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# A Bird Flight from Iceland to Ireland: Transculturality and Intermediality in Pat Collins' Biopic *Song of Granite*

Louise Sampagnay



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Speaking of the legacy of Flaherty's 1934 documentary *Man of Aran* and the perceived dangers "inherent in its romantic excesses", M. McLoone suggests that this awareness has greatly influenced New Irish cinema in so far as

the myths embodied in Irish landscape and the ideological construction of the west of Ireland – the way in which a particular form of Irish identity was imagined, in other words – have provided one important theme in recent Irish cinema. Thus one of this new Irish cinema's main projects has been to demythologise rural Ireland and to question the ascetic nationalism that underpinned it. (McLoone 50)

Upon a first viewing of Pat Collins' 2017 *Song of Granite* and a rapid glance at the reference list in its closing credits, a sense of paradox emerges: throughout this unconventional biopic which systematically intertwines the life periods, appearances of the main character at the ages of 10, 45 and 60 (on the screen and in voiceovers<sup>1</sup>), all levels of narration and diegetic times of narration appear to be well anchored in a culturally homogenous context of traditional Irish rural life. Despite the use of archival footage and audio archive, this hybrid black-and-white film (shot almost entirely in the Irish language<sup>2</sup>) could be described as a partly imagined, hauntingly oneiric and boldly poetic retelling of the life of famous sean-nós<sup>3</sup> singer Seosamh Ó hÉanaí (Joseph Heaney, 1919-1984) from birth to death. Ó hÉanaí spent his childhood in the scenic Connemara Gaeltacht, then emigrated to Scotland where he married and worked in a Glasgow factory. Not unlike a migratory bird whose instinct is to be always on the move, Ó hÉanaí soon abandoned his family indefinitely and left for America where he worked as a doorman in New York, while continuously performing and recording sean-nós songs. Yet Collins' film suggests that his physical connection to the rocks and rough nature, as well as his tender human connections from his native Connemara uncannily haunted him throughout his life. Moreover, upon a closer look, there appears to be cross-cultural echoes everywhere, as evident from a quick look at the closing credits, in which dozens of references figures: songs, literature, poetry, essays from both Irish and, less expectedly, foreign contexts.

Thus, it may come as a surprise that neither the press reviews nor the only academic article focusing entirely on *Song of Granite* (O'Driscoll 2019) take the transcultural intermediality of the film into account<sup>4</sup>. I will be using the term intermediality as a translation of the French *intermédialité*; I shall use the prefix *trans-* to account for the phenomena of cross-cultural transfers.

<sup>1</sup> Played by actors Colm Seoighe, Mícheál Ó Confhaola and Macdara Ó Fátharta respectively.

<sup>2</sup> Seaghan Mac an tSionnaigh provides insightful comments about the few scenes in English, one of which is subtitled because of the thick Glaswegian accent of Ó hÉanaí's son. Mac an tSionnaigh refers to this multilingual context (Scottish English, Scottish Gaelic and Irish Gaelic) as an "interlingual communication": "*Cuireadh fotheidil Bhéarla leis ar fáil don mhéid a chloistear ó mhac Sheosaimh toisc blas tiubh Ghlaschú a bheith ar a chuid cainte, ach b'iontach í an chumarsáid idirtheangach a léirítear idir Ó hÉanaí agus an phearsa Albanach ón tsráid a dtugtar caimeo dó sa scannán seo.*" (Mac an tSionnaigh 25)

<sup>3</sup> "Old style" (literal translation) of dancing/singing. Sean-nós singing is a very ancient, highly ornamented style of Irish-language singing a *cappella* (sometimes containing a few words or lines in English or Latin).

