Back to the future

The Secret of Kells brings the past to life

It's tempting to think that our global, multimedia age is the most multicultural and visually literate in history. However, a new study by Lisabeth Buchelt, of the University of Nebraska—Omaha probes the relationship between a contemporary Irish animated film and the 1,200-year-old masterpiece of Celtic art that inspired it. She finds that the modern age is not the first to integrate visual art and text, and that the creative team behind The Secret of Kells *had much in common with the medieval monks who produced the magnificent Book of Kells.*

The Secret of Kells is an animated film about the origins of the Book of Kells, an illuminated Biblical manuscript produced by monks in 9th century Ireland. The book is regarded as an enduring treasure of Celtic art and the film was nominated for an Oscar in 2009, only losing out to the Disney Corporation's *Up*.

Produced by the Irish animation company Cartoon Saloon, *The Secret of Kells* is set in and around the Abbey of Kells, Ireland, at the time of the Viking incursions. The film narrates the quest of 12-year-old Brendan, who, among other challenges, has to fight a serpent in an enchanted forest to capture a magic crystal. Acting like a lens, the crystal will help his fellow monks create the text and images of the manuscript that will one day bear the abbey's name.

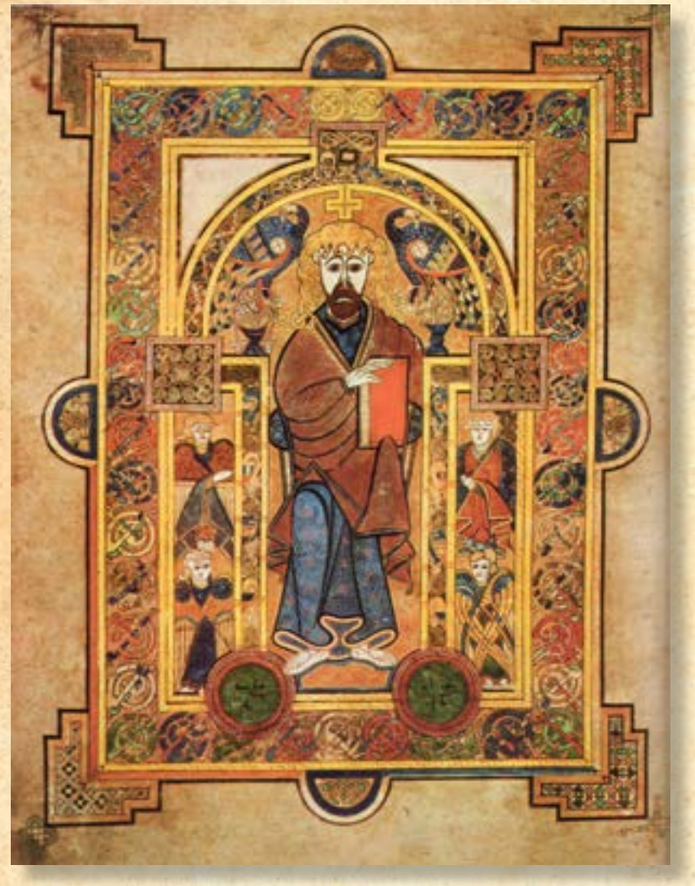
In a new book about the screening of contemporary Irish fiction and drama, Lisabeth Buchelt, from the University of Nebraska—Omaha in the United States, explores how *The Secret of Kells* crosses time and space to bring both medieval Irish history and Celtic art alive for modern audiences. Buchelt argues that, while the film is neither entirely fictional nor factual, its storyline provides a perfect insight into the world that produced the Book of Kells. By its own artistry, the film also provides a modern iteration of medieval culture, and demonstrates the book's continuing impact on the Irish and global imagination.

A MEDIEVAL STORY

The Secret of Kells draws on known historical facts, but its storyline is not directly based on a specific text or historical source. For example, history shows that Viking incursions threatened communities and institutions, forcing many people to flee their homes and endangering seats of learning, such as monasteries. In the film, master illuminator Brother Aiden arrives at the abbey, having left his former monastery in fear for his life. Not only is he carrying a wonderful, unfinished, illuminated manuscript, he is accompanied by a white cat called Pangur Bán, which subtly references a well-known Old Irish poem of the same name.

Irish legends about St Patrick, the country's patron saint, are equally familiar to modern Irish audiences. The film draws on these by naming the serpent that Brendan must fight 'Crom Dubh' – a pagan deity associated with sacrifice and St Patrick's arch enemy. Brendan – who, like Aiden, is also named after an Irish saint – is helped in his quest by the shape-shifting, fairy-like Aisling. With a name meaning 'dream' or 'vision', many versions of Aisling appear in Irish poetry and mythology as an otherworldly being who represents the spirit of the land.

