

***The Secret of Kells:* Adaptation and Semiotic Interpretations of Ninth-Century Ireland**

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Abstract

This chapter examines historical accuracy and creative adaptation in the animated film *The Secret of Kells* by Cartoon Saloon, focusing on its portrayal of ninth-century Ireland and the creation of the *Book of Kells*. The research delves into the balance between historical fact and artistic license when telling a story, whereas other studies of the text focus on aesthetic and symbolic elements within the film. The chapter explores whether the film's deviations from and faithfulness to historical accuracy impacts on its reception and effectiveness as a cultural and educational text. By analysing the visual and narrative choices made in *The Secret of Kells* and comparing them with other historically themed animations, the study aims to assess the role of adaptation in audience perceptions of history. The research also addresses the necessity of historical accuracy in animated adaptations and the significance of creative interpretations in bringing historical events to contemporary audiences.

Introduction

The Secret of Kells is a beloved Irish animation from Cartoon Saloon that depicts a fictionalized account of ninth-century Ireland, more specifically the completion of the *Book of Kells*. This development is seen through the eyes of Brendan, the film's protagonist (Ebert 2010). Through this animated narrative, we as an audience are drawn towards a backdrop of early Christian Ireland, the Viking attacks on the monasteries across the island, and life during that time. Tomm Moore directs an intertwining of monastic art and Celtic symbolism to juxtapose pagan and Christian elements through an enthralling and visually stunning narrative that is steeped in mythology and folklore (Kılınçarslan 2023).

Given the popularity of the animation and the historical significance of the *Book of Kells*, research into the film has been extensive, yet the research presented in this chapter aims to note the accuracies and inaccuracies of this adaptation of historical fact to screen, and whether that positively or negatively impacts the reception of the text. However, it is first worth acknowledging the existing studies into *The Secret of Kells*. Kılınçarslan (2023) analyses the cultural and ethnic expression of Ireland within their research, as well as the aesthetic choices of the animation in mirroring Celtic art. Characterizing the 'illuminated' animation style and the link to religious symbolism, the study concludes that the narrative is an expression of Irish culture and folklore, a unanimous consensus among scholars on the subject. Similarly, Kim and Lee (2020) explore the preservation of Irish cultural heritage through the lens of the film. They argue that animation can be used not only as entertainment but also as an educational tool to understand historical events, detailing how narrative and visual elements in the film capture the essence of the era. The debate should be noted, however, that *The Secret of Kells* may not be an attempt to educate, but rather to entertain and celebrate cultural elements, a topic discussed within the later sections of this paper.

The visual beauty and symbolism of the text is clear throughout, and Widadijo (2020) outlines this in their examination of rhythm, balance and design principles through an analysis of several shots from the film, linking them to the animation principle of staging and theories of composition. Spartz (2015) notes the narrative link to the monks of Iona, but focuses their study on themes such as resilience and the symbols of the forest, as well as a development of cultural studies and symbols of mythology. Spartz's paper acknowledges the artistic licence in relation to historical portrayals within the narrative, yet neglects to provide in-depth examples of those inaccuracies, therefore losing some of clarity of their presented semiotic interpretations. AlKhayat (2020) returns to cultural identity and intertwines it with national identity, looking at how the film reinterprets Celtic myth for a contemporary audience.

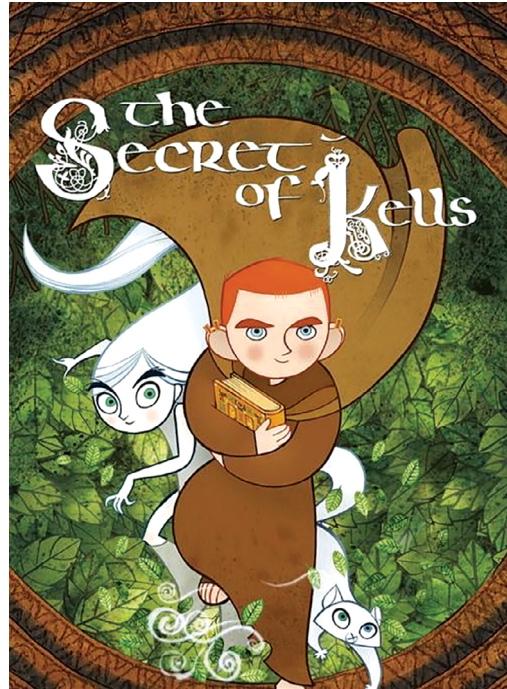


Figure 1. A poster depicting the main protagonists of *The Secret of Kells*

By recognizing the work as a form of adaptation, AlKhayat's (2020) study steers closer to the topic of our research, yet it does not offer research on the historical context, opting to focus primarily on the aspects of folklore within culture.

