

# IRISH ANIMATION AND RADICAL MEMORY

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In *Transformations in Irish Culture* (1996), Luke Gibbons considers the transformative potentials of modern media and technologies such as television and how they have acted upon expressions of indigenous Irish culture. According to Gibbons, these potentials are particularly evident in the use of American TV genres by indigenous Irish producers in their depiction of contemporary Irish society. Gibbons also argues that contact between external modern media forms and internal indigenous Irish culture reactivates latent radical potentials inherent in traditional culture, which then resurface to problematise the symbolic expression of Irish modernity. Gibbons states:

Tradition itself may often have a transformative impact, particularly if it activates muted voices from the historical past [...] It is in this context that I argue, in relation to the influence of television on Irish society, that it was home-produced programmes, not imported products, that posed the greatest challenge to taboo areas in Irish society. These programmes often borrowed heavily from formats and genres evolved elsewhere [...] and this exposure to external forms was vital to their success [...] the innovative thrust of these programmes did not entail a blanket repudiation of "traditional" or national values, but rather allowed them to re-work the specificity of Irish culture. (Gibbons 4)

In his treatment of Gibbons' argument, Martin McLoone describes this re-emergence of radical elements of indigenous culture as a "radical memory" and furthermore points out how Gibbons identifies similar processes at play in the Modernist writing of Joyce and Beckett (McLoone 104-105).

This article will first consider animation as a Modernist art form using a particularly American heritage in an Irish context, something that suggests a similar awakening of a radical indigenous tradition in the work of contemporary Irish animators. Since this radical memory is generated through a tension between tradition and modernity, it will also be explored by addressing the relationship between tradition as a localised memory and modern Ireland as a place in an increasingly globalised world. This contact between the local and the global and the potential liberating results of cultural contact for expressions of contemporary Irishness will be discussed in relation to a case study of Brown Bag Films' animated short film *Give Up Yer Aul Sins* (2001).

One of the more important concepts of commercial animation, in terms of the role it plays in representing contemporary culture, is its existence as an essentially Modernist and modernising art form relying on a particularly strong American heritage. Animation emerged as a proto-cinema in the nineteenth century and established itself alongside live-action cinema at the turn of the twentieth century with films such as Stuart Blackton's *Haunted Hotel* (1907) and Emile Cohl's *Fantasmagorie* (1908). Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein saw in early Disney cartoons a primal "plas-

maticness," a primordial energy that represented life's potential resistance to the regulated Fordist<sup>1</sup> society of America, maintaining that

in a country and social order with such a mercilessly standardized and mechanically measured existence, which is difficult to call life, the sight of such "omnipotence" (that is, the ability to become "whatever you wish"), cannot but hold a sharp degree of attractiveness. This is as true for the United States as it is for the petrified canons of world-outlook, art and philosophy of eighteenth century Japan. (5)

Similarly, Paul Wells makes use of Frederick Karl's division of Modernism into three distinct types: radical, conservative, and moderate (Wells 27), to theorise animation as a potentially radical form of Modernist representation that addresses concerns of human agency in an industrial, Modernist period. Wells points out:

Animation was a language by which the "ephemeral" understanding of the Modern could be both philosophically suggested and literally depicted. The early animators were essentially taking the codes and conventions of the comic strip, vaudevillian performance, perspective drawing and observational modes of realist representation, and re-designing a form. (26)

During the early twentieth century the Western society most representative of Modernist conditions was, as suggested by Eisenstein, that of the United States. Thus Donald Crafton notes how early animation in Europe was known as "le mouvement américain" (16) being closely associated with American cultural production.

The industrially produced Disney film was to become such a dominant presence that it turned into an orthodoxy against which other animated forms defined themselves as reactionary or experimental, with fine-art practices invested in their aesthetics. As a result a binary opposition developed in animation discourses between the American commercial form, epitomised by Disney, and the European auteurist form, exemplified by the productions of European filmmakers such as Oscar Fischinger and Berthold Bartosch (see Halas & Manvel 14-15).