The Secret of Kells contains many other references to Irish history and legend. Buchelt argues that these make the film 'deeply erudite as well as entirely enjoyable'. They help to set the animation firmly in medieval Ireland's golden age, when it was known as the 'Island of Saints and Scholars'. They also add depth to the film's deceptively simple narrative.



Scanned from Treasures of Irish Art, 1500 BC to 1500 AD: From the Collections of the National Museum of Ireland, Royal Irish Academy, & Trinity College, Dublin, Metropolitan Museum of Art & Alfred A Knopf, New York 1977.

The Book of Kells, an illuminated Biblical manuscript produced by monks in 9th century Ireland, now in the Trinity College Library in Dublin.

The Secret of Kells *crosses time and space to bring medieval Irish history and Celtic art alive for modern audiences.*

Screenshots from *The Secret of Kells*.
Above: Aisling and Brendan; below: the march of the secret Vikings.

CELTIC ART

The visual style of *The Secret of Kells* is derived from the illuminated manuscripts produced in monasteries in Ireland and Great Britain between the 6th and 9th centuries. As Buchelt demonstrates, the film's relationship with its design source goes much deeper than the popular, contemporary use of Celtic imagery in marketing items like t-shirts and tea towels. Not only does the animation's sophisticated artistry look good, the aesthetics embody the narrative.

The Book of Kells incorporates two distinct styles on different pages throughout the manuscript – a geometric, angular style, and a lighter, more curvilinear style. The film adopts both styles to illustrate the narrative's mood. For example, the heavier, geometric style is used to depict the Vikings' violence and Brendan's fight against the serpent, and the lighter, curvilinear style is used to depict the wonder of the natural world that Aisling reveals to Brendan.

Colour cues are also used to suggest the distinction between light and dark, symbolising good and evil. Heavy reds and blacks dominate the angular style, and softer greens and yellows characterise the curvilinear. This reinforces the fact that the book that Brother Aiden is desperate to complete is known as the 'book that makes the darkness light'. The two styles are sometimes combined to imply that, as in Brendan's quest, light can only be found by conquering the dark.

The locations depicted in the film, for example the monastic enclosure and the surrounding forest, also reference historical sites from across Ireland. These include a stone circle, standing stones, statues, sculptures, and beehive-shaped huts. Buchelt finds that, while these may not be geographically close to Kells, they are recognisable and help to create an 'Ireland of the mind' that accurately represents the intellectual and cultural world inhabited by the creators of the Book of Kells.

MULTICULTURAL COLLABORATION

The Secret of Kells also shows how the Book of Kells would have been produced. The film begins with Brendan chasing geese to collect feathers to

The Book of Kells is 1,200 years old.

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Above: 'In Principio' page which opens the Gospel of John. The Book of Kells incorporates two distinct styles: a geometric, angular style (left), and a lighter, more curvilinear style (right).

The first complete full-colour facsimile edition of the Book of Kells was not published until 1990.

use as quills for writing and drawing. Brother Aiden then sends him into the enchanted forest for the first time to collect oak apples or 'galls' which were mixed with iron sulphate to produce the brown-black ink for the manuscript's text. As an apprentice artist and scribe, Brendan is also shown how to make other coloured inks to illuminate the manuscript. This demanded resources from as far afield as the Mediterranean, North Africa and even Afghanistan – the source of the lapis lazuli used to make blue ink.

Buchelt argues that this kind of detail suggests the power and wealth that monastic institutions like the Abbey of Kells needed to maintain their production workshops. Such capacity contributed to Ireland's medieval reputation as an international seat of learning and helped to attract scholars – and revenue – from far and wide. This multicultural aspect of monastic life is referenced in the film's other characters, for example Brother Tang from China, Brother Leonardo from Italy, Brother Assoua from Africa, and Brother Jacques from France.

Just as the manuscript in the film was produced by a multilingual group of monks, Cartoon Saloon worked collaboratively with a 200-strong team of artists, writers, and musicians from ten countries to create *The Secret of Kells*. The film took ten years to complete and had a budget of around $8 million. Buchelt demonstrates that the creative teams behind the book and the film should be regarded as 'kindred spirits', or, as Aisling says in the film, 'One beetle recognises another.'

Neither entirely fictional nor factual, the film's storyline provides a perfect insight into the world that produced the Book of Kells.