Perhaps the closest research into the historical aspects of *The Secret of Kells* come from a study by Buchelt (2022), which discusses the blending of medieval Irish history with contemporary animation, noting the accuracy of aspects of this period linked to a modern audience and translating the past using stylized visuals. This text acknowledges that *The Secret of Kells* is an adaptation of an aesthetic, used to create an impressionistic experience of Medieval Ireland. Buchelt weaves the historical context of Ireland – and notably the Viking invasion of the ninth century – into their research to portray the narrative's strength in capturing the visual language of the film. Buchelt (2022) concludes that the film's ability to engage the modern audience from a potentially less accessible text, be it through creative interpretation, may indeed open the visual identity of Ireland and Irishness (Sharpson 2021) to restore the connection of image and word. In this concept, we find a promising base for analysis: to see whether accuracy in the historical context is necessary for the reception and enjoyment of a piece, or whether the choices of which aspects to adapt, and how that adaptation is selected, are far more important factors. The aim within this research is to analyse this gap, focusing also on other animations with historic adaptation and comparing and contrasting their successes and failures.

Adaptation is defined as ‘the action or process of changing something, or of being changed, to suit a new purpose or situation’ (Oxford English Dictionary 2000). This definition has two aspects. The first is that of ‘change’ or ‘changing something’, a concept that perhaps conjures feelings of misinterpretation, and could be even noted synonymously with the word ‘fix’. The second aspect, perhaps more positive, ‘to suit a new purpose or situation’, is a phrase that evokes an idea of rebirth – not out of disrespect for the original source material, but rather out of a love to share the piece with those who may not have had the chance to experience it otherwise. Cutchins (2013) notes that adaptation isn’t just the retelling of a source for an audience, but also a translation of its core concepts. It is in this context that we look at the form of ‘adaptation’. With identified parameters, it becomes easier to comment on the importance, if any, of adaptation, specifically within the animated medium.

In *Adaptation for Animation* (Rall 2019), animation historians Giannalberto Bendazzi and John Canemaker draw the same conclusion that the spirit of the original author should be considered when adapting for animation. Of course, the ‘original author’ must be interpreted far more loosely in the context of medieval Ireland, where one such author cannot be cited. It is here that the spirit of the period acts as a suitable replacement. Whitehead (2004), in reference to the animated form, states that the medium is a rich, vibrant one that is often considered to be for children, yet it is a technically complex form that draws upon everything from folktales to pop culture. Sometimes, however, the context of the original vision can be lost in the crossing of borders, and many argue that cultures and representations of these visions are misrepresented in their translations and adaptations, often forming caricature rather than inclusivity (Lehman 2014). It is also important that care is taken when looking at the form, in order to avoid the moral concerns associated with studios and localization (Ward 2002). The handling of narrative can often be seen as an element that goes hand in hand with adaptation and so semiotics and the study of societal imagery must also play a part in understanding the cross-cultural divide (Barthes 1977). Having established our base, we can now move to the depictions of history in *The Secret of Kells* and the accuracies and inaccuracies that establish it as an adaptation of ninth-century Ireland.

Historical Accuracy and Semiotics

It is impossible to capture the entirety of the ninth-century Irish within a chapter such as this, let alone within the narrative of an animated film, and so creative licence must be taken to put forth a story that can be told within the timeframe of the film’s 75-minute length. However, important elements of historical backdrop must be chosen to best capture the spirit of the period. *The Secret of Kells* focuses on Brendan, a young monk who embarks on a journey to create the Chi Rho page of the *Book of Kells*. From the earliest shots of the inner grounds of the monastery, we see a stylized symbolic design sense that plays homage to Celtic art and explores the importance of it within Irish culture (O’Brien 2011). As our protagonist chases a goose, it intertwines comedic elements with that of historic accuracy, although the accuracy is not in the characters themselves (despite some similarities in appearance and clothing), nor the story beats. Rather, it is the setting, the depiction of ninth-century monastic life, that truly captures the spirit of the time.



