

## NEW MEDIA STUDIES

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**STUDENT NUMBER:** N00211061

**YEAR:** 4

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## **Tomm Moore as an auteur of Irish Animation – Critical Analysis**

This essay is one of two parts of my final year project, drawing primarily on Cartoon Saloon's Irish folklore trilogy. The trilogy includes *The Secret of Kells*, (2008) *Song of the Sea* (2014) and *Wolfwalkers* (2022).<sup>1 2 3</sup> This project aims to highlight the authenticity of Cartoon Saloon's directorial style as an indigenous Irish Animation studio and the role they play in representing and reinventing Irish mythology, folklore, and history. This essay is directly concerned with director Tomm Moore, of Cartoon Saloon as an auteur of Irish Animation.

## **Cartoon Saloon and the Animation Industry**

Cartoon Saloon was established in Kilkenny in 1999, by Tomm Moore, Nóra Twomey, and Paul Young, who were former college associates in the country's first animation course at Ballyfermot College of Further Education, Dublin.<sup>4</sup> At that time, Ireland was experiencing a renaissance in film with the establishment of Fís Éireann, formerly known as Bord Scannán na hÉireann (Irish Film Board Act 1980).<sup>5</sup> These young filmmakers and animators worked together creating a studio that now employs over three hundred creatives, collectively working towards the innovative future of animation. Meriting a three-time Golden Globe award, Emmy and BAFTA nomination, the studio gained international status fast.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tomm Moore, Nóra Twomey, *The Secret of Kells* (Ireland: Cartoon Saloon in association with Les Armateurs, Vivi Film, France 2 Cinéma, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Tomm Moore, *Song of the Sea* (Ireland: Cartoon Saloon in association with SF-Produktion, StudioCanal UK, Haut et Court, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Tomm Moore, Ross Stewart, *Wolfwalkers* (United Kingdom: Cartoon Saloon in association with Melusine Productions, Dentsu Entertainment USA, SIF 309 Film Music, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> 'Cartoon Saloon - Irish Animation Studio,' Cartoon Saloon, <https://www.cartoonsaloon.ie/>

<sup>5</sup> 'About Us,' Fís Éireann/ Screen Ireland. <https://www.screenireland.ie/about/about-fis-eireann-screen-ireland>

<sup>6</sup> 'Cartoon Saloon - Irish Animation Studio,' *Cartoon Saloon*, <https://www.cartoonsaloon.ie/>

International collaboration began to take place between Irish artists and filmmakers and larger industrial firms, and with Ireland's positive tax incentives, the country becomes the most favourable location in Europe to develop an animation industry. Naturally, the industry began to grow rapidly and today, there are up to forty-four leading studios in the country.<sup>7</sup>

Animation as an industry arrived in Ireland in the late 1970's with Don Bluth, American filmmaker, and former Disney animator. Aside from being an English-speaking country, Ireland's government were awarding grants and initiatives to promote film and animation in Ireland at the time.<sup>8</sup> In 1979, 'Don Bluth Productions' was established, a catalyst of change in Ireland's history of animation. Ireland has deep historic connection to America and American culture due to the mass emigration of the 1800s and Irish tax incentives which were highly appealing for U.S. investors, as discussed with Disney's Don Bluth's animation studio.

Later, the Irish animation industry begin to incorporate more generic, family friendly productions such as *Doc McStuffins* (2012) and *Octonauts* (2010), with less culturally specific narratives, to cater for global audiences.<sup>9</sup> <sup>10</sup> Cartoon Saloon branch out with inspiration from international cultures and studios, such as *The Breadwinner* (2018), directed by Nóra Twomey and co-produced by Canada's Aircraft Pictures, Luxembourg's Melusine Productions and in association with Jolie Pas Productions.<sup>11</sup> <sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> 'About,' *Animation Ireland*, <https://animationireland.com>

<sup>8</sup> 'Opportunities for Ireland in the Media Sector,' *Enterprise Ireland*, (Archived PDF: 1999), pp. 30–31.

