Song of the Sea (Tomm Moore 2014)

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Swan Song: Lamenting Ireland’s Traditional Past in Song of the Sea (Tomm Moore 2014)

In the 2008 Irish Film and Television Review for this journal I used the release of Tomm Moore’s The Secret of Kells to chart animation’s position within Irish national cinema. In
concluding the review I suggested that, “Perhaps sometime in the near-future, the film representing Ireland at the Academy Awards will come from drawing on a national identity” (Burke 2009: 191). These comments seemed prescient just a year later when The Secret of Kells received an Academy Award nomination for Best Animated Feature. However further predictions proved less accurate with the review proposing that Tomm Moore’s film, alongside the release of Magma Films’ Niko & the Way to the Stars (Hegner and Juusonen 2008), “found the Irish film industry on the cusp of achieving a consistent level of Irish animated feature production” (Burke 2009: 187). Sustained production of Irish animated features has not been realised in the intervening years, although a number of animation companies have become market leaders in television.

JAM Media, which has offices in Ireland and the UK, expanded its short film Badly Drawn Roy (Shannon 2006) about Ireland’s only “living” animated character into the BAFTA Award-winning series Roy (2009-2015). Brown Bag Films achieved international hits in the pre-teen market producing animated shows like Doc McStuffins (2012- ) and Henry Hugglemonster (2013- ) for Disney Junior. Such was the success of the Dublin-based company, that Brown Bag Films was acquired by Canadian studio 9 Story Media Group in 2015 (discussed in the intro to this year’s Review). Cartoon Saloon, which had already produced the animated series Skunk Fu! (2007) prior to the release of The Secret of Kells, returned to television in 2015 with Puffin Rock about a pair of young puffins on the eponymous Island. Playfully narrated by Irish actor Chris O’Dowd the series is aimed at three to five year olds yet is realised in the same traditional animation that made The Secret of Kells a critical favourite.

To hedge my bets on the success of Irish animated features I offered the caveat in The Secret of Kells review that, “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” (190). Although The Secret of Kells did not find a wider audience, its critical, if not commercial,
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triumph has ensured that The Secret of Kells is not a singular success, with the 2015 release of Cartoon Saloon’s latest feature Song of the Sea. Moore describes Song of the Sea as a “spiritual follow up” (Powell and Brown n.d.: 4) to The Secret of Kells in that it embraces a hand-drawn aesthetic to tell a story based on Irish folklore, in particular selkies—mythological creatures who live as humans on land but on entering the sea they shed their human form and become seals.

The film opens on a storybook-like scene replete with a watercolour aesthetic. A heavily pregnant mother Bronach (Lisa Hannigan) is painting a selkie-themed mural on a nursery wall with her young son Ben (David Rawle). Ben’s father Conor (Brendan Gleeson), the local lighthouse keeper, checks on their progress just in time for Ben to explain to him (and the audience) the legend of the selkies. The fairytale opening is shattered by the apparent death of Bronach following the birth of Ben’s sister Saoirse. Cutting to six years later the film picks up on the family at their lighthouse home where the impact of Bronach’s death is still strongly felt. Conor has retreated behind his pain barely able to engage with his children, Ben openly torments his younger sister, while the imp-like Saoirse has yet to learn to speak. Yet, unbeknownst to Ben, Saoirse is the last of the selkies whose song is destined to return the fairies (or “Sidhe”) to their spiritual home. This destiny is scuppered when Ben’s city-dwelling Granny (Fionnula Flanagan) forces the children to move to Dublin. What follows is a road trip through an Irish countryside populated by fairy folk as Ben and Saoirse escape their Granny’s clutches in order to return home where the last of the selkies might fulfil her fate.