Figure 2. A comedic scene with background details depicting everyday life within Kells

The existence of the Abbey of Kells and its depiction within the film is one that is clear, yet not spoon-fed, to the audience. The scene is quickly established through the presence of medieval architecture and lifestyle, not just in that of the monks, but in the farmers, carpenters and blacksmiths who inhabited the grounds, religious, yet not to the same level of piety as the monks. That said, religion formed a significantly large part of the lives of those at Kells. The period was quickly referred to as the 'Age of the Monks', with monasteries serving not only as a place of prayer but also as a place of learning and social organization (Staudt 2019). Through the film's stylistic opening scenes, Moore manages to create a clear and welcoming depiction of the early medieval age and uses it to reference peace, tranquility and everyday life, such as the housing of animals and workshops within the community. This adaptation of the acts of the day-to-day conveys a strong foundation for normal, average life before the narrative and tonal shifts towards the violence and destruction of the Viking invasion, creating a parallel between the two worlds.

Outside of the portrayal of ninth-century living conditions, *The Secret of Kells* also manages to create a bridging for our audiences that allows for an understanding of the people of the period, those inhabiting the grounds at Kells, particularly the monks. The abbots acted as the central governing figures of the church (Staudt 2019) and ruled the church, with a monk appointed as a bishop to administer sacraments under the abbot. Within *The Secret of Kells*, the abbot and the monks' roles are filled in by several multicultural characters, representing different global ethnicities. Although, on first viewing, this may seem to be a misrepresentation, Moore and the film's team researched extensively into the monks and their designs, opting to draw upon inspirations from the artistic influence, ink usage and relevance of the medieval world on a global scale, rather than just Ireland. Monks from as far afield as Africa and Asia were represented within the narrative (Moore & Stewart 2014) despite the almost certainly only Irish monks that lived



Figure 3. A depiction of the Viking invaders from the film, sharp angles, shadowed and lacking individuality

and worked on the *Book of Kells*. The coloured ink was sourced from materials found as far as North Africa and the Middle East (Buchelt 2022), and although it is alluded to in the aspects of representation, the in-depth analysis of such sourced inks is not directly explained throughout the film.

Considering the incorporation of the Viking invasion within the background of *The Secret of Kells*, we can see several stylistic choices that help to influence the reception and understanding of the historical context in which the film is set. Christianity was well established by this point in Irish history, and the growth in wealth of monasteries such as Kells presented extremely attractive rewards for the invaders (Atwood 2015). *The Secret of Kells* has the Vikings as the main antagonists of the film, acting as a disruption to the beautiful lifestyle we see in the first act. We are immediately introduced to a visual difference in these Northmen. As discussed by AlKhayat (2020), the drawings of the Vikings themselves are far more straight-lined and angular than the other characters, featuring abstract, faceless forms and shadowy, bland colour schemes that create a symbolic interpretation that contrasts with the variety and individualism of the Kells inhabitants. This choice in visual adaptation isn't accurate, of course, as the conclusion of Viking and Gael difference is one that could be archaeologically ambiguous, yet manages to capture the difference that the Vikings presented to Ireland, both in ideology and methods, setting them apart thematically from that of the monks.

The film alludes to the history of these invaders throughout, but never acts as a clear retelling of the point in time. Historically, the earliest records of the Vikings first invading Ireland was in the late eighth century (Downham 2014), and their long-term influence on the island is significant. They eventually contributed to the foundation of many coastal towns, including Dublin and Limerick, and provided a clear influence on developments of Irish lifestyle, architecture and custom. Although these effects can still be seen in modern Ireland, it is a period that is painted in *The Secret of Kells* for its forceful nature and removal of the cultural 'Irishness' that the narrative celebrates. Maxwell (2013) suggests that the