<sup>4</sup> However, Seaghan Mac an tSionnaigh stresses the multilingual dimension of the film, pointing out that *SoG* had been selected as Ireland's official entry for Best Foreign Language Film at the Oscars: "*Cuirigi saoihtineacht im leith má maith libh é ach cuirimse go dána fé bhur mbráid gur saothar ilteangach é an scannán ann féin, anuas ar a bheith i gcatagóir na scannán i dteangacha iasachta.*" (Mac an tSionnaigh 24)

I therefore prefer using the prefix *inter-* to identify cross-medial dimensions specifically at stake here.

When trying to explain what intermediality is, the hardest task is to distinguish between the medium and the support, between the institutionalised media and mediation in the broad sense (narrative mediation in the sense of Paul Ricoeur, linguistic mediation, juridical mediation). For the question still stands: what do we mean by "mediality" when, by means of a simple prefix (*inter*), we claim to open an entire field of research? Should we not tackle the problem head-on, by connecting the materiality of human mediations (supports, but also technical devices) to the ideal mediation of togetherness? ... Intermediality could be understood as the correlation between the materialities with which community challenges itself, constructs itself, thinks of its own exchanges on the one side and, on the other side, its properly political aims, its ideal of community. (Villeneuve 70)<sup>5</sup>

In addition to Paul Ricoeur's paradigm of *mediation* (Ricoeur 112-113) and the underlying political implications summarised in Villeneuve's analysis, the terminological elucidation she offers here is a sound starting point from which to account for the amount of references to literary materials stemming from outside the film's diegesis which strikes the audience of *Song of Granite*<sup>6</sup>. Various forms of transtextuality<sup>7</sup> open and close the film. These intertextual references, in the form of direct quotes, form an easily identifiable intermediality: they are visually displayed in the subtitles by double quotation marks or italics, and are equally present in the lyrics of songs performed on the screen, as well as in the self-reflective and philosophical quality of archival footage, or in real or reenacted interviews of Ó hÉanaí in the film. As a first-time viewer of *SoG*, one expects to see a biopic or a "documentary-of-sorts" (O'Driscoll 2019); yet one is confronted, from the outset to the end sequence, with an intense hybridity (from literature or poetry up to film script, and often through music simultaneously). It is this double hybridity of media and cultural sources in *SoG* which will be analysed in this article, which presupposes that both hypermediality and transculturality demonstrate bird-like qualities: musicality and mobility. Incidentally, both dimensions are also inherent to the screenwriting and to its wandering, singing protagonist.

While the reception of *SoG* has been unanimously positive, most reviewers (both in Ireland and abroad) rushed to hail the film as a success, in so far as it constituted first and foremost a hallmark for "traditional" Irish culture. While it is true that "Irish language<sup>8</sup> and songs burn bright"

<sup>5</sup> My translation. "Il n'est pas de tâche plus malaisée, lorsqu'on s'apprête à expliquer ce qu'est l'intermédialité, que de distinguer entre le médium et le support, entre le média institutionnalisé et la médiation au sens large (médiation narrative au sens de Paul Ricoeur, médiation du langage, médiation au sens juridique). Car la question demeure : qu'entendons-nous par 'médialité' lorsque, par le moyen d'un simple préfixe (*inter*), nous prétendons ouvrir tout un champ de la recherche ? Ne faut-il pas alors prendre le problème frontalement, en liant la matérialité des médiations humaines (les supports, mais aussi les dispositifs techniques) à l'idéal de médiation qui consiste à 'vivre ensemble' ? (...) L'intermédialité serait le rapport institué entre, d'une part, les matérialités par lesquelles la communauté s'interpelle elle-même, se construit, conçoit ses échanges ; et d'autre part, sa visée proprement politique, son idéal de communauté."

<sup>6</sup> Noted *SoG* throughout this article.