After the Medieval setting of The Secret of Kells, Moore, hoping to appeal to a wider audience, chose a more contemporary backdrop for Song of the Sea with the film inhabiting a pre-Celtic Tiger Ireland. The director also enlisted screenwriter Will Collins, whose under-seen first feature My Brothers (Fraser 2010), like Song of the Sea, was a 1980s-set road movie. While still primarily aimed at a younger audience, Moore and Collins have managed to
avoid the exposition-laden sequences that stalled The Secret of Kells, and crafted a narrative that builds pleasingly to a tense climax on the open sea. While parents may not find the same narrative meat of a Pixar film, the film’s stunning watercolour tableaux, which capture the changing light and subtle shades of the Irish countryside, are a joy for all. Borrowing a fantasy film trope familiar to anyone who has seen The Wizard Of Oz (Fleming 1939), Ben and Saoirse encounter mythological analogues of their friends and family on their journey voiced by reliable character actors. Jon Kenny infuses both Ferry Dan and the Great Seanchai with befuddled charm; Gleeson breathes life into the remote Conor and the giant Mac Lir whose heartbreak turned him into a stone island; while Fionnula Flanagan transforms her crotchety Granny into the villainous Macha, an owl-like menace who stalks the sibling’s every move. Appropriately for a film titled Song of the Sea, the score, composed by Bruno Coulais in collaboration with Irish folk group Kíla, rounds out the film’s traditional tone and atmosphere.

In his oft-cited article “The Concept of National Cinema” Andrew Higson notes “the politics of national cinema can be reduced to a marketing strategy”, (1989: 37). Indeed there was some scepticism when The Secret of Kells was released that its explicit “Irishness” was an attempt to gain the support of government bodies, with Maria O’Brien suggesting that the film’s focus on folklore rather than organised religion might be seen as, “exploitation of Irish myths to obtain funding within Ireland” (2011: 34). However, Moore responded to the dominance of national themes in his work by explaining, “This is the unique viewpoint I feel I can bring to the animation medium. I don’t rule out eventually making a comedy set in outer space or something like that, but for now I am exploring the culture I grew up in” (Powell and Brown 5). Indeed, since his early Irish language comics An Sclábháí (“The Slave” 2001) and An Teachtaire (“The Messenger” 2003), which told the story of St. Patrick, Moore has maintained an interest in depicting Irish subjects. Song of the Sea continues that trend from the film’s use of Celtic mythology to its eagerness to flit between Irish and English without explanation. This cultural specificity has enabled the film to stand out in a form of
filmmaking crowded by ambiguously set capers.

Similarly Moore rejects the realism that dominates most animated features, a practice Paul Wells traces back to Walt Disney, “Even though Disney dealt with what was a predominantly abstract form, he insisted on verisimilitude in his characters, contexts and narratives” (1998: 23). As in The Secret of Kells, Moore embraces the expressivity of the animated form realising the world of Song of the Sea in an intricate patchwork of icons with disarming graphic simplicity – this is a film in which emotions are unapologetically represented by rainbows and thunderclouds. These countervailing tendencies – national specificity and expressionistic animation – contributed to the film’s rave reviews and another Best Animated Feature Academy Award nomination, even while it struggled to find a cinema audience.³

In Understanding Animation Wells suggests that “it may be claimed that animation is one of the most auteurist mediums available to the film-maker” (1998: 245) in that the handcrafted nature of the form allows the filmmaker to more deeply penetrate a topic without the limitations imposed by live action. Yet, despite the rich potential of the form, the themes Moore tackles are very familiar. Martin McLoone noted that at the height of the Celtic Tiger Ireland found “itself in the position of selling itself abroad as both a dynamic and modern economy with a young, highly skilled and energetic population and as a thinly populated rural country with beautiful unspoilt scenery steeped in tradition and removed from the bustle of a busy world” (2000: 92). Moore engages with this tension between progress and the past explaining that Song of the Sea stemmed from a “trip to the West coast and my nostalgia for the pre-Celtic Tiger’ Ireland” (Powell and Brown n.d.: 5). Using the structure of the road movie, Moore illustrates this theme through an urban/rural divide with Dublin depicted as a Dickensian slum replete with impenetrable fog and burnt out cars while the closer the protagonists get to their coastal destination the more lush and magical their adventures become. Identifying this convention in Irish cinema McLoone summarises,
“We have seen how Irish cultural nationalism was constructed, among other things, on an opposition between the country and the city. In its clearest form this opposition posited the traditional Gaelic purity of Ireland’s western seaboard and islands against the corruption of Irish identity epitomised by the city of Dublin, the ‘strumpet city’ that had prostituted itself to foreign cultural influence” (2000: 201). Unsurprisingly, as a traditional animator in a digital world, Moore gravitates towards stories of artists trying to keep ritual alive: illuminated manuscripts in The Secret of Kells and the stories and songs of his most recent work. In doing so his films maintain a cultural nationalist dichotomy of the “further away from Dublin, the closer one got to the real Ireland” (McLoone 2000: 201).