So where does Irish animation fit into this debate? Irish animation finds itself in the borderland between the two and might signify an Irish culture negotiating a path be-

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1 American entrepreneur and industrialist Henry Ford embraced highly regulated and standardised assembly-line methods in his production of automobiles in the early twentieth century. These manufacturing methods can be seen as emerging alongside the development of a capitalist economic system, from the mechanisation of labour brought about by the Industrial Revolution. Theorists such as Marx and Lukács have regarded the mechanisation of work processes that resulted in the division of labour as detrimental to human social relations, and it is from such conditions that there emerges an experience of the modern as regulated, fragmented, contingent, and having a "dominant urban context" (Stangos 8). These experiences are seen as being reflected in the aesthetic productions of the period, as explained by Chris Barker: "The process by which industrialization, capitalism, surveillance and the nation-state emerged we may call 'modernization.' 'Modernism' refers to the human cultural forms bound up with this modernization" (134). The fragmented production processes used by Ford in manufacturing are reproduced in social processes and thereby arguably produce what might be called a "Fordist" society.

tween a homogenising American globalism and a heterogeneous European socio-cultural individualism, resulting in what might indeed be a "new" Ireland.

Irish animation began with James Horgan's two-minute film of Youghal's clock gate tower. This film is dated around 1910, making it contemporary with Stuart Blackton's *Humourous Phases of Funny Faces* (1906), often lauded as the first animated film ever produced (see Maltin 2). The following decades were, however, less prolific, high points being Gunter Wolf's TV commercials in the 1960s and the work of Aidan Hickey and Quin Films in the 70s and 80s, culminating in Hickey's award at the Anney Animation Festival for his film *An Inside Job* (1987) (see Horgan 10).

A defining point in the development of the current industry occurred in the late 1980s when the Don Bluth studio, attracted by tax incentives offered by the Irish government's Industrial Development Authority (IDA), relocated the hub of its operations to Dublin. The terms under which Bluth established a facility<sup>2</sup> in Ireland were reported at the time by Brendan McGrath, who explains:

The company set up in Balgriffin in September last year with an original job target of 120, but this major expansion follows the successful launch of a full length feature film "An American Tail" [...] The expansion is being supported under the IDA's International Services Programme and this support will include assistance in the training of artistic staff by a group of Sullivan staff who are moving to Ireland. Sullivan has agreed with the IDA that the Balgriffin operation will be a fully integrated unit including key activities such as creative design as well as film production [...] The IDA has agreed to fund extensively the specialist training programme in classical film animation which is not currently done in Ireland [...] Sullivan Studios was approved for £ 2.2 million in capital and employment grants by the IDA for the first stage of the project [...]

Don Bluth was an ex-Disney animator who had grown disillusioned by the quality of productions in the studio during the 1970s and as a result established his own studio in an attempt to revitalise the "Golden Era" of animation production, which he felt was best represented by films such as *Pinnocchio* (1941), *Bambi* (1942), and *Peter Pan* (1953). Discussing their departure from Disney in 1979, Bluth's long-time producer Gary Goldman accounts for the decline of filmmaking at the studio:

The stories at Disney were getting young – younger than we wanted to go [...] And Walt Disney wasn't there any more – it was a committee approach to making movies. When you watch *Bambi*, there's bite: it tells you something about the world. But *The Fox and the Hound* was ho-hum – baby fodder, pabulum. You want to move someone in a film to a point that it will change their life. Our main reasons for leaving though, were that the animation had become minimal – they had eliminated things like shadows, rays of sunlight, smoke. Disney's special effects department was less than five people by the time we resigned. (qtd. in Johnston)

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2 Bluth, with the financial help of American businessman Morris Sullivan, established a studio in Ireland which was initially known as the Sullivan Bluth Studio. However, McGrath in his article mistakenly calls the facility Sullivan Studios.

With this focus on recapturing the quality of early Disney feature films, Bluth's arrival in Ireland brought with it an animation style with a strong American heritage and a realist aesthetic.