<sup>7</sup> I choose "transtextuality" (in Gérard Genette's typology) because of the greater fluidity of this hyperonym for all kinds of relationships between a given "hypertext" (I understand "text" here in an etymological, very large sense of the cultural *fabric* that makes up any artefact) and another "hypotext". (Genette 4-19)

<sup>8</sup> The Irish language is one of the strongest cultural pillars on which an Irish national identity is based during the Irish revival and Gaelic revival, which runs parallel to the emergence of a *national* consciousness throughout the island from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century on.

at the heart of the film (*Linden*), I want to argue that *SoG* is entirely constructed around a varied, rich and transcultural intermediality. I therefore intend to fill a gap in the reception of *SoG*, whose most basic intertextual dimensions (though obvious since they are clearly listed in the closing credits) have, so far, been overlooked by commentators. However, I will take into close consideration O'Driscoll's analysis of *SoG* in which she explores many a dichotomy in the biopic. She explores the extent to which the film resembles a patchwork made up of "poignant" contrasts – especially visible in the different types of *sean-nós* songs, standing out amongst other sub-genres of Irish traditional music heard and performed in *SoG*. She also analyses the power of rural and urban landscapes as anthropomorphic metaphors on the screen. I think one may regard the intertwining of this visual geographical aspects, meshed with these sharp musical and human contrasts, as a form of intermediality itself. Although I shall not focus on this particular aspect of landscape-related intermediality in the context of this article (since O'Driscoll has already done so compellingly), I would like to add to the exploration of what I think is an intermedial quality, while questioning some of the points she makes.

While I agree that

if (...) the current generation of Irish filmmakers are reluctant to depict the Irish landscape on screen for fear of reproducing stereotypical tropes, Collins does not harbour such a fear. He stands as one of the exceptions that offers a complex, mature treatment of the Irish landscape. (O'Driscoll 2019)

I argue that this new treatment of the Irish landscape is not merely physical: the "mature", representation of a stereotyped Connemara "landscape" (in every sense of the word), is first and foremost achieved through the use of intertexts and (more generally) of a deeply transcultural intermediality, rather than through the renewed treatment of a typically western Irish landscape. It should be noted that these transcultural intertexts and hypermediality are displayed within the film narrative by a bird metaphor.

I will first focus on the various types of intertexts on the screen, which are mostly deployed through many "direct" (yet still mediated) quotes from Irish legends and songs, shaping a problematic intermediality between music and literature at first, which is enhanced by the obsessive motif of the bird throughout *SoG*, especially thanks to the meditation on *Buile Shuibhne*. I will then proceed to highlight the ins and outs of a foreign intertext which unfolds through a non-conventional and innovative form of hypertextuality with Icelandic novelist Halldór Laxness, which deepens and complexifies the bird metaphor. I will eventually point out to what extent the intertwining of intermedial and transcultural phenomena through the bird motif bespeaks the intricacies of diegetic enunciation on all narrative levels in the film.

## A seemingly typical Irish tradition: *Song of Granite* as a meditation on the King-bird from *Buile Shuibhne*

The most obvious and expected intermedial relationships in *SoG* are the ones connecting the film to a rich tradition of Irish mythology. The idea of a stereotypical treatment of Irish literature – apart from the sean-nós songs performed on the screen by the three interpreters of Seosamh Ó hÉanaí, by other singers and heard in the voiceover – is manifest in the original choice for the film's title. As mentioned in the closing credits, it is borrowed from one of English cartographer Tim Robinson's chapters in his book *Connemara: a little Gaelic kingdom*<sup>9</sup>. Irish-language literature as a narrative object is foregrounded by the cyclic construction of *SoG*: it comes back every three or four sequences, and it opens and closes the film. Following the meaningful opening sequence (*currachs* in the night; cut to a mother giving birth; cut to an infant humming himself to sleep), the viewers are introduced to sean-nós and Irish storytelling simultaneously. One follows young Seosamh (Colm Seoighe) in the night, as he looks through the window, which mirrors the viewers discovering the scene by the mediation of the camera, a window into a narrative in itself. Seosamh's father sings a sean-nós song to a group of people sitting on the floor of a cottage; then, an old man tells the story of *Buile Shuibhne* (or "The Madness of Sweeney"). The mere fact that the first non-sung text of the film is an age-old *story* underlines how seminal traditional storytelling is in *SoG*. Moreover, it brings to the fore the existence of a transtextual relationship between the shooting script and Irish mythology, rendering it visible to viewers via the use of double quotation marks in the subtitles<sup>10</sup>.