Song of the Sea finds many thematic and narrative parallels with earlier mythologically-inflected Irish family films such as Into the West (Newell 1992) and The Secret of Roan Inish (Sayles 1994). Into the West follows a pair of young sibling’s efforts to escape Dublin on a (possibly magic) white horse and reach Ireland’s west coast. Like Song of the Sea, the film concludes on the coast where the siblings reconcile with their widowed father and are briefly reunited with their deceased mother who has taken the form of a mythological animal. The Secret of Roan Inish focuses on a young girl, Jeni, from the city who is sent to live with her grandparents on the Irish west coast by her recently widowed father who is unable to care for her. Upon arriving at her grandparent’s home Jeni learns the family secret that her younger brother was swept away and raised by a selkie. Ruth Barton argues that the focus on children in magic realist films Into the West and The Secret of Roan Inish further reinforces cultural nationalist sentiment as it “indicates these films’ failure to break with the paradigms of colonial representation with its infantilising tendencies” (2004: 150), a view that might also be applied to the fairy-like children and pastoral nostalgia of Song of the Sea. Yet, Moore goes some way towards reconciling this tension between progress and the past in the film’s climax in which Saoirse sings her song “to send the fairies home across the sea”, prompting Bronach to reappear to her family as a white selkie. Saoirse is given the option to continue onto the fairy world with her mother or stay and give up her
selkie coat; she decides to stay. As the fairies begin to leave, taking with them the magic of Ireland’s folkloric tradition, Bronach advises Ben to “remember me in your stories and in your songs”. In the film’s coda the reconciled family (Ben, Saoirse, Conor, and Granny) is shown to be much more content without the ever-present reminders of their personal and cultural past. These traditions, while no longer tenable, are not forgotten, but are maintained through story, song, and, as Moore demonstrates, cinema.

1. Prior to Puffin Rock Cartoon Saloon had collaborated with Chris O’Dowd on Moone Boy, with the company providing the title sequence and animated interludes for O’Dowd’s coming-of-age sitcom. [ ]

2. According to box office analysis website The Numbers, The Secret of Kells grossed US$3,582,797 internationally ahead of a US$8,000,000 budget. While the film would have grossed significantly more through home video and streaming services it also only grossed €72,700 at the Irish box office (Hogan) with Moore reflecting ahead of the release of Song of the Sea that Irish people seemed sceptical about local releases, “There’s something at play where Irish people are doubtful if it is not from a big studio. There’s an embarrassment factor (over Irish films). If a Hollywood film is crap, you’ll just laugh it off” (McGreevy). In contrast to its modest box office, The Secret of Kells was a critical success holding a 91% approval rating on the review aggregator site Rotten Tomatoes. [ ]

3. Song of the Sea was nominated for Best Animated Feature at the 87th Academy Awards alongside The Boxtrolls (Stacchi and Annable 2014), How to Train Your Dragon 2 (DeBlois 2014), The Tale of the Princess Kaguya (Takahata 2014) and eventual winner Big Hero 6 (Hall and Williams 2014). Song of the Sea holds a 99% approval on the review aggregator site Rotten Tomatoes, but, according to box office analysis website The Numbers, the film only grossed US $1,579,826 in cinemas internationally. [ ]

4. Appropriately the statue of Molly Malone, the street hawker often depicted as a prostitute (Dolby), is one of the few landmarks visible in Moore’s Dublin. [ ]
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