building of the monastery of Kells, or at least the enforcement of its defenses upon building, comes as a response to an invasion in 802, with Kells being built in a more rural, further inland, location, two years later, to protect it from coastal raids, a common strategy of the Northmen. Moore's film not only looks at the Kells invasion but rather, points earlier, to the attack on Iona, referring to its character, Eamonn, as having come from there. Iona was devastated by the Vikings at various points, with the monastery being burned and 68 members of the community being killed in the early 800s with further murders of monks taking place in 825. This potential threat on Christianity itself is given substance throughout *The Secret of Kells*, and the Viking obstacle to the completion of the *Book of Kells* could be suggested as a threat to the very lifestyle of the monks at that time in history.



Figure 4. The Chi-Rho page from the *Book of Kells*, depicting Celtic art

The inclusion of Aidan in the story helps to show us a larger world on the isles and that there are influences on lifestyle outside of just that which Brendan sees. This inclusion also helps to create a backstory for the *Book of Kells* before it reaches the location of our protagonist. In history, there are many suggestions that the manuscript was started in Iona, before moving to Kells for completion. Maxwell (2013) argues that this is not likely, as the ninth century seems an unusual time for the manuscript to be started. Maxwell (2013) proffers that such a time of assault and devastation from such a violent invader would not be the setting for such a vast, and intricate gospel to be commissioned. This seems logical, but, as Maxwell notes, a possible justifiable response to his argument is that this time of turmoil could have in fact provided an opportunity in which to explore divinity in stressful times, a means to be closer to God, an act of prayer and support. The book itself, despite the Viking backdrop, is up for much debate, as there is no definitive answer or solution to the creation of the *Book of Kells* or the location of its formation (Wall 2012). Many aspects and designs within remain unfinished and even the binding itself was not fully decorated. The creator of the book itself is ambiguous in nature, with scholars noting that the number of scribes as well as the identities of those who commissioned the creation of the book are unknown – so how could *The Secret of Kells* possibly present an accurate representation of ninth-century Ireland? Without the presence of a reliable source to the making of the book, it is clear from a historical standpoint why Moore may wish to create a loose, mystical telling of the book's creation, surrounded by elements of mysticism and fantasy.

Our story concerns itself with Irish folklore intertwined with history to create a fresh take on the period, so it is important to not just look at ninth-century events, but also the accuracy of semiotics and religious symbolism at the time and how that weaves its way into Brendan's and Aidan's journeys. Important themes of *The Secret of Kells* are that of experience and wonder, as well as an analysis of self-discovery and identity. These



Figure 5. *The stylized forest featured in The Secret of Kells*

are introduced throughout the film through the symbols of Celtic art and architectural references, entwining these aspects with mysticism and wonder, allowing for a setting that helps Brendan's growth in the film. The presence of flora and fauna, and nature itself, helps to bridge the gaps of self-discovery, as Brendan finds himself along the way. There is no better example of this than that of the forest. It acts as a symbolic bridging of past and present, of old and new, as Brendan and Brother Aidan are compared in their understanding of the freedom that the forest brings, looking at the enchantment of natural creation as the monks of monastic Ireland once did (Spartz 2015).

In a more visually stylistic sense, the appearance of the forest itself, both in animation and stills, acts as a reference to the Gothic architecture associated with the semiotic representations of Christianity. The colours may even suggest holding onto the Irishness and freedom of the people, the last piece of self before the invaders take it. Spartz also suggests that the forest is the place where Brendan first meets the personification of light, Aisling, a representation of Irish legend and mysticism, and a fairy guide for our hero. She acts similarly to the wise mentor figure, Aidan, in that she supports Brendan on his journey, bringing elements of ancient Irish symbology to our screen. The illumination animation present features many different shapes, from zigzags to spirals, that form the outlines and backgrounds of our shots and the characters that inhabit them. Once again, this is artistic license, and not a clear historical representation, yet it acts as homage to the symbols and signs that one would find within the pages of the *Book of Kells*.