The animation scene in Ireland went from being a small cottage industry, more attuned to independent European cinema, to embracing a large-scale industrialised and commercial American model. The sheer scale of this move is suggested by Goldman, who states:

We didn't leave America, we took America with us. We took 87 artists, their families, 17 dogs and cats, and moved everybody to Ireland, where we proceeded to teach the talented Irish artists how to deal with what we do. Within a year and a half we were 400 strong. We were the largest animation studio in Europe. (qtd. in Ward & Smith)

Not only did the presence of such a large commercial studio have a profound effect on the professional standards of animation in the country, but it also brought with it the creative impetus and financial interest to establish animation courses designed to produce future employees trained in the production methods and visual style of an American studio. The significance of the American studio as a graduate employer was pointed out by Jerome Morrissey, principal at Ballyfermot College of Further Education (BCFE<sup>3</sup>), one of the foremost animation schools at the time: "We have the best resources of all here – young people with artistic talent and an interest in the area. Parents can now encourage their children to pursue an artistic course in college, because there are loads of jobs there" (qtd. in Foster). Before the arrival of Bluth there was very little interest in animation education, except for night courses run by American animator Harry Hess at the National College of Art and Design. After Bluth's arrival two main animation courses emerged: the first was situated at BCFE, which, as suggested above, with its strong connection to the Bluth studio catered for the commercial American studio process. The second was an alternative course established at the Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology (IADT), which came to be associated with the auteurist European style of animation, due in part to an interdisciplinary approach with its Visual Communications Diploma course.<sup>4</sup>

Irish animation, like its live-action counterpart, has in the past been dominated by foreign companies, usually American or British, using Irish resources to make their own films, with little support for indigenous Irish productions.<sup>5</sup> What support there was

3 BCFE was known at the time as Ballyfermot Senior College and has since re-branded its animation courses as "The Irish School of Animation."

4 Maeve Clancy points out the unusual split between animation education in Ireland, which exposed students to both commercial and fine-art based forms of animation production.

5 The dominance of foreign film industries over indigenous Irish film production is the main polemic in Kevin Rockett, Luke Gibbons, and John Hill's seminal book *Cinema and Ireland* (1987). In particular, Rockett's assessment of the Ardmore film studio illustrates the institutionalised attitude towards film production in Ireland, which prefers to attract foreign industry rather than support its indigenous filmmakers (95-126).

had come from the European Union's MEDIA project established to counter the dominance of American Hollywood productions in European cinemas (see McLoone 114). It is only since the advent of the second Irish Film Board in 1993 that resources such as Irish Flash, Frameworks and Short Short schemes have been directed to support indigenous animation productions, as part of CEO Rod Stoneman's concept of creating "market-responsive" auteurs (see Stoneman).

Part of the tension that informs the contemporary Irish animated text is derived from its genesis during the Bluth period, but texts are also affected by the necessity for adaptation and engagement with European partners in order to sustain film production in a global marketplace. It was, however, the initial investment, provided and inspired by the Bluth studio, that led to rapid modernisation in animation techniques and advancements in animation education. When the studio finally collapsed in 1995, it left behind a highly skilled workforce that was to build an independent industry, free to represent issues of a new, more confident and cosmopolitan Irish identity emerging at the turn of the millennium.

Arguably the emergence of an independent Irish animation industry in the 1990s is analogous to the emergence of a so-called "new" Ireland under the conditions of the Celtic Tiger economy, a point taken up by Maeve Connolly in her alignment of contemporary Irish animation with entrepreneurial initiatives in a new, more affluent Irish society:

During the 1990s, however, artisanal experimentation has given way to new forms of entrepreneurialism [...] This transformation of indigenous animation parallels other developments within film and the arts, and can be considered within the context of a broader process of cultural and economic "reinvention." (Connolly 84)

If one is to herald the emergence of a new and reinvented Ireland, then one must simultaneously consider the passing of an old Ireland. If one looks at how Raymond Williams considers the representation of places, with urban space as the modern and futuristic and rural space as a pre-modern past, then a new Ireland might be seen as an essentially urban, cosmopolitan place and an old Ireland as a rural place or a rural memory that resurfaces as a radical memory to disrupt this new urban modernity, which might be seen as a modernity being imposed from an external source.

Raymond Williams also illustrates a certain relationship between memory and place:

It is significant that the common image of the country is now an image of the past, and the common image of the city an image of the future. That leaves, if we isolate them, an undefined present. The pull of the idea of the country is towards old ways, human ways, natural ways. The pull of the idea of the city is towards progress, modernisation, development. (297)

The question is, however: might it also be possible to see memory as place? It is interesting then to consider how this relationship might be disrupted and how ideas of memory might be separated from place by the processes of globalisation. This dichotomy of rural and urban places points to a tension between the traditional and the modern that still lingers in contemporary Irish culture. If, in terms of the contemporary

Irish animation industry, the animated form can be read as a technological and Modernist art-form, then its depictions of Irish memory as a localised place can be deemed to be disrupted by a Modernist aesthetic that is essentially global (and arguably American).