Paradoxically, 'Buile Shuibhne', though being quintessentially Irish, has little connection to the Irish folk tale repertoire, rendering its paramount importance in a film placing Irish music and legends at its core even more surprising. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this medieval romance about Suibhne, a King gone mad, had been put to the fore by scholars (O'Keeffe 1913). Having been cursed by Saint Ronan, Suibhne is condemned to fly around the world naked, like a bird. The connection made between Ó hÉanaí as a bird-like protagonist, its wanderings and a certain form of madness (for instance in the brutal way with which he abandons his family) is displayed throughout the film. One could therefore consider O'Keeffe's translation as a hypotext of *SoG*'s screenplay, as demonstrated in some of his lyrical phrasing of Suibhne's mad bird qualities: "Through Ronan's curse he went, like any bird of the air, in madness and imbecility." (O'Keeffe 15). O'Keeffe even considers that "throughout the story (Suibhne) speaks as though he imagined himself a bird" (O'Keeffe 33).

However, Collins seems to have found the idea of turning Ó hÉanaí into a 20<sup>th</sup>-century avatar of mad Suibhne in Ó hÉanaí's biography (Williams and O'Laoire 2011<sup>11</sup>). The reference to Suibhne

<sup>9</sup> Robinson himself borrows it from Patrick Pearse – this three-step mediation is already a telltale sign that intermediality is enshrined in the very title of the film. (Robinson 123)

<sup>10</sup> Although the film has been shown on TG4 (the Irish-language channel) where subtitles are optional, the film has not been dubbed and it is impossible to hide the subtitles on the DVD. Thus most Irish speakers will be made aware of the intertextual dimension by the presence of typographically marked quotes, provided they keep an eye on the bottom of the screen.

<sup>11</sup> "It is also worth noting the second phrase, 'like the small birds among the trees.' This reminds us of a much older text, the story of Suibhne Geilt, Mad Sweeney, who was driven mad by a saint's curse and also spent his time like a bird among the trees. We are not suggesting that (Ó hÉanaí) was aware of this connection. (...) These coincidences are just

is stressed during a performance of the English-language sean-nós song, "the Rocks of Bawn" in *SoG*. As noted by Williams and O'Laoire, "in most performances of this song, Ó hÉanaí generally chooses not to ornament a particular opening phrase to a verse later in the song: *and my curse attend you Suibhne.*" (Williams and O'Laoire 62-63). This contrastingly stark verse makes the viewers aware of the importance of Suibhne as a fictional double of Ó hÉanaí. Pat Collins and his screenwriter Eoghan Mac Giolla Bhríde may have been inspired by Ó hÉanaí's own relationship to this song, which he described in a 1983 interview as "the daddy of all Irish folk songs in the English language" (Williams and O'Laoire 129):

(Ó hÉanaí) treated this song, in a typically Irish fashion, as a dialogue and filled in the gaps in the dialogue as a narrator, saying who, what, and why, giving added determinacy to a rather unstable text. (Williams and O'Laoire 130-131)

This intertextual connection between a seemingly straightforward, culturally homogenous hypotext (the Irish medieval romance of Buile Shuibhne) and the script already underscores the idea of a great porosity of cultural borders. The storyteller opens the film with the words ("They were the first people to settle in Ireland." *SoG*, 00:05:44)<sup>12</sup> that literally invite the (intradiegetic) audience to listen to his story. By extension, these words invite the extradiegetic viewers of the film into its multi-level complex diegesis. Viewers are thereby prompted to penetrate the alien borders of an ancient culture, which hardly ever appears in films. Having subsequently narrated Suibhne's frenzy (who could not stand sharp sounds, which is undoubtedly an unsettling way of launching a biopic about a singer), the old storyteller proceeds, as a homodiegetic narrator within the film's narrative, to recite the 12<sup>th</sup>-century poem.