MacGabhann (2022) refers to the artist Françoise Henry's writings surrounding the 'minute' spirals that decorated the *Book of Kells*, highlighting the concept of illumination, and in turn, that of the Illuminator, looking at the intricate designs and details of each page and the complexity needed to recreate such designs in the modern age. Particular interest is placed upon the Chi-Rho page, arguably the most famous page of the manuscript, and

the page that *The Secret of Kells* focuses on. The attribution of this page is to that of the master artist, who acted as the creator of this page as well as a mentor to the other scribes involved in the manuscript's production. The Chi-Rho page, one of the most celebrated pages in the *Book of Kells*, contains a swirling design with reference to the first letters of the word, Christ. The intricate details of the page are of no doubt created with extreme precision, and the film alludes to Brendan as perhaps being that master illuminator, developing his character, and growing him from a more simplistic lifestyle into someone capable of such depth and detail upon the end of the story.

Fantasy is brought into the fold through the animated storytelling, but it is the creative choices of the writer that allows for historical aspects to flow throughout. It is important to note that despite *The Secret of Kells* not necessarily being a work of historic fiction, it does allude to it, and references historic events with far more fictional aspects and freedom. Financially, the film was an international loss at the box office (The Numbers 2010), and Montgomery (2011) presents an interesting opinion that the reasons for this may relate to the unconventional methods of storytelling and stylistic presentation that strays from the 'mass sensibilities' that audiences can accept with 'little effort'. The question is still, however, whether the historical accuracy, or lack thereof, is more or less beneficial to audiences. Artistic licence is a strong topic of this film's narrative but with this artistic choice may also come with drawbacks. At some point, artistic licence may become so powerful that we lose the accuracy of the story it is trying to tell. Perhaps this has an effect on audiences. Here is where it is important to create a comparison to existing works of animation that similarly rely on a backdrop of history to set their scenes.

Historical Adaptation in Animation

When presented with source material, be it fictional or otherwise, the creative choices associated with adaptation can come in several forms. First is the understanding that adaptation is potentially from one medium to another, and in doing so, the changes need to reflect this switch, highlighting that a message may be delivered differently to a viewer if it is presented in an unfamiliar or different form (McLuhan et al. 1967). Second, we must also note the vision of the director and writer and how different creators may have different visions of how to adapt materials. With more modern adaptations, one must not only keep the source in mind, but also the audience and fanbase. In the context of historical adaptation, it is historians and those familiar with the historic period as well as the culture of the time that must be acknowledged and made aware of, and an awareness of struggle in the 'construction of national culture' (Bhabha 1990).

Many historical animations are adaptations of more modern events, with more primary sources available and better accounts of transpiring events. *Persepolis*, for example, the autobiographical account of author Marjan Satrapi, 'destabilizes' the standard historical narrative, 'claiming its own historicity' (Chute 2008) and tackles the violent experiences of real-world events. Stepping back towards the 1997 animated film *Anastasia*, just one of many adaptations of the source, set in another time of turmoil, we see the other side of the adaptation of narrative, showing us an alternate 1926. This acts similarly to *The Secret of Kells* in that it also manages to place creative freedom at the forefront, using the backdrop

of history, less as a means of education and accuracy but rather as one of entertainment and thematic exploration. Don Bluth manages to create a mostly fictional account of the Romanovs yet connects it to the social and political references of early 20th century Russia – for example, that of the costume designs and settings of the time (Kirsanova 2023) – leading us once again to a piece of entertainment rather than a historically accurate account of events.

The amalgamation of various aspects of history to tell a story is no stranger to the medium of animation, appearing regularly in games and films. It is worth noting the other aspects of historical adaptation for the form, education, and the various creations within the field for this very purpose. On one side, we have series such as *Histerial*, a comedy sketch heavy, animated series that looks to educate young audiences on historical events but does so in a lighthearted and comedic way. That said, often aspects of bias come through within the series, leading to a somewhat inaccurate portrayal of fact. It is, however, the nature of the series, to educate, but in a humorous way. Looking at the more drama-heavy alternative, rich with thematic aspects and representation of all sides of conflict, we have examples such as *Liberty's Kids*, a 2002 series focusing on the American War of Independence, a series that treats its historical figures with as much three-dimensionalism and love as its fictional ones. Although unrealistic in many areas, the creators used creative freedom in allowing their characters to witness crucial events from the period. This helps the audience to place themselves in the scene and learn alongside the heroes. This was key in providing an opportunity for historical figures to appear within the narrative, in a way that did not feel forced (Rotoscopers 2019). Despite the work being an expression of American nationalism, seeing various characters' perspectives allows for a far less biased study into the time. Unlike *The Secret of Kells*, these examples were created for education and so act as a piece of historical representation much more than a cultural expression. It is important to note that both approaches promote their value within education, but with different core values in mind (Özer & Avcı 2015).