As Gibbons observes, "Ireland is a First World country but with a Third World memory" (3), ascribing modernity to concepts of an Irish "place," while deeming its cultural memory to be rural and underdeveloped. McLoone, writing in relation to representations of the Irish in contemporary Irish cinema, notes how for much of the twentieth century Irish national identity was profoundly effected by a conservative cultural nationalism, and this conservatism was inherited from the various cultural revivals at the turn of the previous century. In his treatment of Irish representations in live-action film, McLoone considers how the quest for an Irish cultural nationalism is underpinned by a debate between modernity and tradition, and Irish live-action cinema takes this modernity/tradition binary as one of its themes. As McLoone points out,

the emphasis on history has inevitably resulted in the valorisation of tradition and the past at the expense of the new and the modern, giving Irish nationalism a paradoxical radical conservatism [...] the literature on nationalism in general has stressed that it is essentially a process of modernisation, an inevitable path towards economic development that has been characteristic of capitalist development universally [...]. The central dialectic here is that between tradition and modernity and is a recurring theme in Irish cinema [...]. (13)

The ideological use of a mythical past and the invoking of a common ancestry and memory are not particular to Ireland. The engagement of a people's memory allied to acts of imagination is a common strategy in creating a dominant national hegemony. In *Imagined Communities* (1991) Benedict Anderson argues that the concept of the "nation" is a modernist construct stemming from the values of the Enlightenment; it is an act of imagination that allows disparate people to believe themselves as belonging to a greater unified entity (see Anderson 6-7). As discussed by Richard Kearney in *Postnationalist Ireland* (1997), one of the aspects of modern nationhood is its connection to a particular geographical territory, an actual physical place occupied by the people (see Kearney 3). It is the communal memory of people connected to a particular place that gives rise to distinct, modern nations.

Representing a new Ireland, therefore, might question the old Ireland in two ways: firstly, it might challenge the use of memory in creating a conservative nationalist hegemony, and, secondly, it might question the legitimacy of discrete territorial and cultural boundaries in an increasingly globalised world.

Writing about the effects of globalisation on localised cultures, Arjun Appadurai disconnects cultural memory from its containment within national borders; the past thus becomes a storehouse of cultural scenarios that might be adopted in any place at any time. For example, considering the popularity of American music of the 1950s in contemporary Filipino culture, Appadurai observes how one country's past may re-emerge as another country's present (see Appadurai 326). In a globalised world cul-

tural memory can become separated from place, but also it is not necessarily confined to the past; memory can literally become a new place. Appadurai states: "I would like to suggest that the apparent increasing substitutability of whole periods and postures for one another, in the cultural styles of advanced capitalism, is tied to larger global forces, which have done much to show [...] that the past is usually another country" (327). If one separates Irish cultural memory from Irish territorial space, it becomes just another scenario amongst others in a global context; this allows it to be reactivated not as an atavistic return to the past, but as a modern critique of the present, as a radical memory.

Just as an old Ireland was dominated by a conservative cultural nationalism, with its media falling under the influence of Anglo-American models of modernity, then representations of a new Ireland must necessarily produce a critique of the old. Animation as a modernist and potentially radical form of representation can facilitate this questioning through its representations of place and memory, and a close textual reading of Brown Bag Films' *Give Up Yer Aul Sins* (2001) might serve to illustrate some of the issues involved in such a representation.

*Give up Yer Aul Sins* was made at the Brown Bag Films animation studio in Dublin and was produced and directed by Cathal Gaffney, Darragh O'Connell, and Alan Shannon, all of whom were former students at BCFE and trained in commercial animation practices associated with the Bluth studio. Ultimately *Give Up yer Aul Sins* questions the role of Catholic teaching in a modern, albeit romanticised urban Ireland. It does this by splitting the narrative between place and memory; the place is urban Dublin, and the memory is a child's retelling of a Biblical story in fantastical rural terms which are not culturally identifiable with modern Irish space. This splitting of place from memory can be read as a result of globalisation, but it is also a sign of a new Irish identity capable of critically engaging with the processes of its own formation.