Through this direct quote, Collins deftly uses a device present in all forms of art, namely a *mise en abyme*: he embeds a poem within the story told to the audience, and this story is in turn located within the highest narrative level of the film. The doubly mediated nature of this poetic quote is once again conveyed through italics. This *mise en abyme* of mythological and poetic quotes, coupled with the embedded levels of narration, is rich and immediately stresses the need to consider this film as a palimpsest of songs and ancient literature. This in turn bespeaks an evident will to situate a film dealing with a peculiar, geographically limited genre of music (the sean-nós of the Gaeltacht) and its traditionally Irish cultural roots in a wider, transcultural framework. The *mise en abyme* also functions as a strong reminder, from the outset, that every language with a literature is a language of culture, and that all cultures are in contact with other times and places. Incidentally, this is one of Tim Robinson's argument in his book (Robinson 12-13). Is this meshing of narrative levels a coincidence or a conscious form of creative intermediality? It should be noted that this film contains echoes of an English cartographer's essay content in its title, and perhaps in its second sequence already.

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that – striking similarities with no real link. And yet they belong to the same literary and oral tradition." (Williams and O'Laoire, 171-172). This biography as well as an Irish-language one (Mac Con Iomaire 2007) are listed in the film credits.

<sup>12</sup> Unless I specify otherwise, all quotes from the film are English subtitles from the Irish.

*Buile Shuibhne* can be said to have characteristics likening it to elements of an old bardic cycle; it emerged at a time when the connection between song, poetry, and *mise en abyme* was alive and well. Its presence from the beginning of *SoG* suggests that Mac Giolla Bhríde attempts to rebuild this oft-forgotten historic bridge between song and poetry, arguably the oldest form of intermediality known to man: a bardic cycle, like many forms of ancient poetry across all cultures, was designed to be sung, which helped memorisation in ancient oral transmission. It would be vain to list all Irish-language literary intertexts in *SoG*'s shooting script. Let us mention some of the pieces of literature that figure in the closing credits: *Páipéir Bhána agus Páipéir Bhreaca* by Máirtín Ó Cadhain (1969), early Irish narratives from the 12<sup>th</sup>-century *Lebor na hUidre* (though some of these texts probably date back to the 8<sup>th</sup> century), legends from the collection *Irish Fairy Tales*, by James Stephens (1920). This abbreviated list prompts me to make two remarks.

Firstly, these materials are heterogeneous, and already mediated in their very conception. This mediation unfolds through numerous translations – for example, Stephens' *Irish Fairy Tales* were translated from the Irish or from older English versions, and gathered into his collection<sup>13</sup>. In *SoG*, the legends are translated back into Irish for the shooting script from this mediated English-language version, and then "translated" back for the fourth or fifth time into their "original" 1920 English version – for the subtitles. They are never typographically signalled as direct quotes in the subtitles, although they are quoted verbatim in voiceovers. This dimension of mediation can also be accounted for by the genre to which the hypotext belongs: although mythology is a traditional form of a hypotext in a context of transtextuality and intermediality, the presence of Ó Cadhain's essay (a philosophical and partly autobiographic text about his writer's craft, the Gaelic Revival and Irish literature in the context of language politics in 1940's Ireland) is more surprising, especially considering that some of the quotes from this 1969 lecture in the film are satirical. However, even though Ó Cadhain's life (1906-1970) may be construed as a constant, nimble birdflight between many languages<sup>14</sup>, the viewers can only realise the similarities between Ó hÉanaí and the Irish-language author, a native Irish speaker from Connemara, upon seeing the reference list at the end of *SoG* – unless they identify the passages from Ó Cadhain's text from memory.