<sup>9</sup> Chris Nee, *Doc McStuffins* (Ireland: Sparky Animation, DQ Entertainment, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> Darragh O'Connell, *Octonauts* (Ireland: Brown Bag films, Silvergate Media, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Nóra Twomey, *The Breadwinner*, (Ireland: Cartoon Saloon in association with Aircraft Pictures Canada, Melusine Productions Luxembourg, Jolie Pas Productions, 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Aircraft Pictures Canada, *The Breadwinner: Official Trailer*, <https://www.aircraftpictures.com/the-breadwinner>

Another notable international production of Cartoon Saloon is *Puffin Rock* (2015), an animated series for young children.<sup>13</sup> Now being broadcasted worldwide, TenCent streams from just China alone amount to one hundred million views.<sup>14</sup> This reflects the heavy collaboration between different animation and production companies globally and demonstrates how Cartoon Saloon straddles both national and international animation markets with ease. Discovering the world of European animation co-production in Ireland came to surface through conventions such as ‘Cartoon Movie’ (a French co-production forum for pitching animated feature films) and ‘enables what Moore calls independent, [...] art house animated films for families.’<sup>15</sup>

The acceleration of the development of animation came with technological advancements, making animation a cheaper, less time-consuming industry. Now, with the new use of massive teams with delegated responsibility for the production, CGI, specialists and colourists, the landscape of animation film has been altered further. These productions often have higher budgets, higher volume of works, producing more life-like 3D animation, with ‘realist’ seamless, movement. However, Cartoon Saloon remained loyal to traditional, authentic practises of hand drawn animated sketching, using lots of linework, in a two-dimensional graphic. Studio co-founder, Tomm Moore, emphasises how extensive and collaborative the process of animation is, naturally, due to their detailed hand drawn approach in Cartoon Saloon. For example, *Song of the Sea* needed approximately 67,680 drawings as a

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<sup>13</sup> Tomm Moore, Paul Young, Lily Bernard, *Puffin Rock* (Ireland: Cartoon Saloon in association with Dog Ears and Penguin Books, 2015).

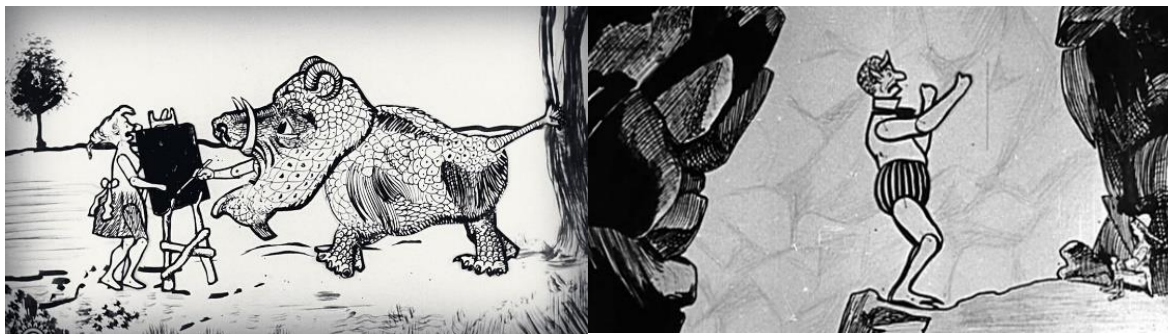
<sup>14</sup> ‘Get Ready for a New Puffin Rock Adventure – This Time It’s a Movie!’, *Animation Ireland*, (2019). <https://animationireland.com/get-ready-for-a-new-puffin-rock-adventure-this-time-its-a-movie/>

<sup>15</sup> Jamie Lang, ‘Watch Cartoon Saloon’s Founders Celebrate 25 Years In Anecdote-Filled Q&A’, (Cartoon Brew: 2024). <https://www.cartoonbrew.com/studios/cartoon-saloon-founders-celebrate-25-years-in-an-anecdote-filled-qa-239166.html>

93-minute feature.<sup>16</sup> This hand drawn centred method, although more labour-intensive, was favoured by early French artisanal animators.<sup>17</sup>

### Auteurism and French Film Theory

Neupert argues that ‘French animators differentiate themselves from mainstream global practices by mimicking older artisan techniques,’ such as hand-drawn sketches and 2D style drawings to retain ‘auteurism’ in a national French style.<sup>18</sup>



For example, Émile Cohl uses flat fine line in the first ever animation film, *Fantasmagorie* (1908).<sup>19</sup> This hand drawn 2D style is reflected further in contemporary French film, for example in *L'Illusionniste* (2006) by French filmmaker Sylvain Chomet, proving Neupert's argument of artisanal techniques.<sup>20</sup>

However, it was not until after the second World War that French cinemas were flooded with foreign films, and critics began to analyse rethinking the role of a director and pay more attention to films of those Hollywood studios, acknowledging that directors in America did not have much control of the production.<sup>21</sup> Some then debated the notion of an auteur by connecting it closely with the French concept of ‘mise-en-scène,’ present in

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<sup>16</sup> Animation Masterclass with Cartoon Saloon, Two Tube RTÉ, (22 September 2015) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GWViWIM93g4>

<sup>17</sup> Richard Neupert, *French Animation History* (Wiley Blackwell, 2011) pp. 163.