BRINGING THE PAST TO LIFE

While contemporary Irish animation is a highly successful industry, its films are not often based on Irish themes. Buchelt argues that by basing the narrative and aesthetic of *The Secret of Kells* on Irish history and a Celtic visual style, Cartoon Saloon has produced a modern iteration of medieval culture. Not only does the film help modern audiences to learn about the past, the collaboration required to produce the animation has much in common with that behind the book that inspired it – multiculturalism is not an exclusively modern phenomenon.

Despite having long been recognised as a treasure trove of medieval artistry, the first complete full-colour facsimile edition of the Book of Kells was not published until 1990, and even though the original is on public display, only a limited number of pages can be viewed at any time. Thanks to *The Secret of Kells*, contemporary audiences can more easily access and enjoy an experience of medieval monastic Ireland in which storyline and aesthetics are intertwined.

As Buchelt concludes: 'By purposefully transmuting and transforming ancient, medieval, and modern visual icons of Ireland, transgressing boundaries of both time and space and interlacing them together with the film's narrative, *The Secret of Kells* performs an act of translation between past and present in which artists and intellectuals 1,200 years apart work together to entertain, to inform, and to inspire 21st century audiences.'

Behind the Research

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Research Objectives

Lisabeth C Buchelt specialises in medieval and nineteenth-century British and Irish literary and cultural studies.

Detail

Bio

Lisabeth C Buchelt, University of Nebraska—Omaha, has published on tenth-century Old English poetry; gospel book design in ninth-century Ireland; early medieval Hiberno-Latin poetry; modern Irish visual arts; nineteenth-century vampire narratives; and occult imagery in the drama of WB Yeats. She won *New Hibernia Review*'s Roger McHugh Award for Outstanding Article (2012); a fellowship from the National University of Ireland—Galway Moore Institute for Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences (2014); and is a Fulbright alumna.

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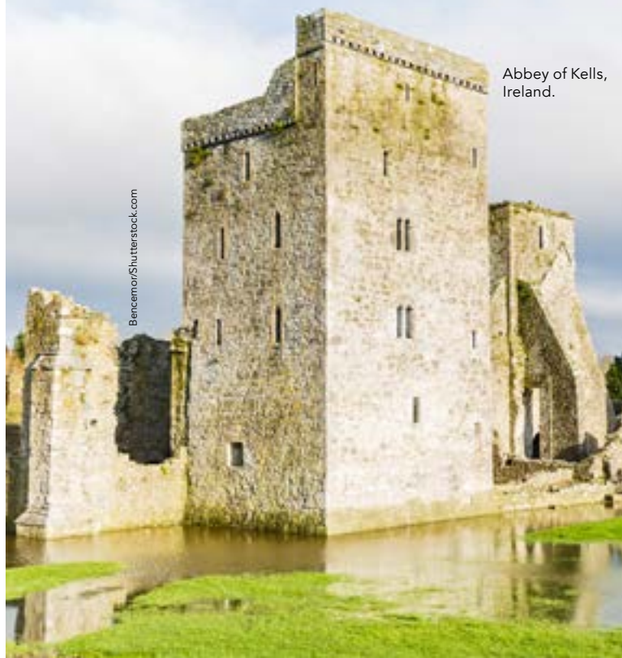
Personal Response

What is it about animation that made it such a successful medium to tell the story of the Book of Kells?

That's a wonderful question. One thing, I think, is that the Book of Kells' aesthetic, although a static object, is one of animated visuality. The opening pages of each of the four Christian Gospels are perfect examples of this. Most scholars agree that these 'carpet pages' were intended to function as meditative tools, much as mandalas function in other spiritual traditions; as complex visual cues upon which to focus so that the reader's mind may enter a state that can see much more than just the words on the page. That is, gazing at, for example, the 'In Principio' page that opens the gospel of John – the very words on the page are so integrated with the various interlace designs and details that almost the only way to find the letters to form the words is to 'move' the visuals around with your mind's eye. To animate them. There would be no way to truly capture this immaterial aspect of the Book of Kells in a live-action film. Another thing, I think, is that the art of hand-drawn animation with its need for meticulous attention to detail and the artists' relationship to the finished product is not mediated through another (such as an actor) is almost identical to the relationship the medieval artists must have had to the Book of Kells. The readers or viewers are the immediate recipients of the artists' creation, rather receiving the artists' interpretation through another's interpretation. This provides us with the means to interact directly with the object; it becomes a very intimate relationship.



Abbey of Kells, Ireland.

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