Secondly, even the most expected traditional Irish intertexts are in fact transcultural themselves – but is not any language with a literature by essence cross-cultural? For instance, the direct quotation from *Buile Suibhne* here reminds one that even a quintessentially Irish hero is himself a traveller, who, like "any miserable bird going from wilderness to wilderness" (O'Keefe 53), can hop from mountain top to mountain top, through Scotland, the West coast of England, Wales, and is not confined to Ireland. The transcultural dimension of even the most stereotypically Irish language and literature is perfectly encapsulated in a Connemara scene. Having climbed on top of a mountain surveying a Connemara lake, 40 year-old Seosamh appears with his back to the camera in a rift between two rocks, facing a mountain landscape which appears through the rift in

<sup>13</sup> It is surprising that Mac Giolla Bhríde, an Irish speaker, did not quote from Irish-language works by Séan Ó Súilleabháin or Séamus Ó Duillearga.

<sup>14</sup> Originally a primary school teacher, Ó Cadhain became a lecturer and a Professor for Irish Literature at Trinity College Dublin from 1956 to his death in 1970. A native Irish speaker, he was also a gifted linguist and could speak and write half-a-dozen other languages fluently. More information about his linguistic, professional and language activism related activities can be found in Alan Titley's translation of Ó Cadhain's 1949 novel *Cré na Cille* – arguably the most prominent narrative in Irish-language literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Ó Cadhain iii-vi).



the background; cut to a long close up on his pensive face. In the voiceover, older Seosamh's voice quotes a long excerpt (the intertextual nature is signalled by italics this time) from Ó Cadhain's lecture *Páipéir Bhána agus Páipéir Bhreaca*, entirely written in modern Irish. The text contains lyrical passages, such as the one quoted at this point in *SoG* and put into Ó hÉanaí's mouth via the voiceover:

I am the age of the Old Hag of Beara. The age of Newgrange. The age of the Great Deer. I have two thousand years of that stinking sow that was Ireland resonating in my ears, in my mouth, in my eyes, in my head, in my dreams. These horses, each with the hammer and sickle on their flanks, they were the horses of the Emir of Bokhara, they were the Golden Horde, Genghis Khan's cavalry. They were also the slender brown horses in my father's and grandfather's stories. **And who truly knows that they were not?** (*in English*) *Oh no one knows through what wild centuries roams back the rose.* (*SoG*, 01:27:09 → 01:29:31)

Beyond its self-deprecating cultural irony (through this ultimate question, in bold above), this quote from Ó Cadhain constitutes a summation of every foreign influence which dwells in Ireland, be it in its imagination or its history. It is deeply telling that the only piece of modern Irish-language literature that appears in the hypotext of *SoG* displays a dimension of witty cultural reflexivity, and precisely refers to a cross-cultural depth. Even more surprising: the subtitles display an original translation<sup>15</sup> into English (quoted above, made for the purposes of the film) of Ó Cadhain's literary essay, and this lyrical passage is concluded by a single line from a radically different piece of quintessentially *English* literature, namely the verse "or no one knows through what wild centuries roams back the rose". This line from British poet Walter de la Mare's 1912 poem "All that's past" is the single instance of English *literary* language said *in English* in the whole film, which evidently puts it to the fore.<sup>16</sup>

Let us summarise the transcultural and intertextual dimension of this sequence: at this point, within four minutes, Ó hÉanaí has been monologuing in a voiceover about the alleged "quintessential" traditional Ireland which many film critics think *SoG* stands for – and which is indeed visually omnipresent throughout the film, via numerous long or establishing shots of typical Connemara landscapes, as analysed by O'Driscoll). The intertexts in this sequence alone, and the cross-cultural dimension their very content displays, form a whirlwind of historical and cultural references from various cultural spheres (pre-Christian Partholón, USSR, Newgrange, Mongol hordes etc.) However, the hypertext itself (direct quotes from Ó Cadhain's literary essay) is undoubtedly Irish in many cases – it is an original piece of Irish-language writing after all. Nevertheless, even before reaching the proper transcultural, hard-to-decipher *foreign* (Icelandic)

<sup>15</sup> To my knowledge.