<sup>18</sup> Neupert, pp. 97.

<sup>19</sup> Émile Cohl, *Fantasmagorie* (1908).

<sup>20</sup> Sylvain Chomet, *L'Illusionniste* (2006).

<sup>21</sup> Susan Hayward, *Cinema Studies; The Key Concepts*, (New York, Routledge, 2000) pp. 21.

Hollywood film, which leads to another identifying feature of Tomm Moore's auteurism, explored later in this essay.<sup>22</sup>

The notion of 'auteurism' derives from the birth of 'Avante Garde,' or French art cinema. Art Cinema refers to a 'type of European cinema that is experimental in technique and narrative.'<sup>23</sup> Further, art cinema traditionally 'produces low- to mid-budget films,' which were 'produced outside dominant cinema systems.'<sup>24</sup> The 'dominant cinema systems' refer to the Hollywood industry system model, which relies heavily on large teams and high budgets. French art cinema gave way to French New Wave, which was a new way of looking at film as critics began to examine cinema as an art form rather than an industry.<sup>25</sup> This movement took place in the 1950's with the establishment of French film magazine *Cahiers du Cinema* in April 1951 by André Bazin, Jacques Doniol-Valcroze, and Joseph-Marie Lo Duca.<sup>26</sup>

A key figure in the theory of 'auteurism' was French filmmaker François Truffaut, with his highly influential essay *Une certaine tendance du cinéma* (1954), published in *Cahiers du Cinema*, which is often referred to as the 'manifesto' for auteur theory.<sup>27</sup> French film critics began theorising the role of a director, in which the concept of an 'auteur' arose. By definition, the director is the 'author' of the film, reflecting their own creative vision into each film. This authorial rule over the text is sometimes critiqued because it erases the other highly valued roles in a production team.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Hayward, pp. 21.

<sup>23</sup> Hayward, pp. 16-17.

<sup>24</sup> Hayward, pp. 16.

<sup>25</sup> Hayward, pp. 20.

<sup>26</sup> Hayward, pp. 20-21.

<sup>27</sup> Hayward, pp.20.

<sup>28</sup> Hayward, pp. 387.

## Irish Film

Ruth Barton draws similarities ‘the French situation, the current generation of Irish animators creating Irish- themed films distinguishes their product by recreating an artisanal style and relying on art cinema traditions to identify their output.’<sup>29</sup> Irish art cinema is often distinguished by a thematic focus on grief, identity, history, and memory, while using poetic, contemplative style of storytelling. With recent feature films such as, *Arracht* (2019), *The Banshees of Inisherin* (2022) and *An Cailín Ciúin* (2022), are all relating somewhat to the themes stated above.<sup>30 31 32</sup>

Andrew Kavanagh of Kavaleer Productions argues that ‘Irish animation is a lot more literate, concerned with narrative and script. We do not write as animators; we write as filmmakers.’<sup>33</sup> This may be due to Ireland’s more recent, but rich national film history. For example, Brown Bag Production’s *Granny O’Grimm’s Sleeping Beauty* (2008) dir. by Nicky Phelan. This short film is a cinematic experience with a strong narrative of the adaptation of the canon ‘Sleeping Beauty’ story. Similarly, another Brown Bag Production, *Angela’s Christmas*, heavily relies on script and narrative to evoke a powerful sense of storytelling.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ruth, Barton, ‘2: Animating Ireland’ in *Irish Cinema in The Twenty-First Century* (Manchester University Press, 2004), pp.43.

<sup>30</sup> Tom Sullivan, *Arracht* (Dublin: Macalla, 2019).

<sup>31</sup> Martin McDonagh, *Banshees of Inisherin* (USA: Searchlight Pictures, 2022)

<sup>32</sup> Colm Bairéad, *An Cailín Ciúin* (Ireland: Camera Film, 2022).

<sup>33</sup> Maeve, Connolly, ‘Theorising Irish Animation: History, Enterprise and Critical Practises,’ *National Cinema and Beyond: Studies in Irish Film 2*, edited by John Hill and Kevin Rockett (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005) pp. 2.

<sup>34</sup> Damien O'Connor, *Angela’s Christmas*, (Ireland: Brown Bag Films, Netflix, 2017).





