assessment that is borne out in

the early promise of *The Secret of Kells* and echoed by its producer Paul Young, ‘the talent and the will is here’.14 Perhaps sometime in the near-future, the film representing Ireland at the Academy Awards will come from drawing on a national identity.15

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14. From an interview with *Secret of Kells* producer and Cartoon Saloon founder Paul Young, January 19, 2009

15. The growing confidence in animation within the Irish film industry is further testified by the Screen Director’s Guild of Ireland choosing *The Secret of Kells*, above live-action features, as the 2008 Directors Finders Series Awards winner. The award sees the winning film given an industry screening in L.A., and is an important platform for securing US distribution. Recent winners of the award include John Carney’s *Once*.

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