<sup>16</sup> The actual verse states "roves back" as opposed to the subtitles' "roams back". The presence of a subtitle for De la Mare's verse is already surprising: it is unneeded, since the voiceover switches to English. Even though there is no way to know whether this is a mistake or a deliberate rewriting of the verse, this simple fact draws attention to what transcultural mediations, quotes, and re-translations risk losing or conversely can gain (depending on one's standpoint) within this ambitious use of intermediality. Alternatively, this mistake could be a deliberate misquote, indicating that the rose is intended as a reference to "Róisín Dubh" (the name Róisín means small rose), a love song which is performed in the film. The rose and the constant physical changes it undergoes may metaphorically refer to the numerous iterations of the story of Ireland mentioned in Ó Cadhain's quote above and displayed throughout the film. Despite its many cultural layers, political and historical changes, Ireland paradoxically remains a coherent entity through time.

intertext, the viewer is confronted with a patchwork of “Irish” hypotexts that are actually not so stereotypically Irish. But let us take a closer look at the openly alien intermediality in Collins’ film, focusing on the bird metaphor as a narrative way of echoing transcultural and transmedial phenomena through space and time.

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## An original use of transcultural intermediality by a "song-bird of the air": Icelandic author Halldór Laxness’ epic novel *Sjálfstætt fólk* within the film narrative

One could hastily assume that the only instance of a clearly marked foreign intertext in *SoG* is the one listed in the closing credits: a direct quote from 1935’s epic novel *Sjálfstætt fólk*, published in its first English translation in 1945 under the title *Independent People*. This typographically non-signalled direct quote in the subtitles is once again put in a voiceover, within the poignant end sequence – a hallucination of Seosamh dying, where he mentally revisits scenes (and the scenery) of his childhood as in a birdflight over his own memories.

His mother taught him to sing. And when he had grown up and had listened to the world’s song, he felt that there could be no greater happiness than to return to her song. In her song dwelled the most precious and the most incomprehensible dreams of mankind. The heath grew into the heavens in those days. The song-birds of the air listened in wonder to this song, the most beautiful song in life. (Laxness 219, Chapter 30 "Of song")

The intermedial relationship between *Independent People* and *SoG* is systematically built around the use of the bird as an obsessive image in the film. In *SoG*, the imagery of the birds is deployed both intradiegetically and in the sheer sensorial fabric of the film, since one can hear birds singing in virtually every natural scene<sup>17</sup>. Birds constitute a leitmotiv in Laxness’ novel itself, and within the diegesis of the film, it immediately draws the viewer’s attention back to the "first people who came to Ireland" which opened *SoG* in the sequence I mentioned in the first part of this article. One should remember that this phrase was within a quintessentially Irish literary intertext (*Buile Shuibhne*), which underlines once again how very intertwined transcultural and intermedial connections are.

They had tremendous insight and hidden knowledge of many things. They had knowledge of the future. They could speak the language of the birds. They could see as the birds can see from the sky above. They could look over the whole land.

Suibhne was cursed by St. Rónán because he killed one of his clerics. From a vision he saw in the sky, he heard the noise of the upcoming battle and fled. Part of the curse was that he could not endure sharp sounds. He flew from the scene of battle in a frenzy. He spent years hopping from tree to tree for he couldn’t set foot on land again.

And, like the birds, he could never again trust humans. (*SoG*, 00:05:48→ 00:06:53)

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<sup>17</sup> Those numerous, very long shots of rural landscapes, along with the sound of river, wind, birds, the sea etc. remind us of Andrei Tarkovsky – whether or not a conscious intermedial connection was intended.