Image 1: Still from *The Secret of Kells*.

## Moore's Signature Style

Moore adopts a distinctive *mise en scène* throughout his films. Scenes are bolstered with heavy gold ink, sparkling magically representing the visual richness of the film. Bold primary colours and contrasting shapes and graphics fill the screen, using iconography such as Medieval art works, ancient or mythical artefacts, and religious imagery. Tom Walsh states that, 'Elements of an Irish visual arts traditions (are) drawn from Celtic artefacts rather than a fine art tradition.'<sup>35</sup>

Moore reveals in an interview that Cartoon Saloon 'took Irish art and gave the world our take on it', confirming Moore's visual style revolving around mythical ancient Celtic art, particularly the triskele.<sup>36</sup> First evident in their first feature film *The Secret of Kells*, the

<sup>35</sup> Tom Walsh, 'Re-animating the Past: An Irish Animation History,' in *Nordic Irish Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2018), pp. 135.

<sup>36</sup> Scott Thill, 'Tomm Moore on *Song of The Sea*, Reinventing 2D, and Dodging the Studio System,' *Cartoon Brew* (Cartoon Brew, LLC, 2015) <https://www.cartoonbrew.com/interviews/tomm-moore-on-song-of-the-sea-reinventing-2d-and-dodging-the-studio-system-107389.html>



triskele continued to appear in *Song of the Sea* and *Wolfwalkers* and it is fair to say it becomes an identifying symbol throughout the trilogy.

The Celtic triskele is an ancient symbol originating from neolithic art, consisting of three legs or spirals with rotational direction, which represent the cycle of life: birth, life, and death. Other interpretations offer meanings such as balance, unity, 'Earth, Wind, Fire' or the 'The Holy Trinity.' Moore implements many variations of the triskele into backgrounds, foregrounds and even the characters in his films. For example, the simpler version – cyclical swirl.

Wells states that a 'symbol may be consciously used as part of the image vocabulary to suggest specific meanings, equally, a symbol may be unconsciously deployed.'<sup>37</sup> I believe in the context of Moore's trilogy; the triskele is not afforded specific meaning but rather unconsciously deployed deeply throughout the films.

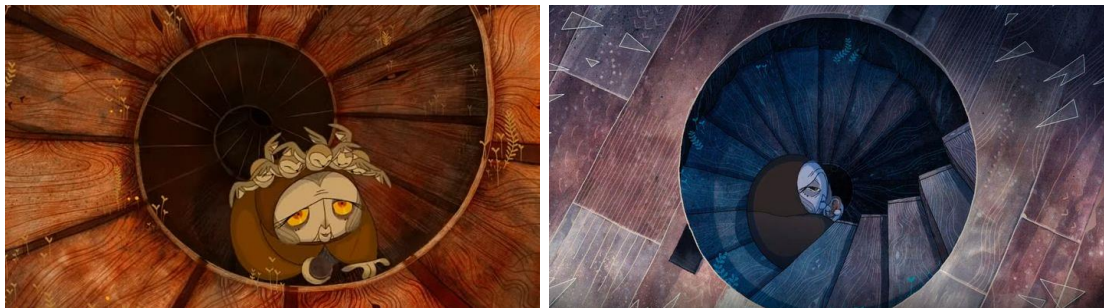


Image 2&3: Still from *Song of the Sea*.

The use of 'metamorphoses' could be cited in this trilogy in how his shots are formatted, for example Macha's turning to stone and her position on her spiral stairway. Wells offers that 'Metamorphosis also legitimises the process of connecting apparently unrelated images, forging original relationships between lines, objects and disrupting established notions of classical storytelling.'<sup>38</sup> In that case, the triskele could be seen as a sign of life and death,

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<sup>37</sup> Paul Wells, '2: Once upon a time: Narrative strategies', in *Understanding Animation*, pp.83.

<sup>38</sup> Wells, pp.15.

consistently present in the trilogy. These details are of the signature sign of Moore's directorial artistic vision for the visual production of the trilogy, proving his position as an auteur of Irish indigenous animation.

As shown in the trilogy, Irish folklore and mythology are a massive inspiration for Moore's narratives. Incorporating a wide range of characters and character types from Irish mythology, as well as using ancient Irish names, poems, songs. For example, the myth of son Mac Lir and his mother Macha in *Song of the Sea*, the evil serpentine Crom Cruach in *Secret of Kells*, and the extinct magical Irish wolves in *Wolfwalkers*. Moore uses this historical folklore heritage as a frame, backdrop and as a central narrative thrust of his film work, reflecting Ireland's ancient cultural emphasises on folklore and the importance of storytelling. This consistent thematic focus across his directorial work suggests a distinguishable authorial interest.