As a final example, we should look further back to a story that also draws from a historical period that has both religious context and symbology, as well as a less accurate reliable author. DreamWorks's *The Prince of Egypt* (1998) is one such example in that its portrayal of biblical figures allows for entertainment with a backdrop of historical events. The narrative thematically echoes the same coming-of-age concepts as Brendan's journey, with a balance placed on growth and self in the individualist narrative, but the biblical side weighing heavily on themes of community (Rohrer-Walsh 2002). Rohrer-Walsh, in their analysis of identity in *The Prince of Egypt*, draws the same conclusion that the presence of conflict, and the mentor figure, similar to that of Aidan in *The Secret of Kells*, allows for our protagonist to learn and grow into someone capable of achieving their goals. They go on to say that the level of tension within the narrative should correspond to the purpose of the coming-of-age story.

An adaptation of the book of Exodus, Moses's story is told in such a way that it draws from the source material, yet as scholars of historical context point out, the book of Exodus may be grounded in far less plausibility than historic accuracy. It is within this uncertainty that creative freedom and entertainment-based adaptation must come to the forefront, creating a far more parallel comparison to the subject of this study. Noting the



Figure 6. *Liberty's Kids*, an educational adaptation of life during the American War of Independence



Figure 7. *'The Prince of Egypt', telling the story of Moses*

difference in box office success, *The Prince of Egypt* grossed a significantly higher figure than that of *The Secret of Kells* (Box Office Mojo, n.d). This could be due to a number of factors, such as *The Prince of Egypt* having a higher budget, stronger global marketing strategy and a more well-known source material. Reviews and studies point to the film 'transcending commodification' in order to appeal to mainstream consumers (Lott 2020) and it is also worth noting that, despite clear artistic licence, the main story beats of the tale of Moses were incorporated in such a way that the spirit of the tale was retained, something that *The Secret of Kells* doesn't have to rely on.

Conclusion

Adaptations of historical stories give audiences an opportunity to reflect on timeless human experiences from a new perspective. As well as offering an education on past events and cultures, the psychological 'distance' afforded by the character's narrative provides a better space in which to consider contemporary values and attitudes.

The Secret of Kells is not a wholly accurate portrayal of ninth-century Ireland; it is an adaptation of the spirit of the time and acts as a thematic and stylistic celebration of such, including the essence of 'Irishness'. It is a culturally modernized presentation of the period that allows for our protagonists to feel real and help to convey the development of their goals and aspirations. Further studies should consider audience reception and retention of historical fact within such a narrative. It is important to note that artistic licence and the intentions of the director can and often will supersede the original source author's vision. If the source is treated with respect, the adaptation itself can ground itself more in fantasy than history as a means to tell a story. Characters do not have to have existed, yet they must be a realistically suitable fit within the setting of the piece. If the goal is to entertain within the medium, then that level of retention and enjoyment will surely help to pique interest and retain historical fact for the viewer. Arguably, the ability of good storytelling to engage with its audience is more important than the accuracy of the adaptation, allowing for those audiences not familiar with a source of history to access it in a different way and make new connections between past lives and their own.

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Image References

- Figure 1, 2, 3 and 5: *The Secret of Kells*, directed by Tomm Moore (2009), Cartoon Saloon
- Figure 4: Chi-Rho Page, in Tom Lubbock, 'Anonymous: The "Chi-Rho" from "The Book of Kells" (c.800)', *The Independent*, 16 May 2008, viewed 18 June 2024, <<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/great-works/anonymous-the-chirho-from-the-book-of-kells-c-800-828951.html>>.
- Figure 6: *Liberty's Kids*, DIC Entertainment (2002)
- Figure 7: *The Prince of Egypt* (1998), directed by Chapman, Hickner and Wells, DreamWorks Pictures.