Ireland's cultural nationalism in the last century was informed by a tension between tradition and modernity. The Modernist writing of Joyce and Beckett provided a valuable critique of the Celtic revival's mythologising of the past. In the case of *Give Up Yer Aul Sins*, animation operating as a Modernist and a modernising art-form serves a similar demythologising role, calling into question the accuracy of memory and illustrating the subjective nature of the remembering process, which is infused with the particularities of a certain place. Here, the mythology of the Christian story is disturbed by an urban Dublin vernacular, and Catholic myth is rendered as a comic satire by the innate innocence associated with the animated form.

*Give Up yer Aul Sins* is a text heavily invested in evoking a sense of childhood memory and a romanticised urban space. The tension between tradition and modernity, or what might equally be called a discrete national territory and a postnational global culture, is articulated in both the form and the narrative content of the film. It is a hybrid text; its soundtrack is taken from actual recordings made in the Dublin of the 1960s by schoolchildren telling Bible stories. The use of this soundtrack invokes an

oral storytelling tradition, as well as being a form of documentary when placed in its social context. If it is possible to see the Irish Republic of the twentieth century in postcolonial terms and, more specifically, the new Ireland of the twenty-first century as a bourgeois neo-colony dominated by neo-colonial global capital,<sup>6</sup> then the use of an oral storytelling soundtrack poses an alternative method of transmitting communal memory, thereby problematising the televisual media of the metropolitan centre.

This recorded dialogue, taken from a real historical past, is overlaid with the modernist aesthetic of animation, and through this process is turned from documented memory to contemporary fantasy. Thus, the memory of a traditional past and the lived reality of an urban modernity are collapsed together in the animated form, using childhood innocence to engage adult irony. A once naïve Irish culture is now mature enough to evaluate and critically engage with its own past.

The film's split narrative form also illustrates the tension between tradition and modernity. The first narrative concerns children in an inner-city school being asked to tell Bible stories to a television crew. The representation of place here is a key element; the narrative is noticeably urban: there are establishing shots of a romanticised Dublin city in the opening sequence. The presence of a TV crew with camera and microphones and the simulated unsteadiness of the camera working to suggest a real authorial presence, all point to a sense of modernity (and arguably a greater sense of a "real" space). The second narrative is the Bible story itself, depicted as essentially rural rather than urban. It is more fantastical in its realisation, it does not call attention to its own artifice. There are no depictions of technological filmmaking apparatus such as a camera or a microphone, neither are there any simulated camera moves to suggest the presence of a filmmaker. In the contrast between these two narratives, the modern Irish identity is inscribed as a self-consciousness articulated through modern media such as television, whereas the imagined myth that constitutes an old cultural nationalism is regarded as a divinely-inspired meta-narrative like the Bible. This myth of a communal memory, which also plays on stereotypes of the Irish as unsophisticated, childish, and dominated by the Catholic clergy, is rendered through the prism of modernity as a naïve and fanciful story.

What we see is an urban space representing rational secular modernity and a rural space as atavistic and childish memory. The animated art-form can equally be seen as modernist, borrowed from a global and American culture, whereas the act of oral storytelling can be seen as local, traditional, and Irish.

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6 Denis O'Hearn, in his assessment of Ireland's Celtic Tiger economy, illustrates its dependency on foreign investment, thereby suggesting Ireland's position as a neo-colony dominated by foreign capital. He states: "Clearly, rapidly rising dependence on foreign investment is the most salient feature of Irish tigerhood. It is barely an exaggeration, then, to say that the Irish tiger economy boils down to a few American corporations in computers and pharmaceuticals" (O'Hearn, 73).



This is where we locate a film like *Give Up Yer Aul Sins*. This film is the product of an industry that once existed on the periphery of an American animation history and is now seeking to re-assert itself as the subject of its own discourse. It is a text that uses the techniques gleaned from its American animation heritage to articulate a new Irish consciousness in an age of postnationalist globalisation. Its depiction of memory and place is an integral part of its process of enunciation.

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