Another indicative aspect of Moore's personal style can be seen in how he combines both rigid, hard lines with softer rounder more dynamic shapes, to highlight contrast. For example, the human-made village in *Wolfwalkers* is compiled of geometric, symmetric, hard lines with a uniform sizing system. In contrast to the forest, the 'untamed' land is drawn with much more fluid, softer, cyclical lines. This could represent the wild nature of the land, embracing magic, fun and freedom.



Image 3&4: Still from *Wolfwalkers*.

## The Global Animation Industry

Iconic Japanese animator and director Hayao Miyazaki of Studio Ghibli also leans to this stylistic tendency when highlighting the contrast between the natural world and the manufactured world. Softer, rounder sketching is used for the forests and meadows while the city is structured and measured.

Studio Ghibli's narratives also similarly use folklore and myth to manufacture an animated film, using animation to explore complex issues such as death, grief with a special emphasis on the natural world and environmentalism. For example, in *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), climate change and pollution are represented widely, including acidic lakes, deadly air and toxic woodland.<sup>39</sup>

He further reflects on the societal transition from tradition to modernity, and the negative effects of capitalism and consumerism in his most known work, *Spirited Away* (1997).<sup>40</sup> For example, Yubaba, the bathhouse owner exploits their employees, representing a capitalist elite – directly addressing the dehumanisation, reduced to their value as a worker, rather than an individual identity, further represented with the physical transformation of the workers.

Moore admits his Miyazaki influence in an interview with Los Angeles Times, explaining how he wanted to 'show Ireland the way Miyazaki had shown Japan in films like his 1988 fantasy *My Neighbour Totoro*'.<sup>41</sup> Miyazaki's influence is also present in how Moore uses the medium of animation to deal with the societal transition from tradition to modernity.

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<sup>39</sup> Hayao Miyazaki, *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* (Studio Ghibli: 1984).

<sup>40</sup> Miyazaki, *Spirited Away*, (Studio Ghibli: 1997).

<sup>41</sup> Rebecca Keegan, 'Animator Tomm Moore lives the dream with a 'Song' in his heart,' *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles Times: 2015). <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-song-of-the-sea-moore-20150109-story.html>



Image 4&5: Still from *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* and from *Song of the Sea*.

Inspiration for *Song of the Sea* came through an experience Moore had while visiting a beach in Co. Donegal. In an interview with Coffee Brew Animation Blog, he explains how he saw a deceased seal and asked about it and found out that ‘local fisherman were killing them out of frustration with falling fishery stocks’, and that it would never have happened years ago with the old ‘belief system that deemed seals sacred’ due to their folkloric history of them being ‘the souls of people lost at sea, or actual selkies’.<sup>42</sup> He emphasises how that got him thinking that ‘folklore and superstitions serve functions beyond entertainment, or quaint stories for tourists.’<sup>43</sup> This suggests placing a higher value on storytelling, where folklore and mythology could serve to educate us on the sacred relationship between humankind and the environment around us. Similarly, in *Secret of Kells*, Aisling, a fairy, shows Brendan how beautiful the world outside the monastery walls is, but more so, the inherent connection we all have to nature and what it can teach us. For example, the gall berries in the Oak tree are retrieved by Aisling, and later Brendan and Brother Aidan make into ink to complete the Book of Kells. Another example of this ecological consciousness is present in *Wolfwalkers* as the film tells the story of a natural habitat being destroyed by human interference, leading to the displacement and extinction of wild creatures.

In conclusion, through Tomm Moore’s strong historic and emotional narratives, spectacular visual style and provocative imagery makes for an authentic film making style as

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<sup>42</sup> Thill, (Cartoon Brew: 2015).

<sup>43</sup> Thill, (Cartoon Brew: 2015).

an auteur of Irish animation. Through his deep connection with Irish art, folklore and mythology, Tom Moore establishes himself as an auteur, representing his dedication to the traditional artisanal techniques and hand drawn practises in his artworks. Using a refined and distinct *mise en scène* through the trilogy, Moore achieves a distinctive style of animation while maintaining age-appropriate concepts and narratives. Using auteur theory allows to focus primarily on the narrative, aesthetics, style, and form, in isolation rather than in a broader context of media and cultural studies.

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