There is arguably a generic connection at hand here, throughout different periods and cultures: the epic dimension of Irish mythology (Suibhne as an indefatigable traveller) is obvious, and Laxness' novel is a modern epos: the main character, Guðbjartur Jónsson, is obsessed with Nordic and Celtic mythologies: his land is said to have been cursed by Irish Saint Colm Cille/Columba himself. Thus, Ó hÉanaí's personal itinerary is mediated through the lens of an epic intermediality, which might imply that despite his faults (abandoning his children), something bigger than him (a sense of epic fate, inherent in many ancient cultures) was leading his steps – as though he were a migrating bird incapable of settling permanently.

The presence of birds in *SoG* is an obsessive leitmotiv, and the deftly constructed intermediality with Laxness' novel reveals Collins' and Mac Giolla Bhríde's sterling work in terms of diegetic symmetry: the final sequence unfolds through the narration of the voiceover, which once again bristles with intermedial references. As regards the transcultural dimension of an intertextual relationship with Laxness, every auditive, visual or textual occurrence of the birds is to be understood as a prolepsis to the final direct quote from *Independent People* mentioned above. The connection between *Independent People* and *SoG* is undoubtedly the most compelling argument for exploring intermediality within Collins' film. The sheer presence of an Icelandic intertext is ambitious in regard to audience (viewers can be already unsettled by an unfamiliar culture and language, which are perhaps hermetic for the layman) and points once again to a multi-layered translation process. Laxness' novel has not been translated into Irish. For the purposes of the film, this passage has been translated into Irish, not from the Icelandic but from the 1999 English translation by J.A. Thompson, whose version is displayed in the subtitles in the aforementioned direct quote from the novel.

Conversely, it is evidently paramount that the novel which Collins and Mac Giolla Bhríde have chosen as a central literary intertext for their film (significantly, the verbatim quote from Laxness' Chapter 30 is the very last words one *hears* in *SoG*), contains itself a reference to Ireland – first and foremost, through the reference mentioned above to Colm Cille (Columba or "the fiend Kolumkilli") and its opening paragraphs.

In early times, say the Icelandic chronicles, men from the Western Islands came to live in this country, and when they departed, left behind them crosses, bells, and other objects used in the practice of sorcery. (...) Their leader was Kolumkilli the Irish, a sorcerer of wide repute. In those days there was great fertility of the soil in Iceland. But when the Norsemen came to settle here, the Western sorcerers were forced to flee the land, and old writings say that Kolumkilli, determined on revenge, laid a curse on the invaders, swearing that they would never prosper here. (Laxness 11)

This opening mirrors the second sequence (the "first people who came to Ireland") of *SoG* which I have mentioned twice already. This reciprocity of Irish and Icelandic references can be read as a fecund form of intermediality, and a form of mutual acknowledgment by two artistic traditions. Both Irish and Icelandic cultures are often presented as stereotypically insular and secondary compared to bigger cultures (respectively British and Danish), perceived as more influential. Yet, the sheer fact that they can respond to each other through different artefacts (novel and film) throughout decades demonstrates the transcultural dimension of intermedial relations. Cultural and medial borders are crossed as effortlessly as in bird flight.

This points to a more subtle form of intermediality: however ambitious this apparently simple direct quote actually is, it is not the most creative as regards intermediality in *SoG*. In addition to the low-key intermediality of Laxness' and Collins' openings, *SoG* features a creative form of free adaptation of another passage<sup>18</sup>. In this long oneiric sequence (*SoG*, 01:20:02 → 01:24:31), older Seosamh (Macdara Ó Fátharta) first appears lying in the dark, staring at the ceiling in a silence broken by the songs of birds. This too is of significance and is followed by the only silent clear cut of the film (without music or sound-over building bridges between shots or scenes) which suggests he has dreamt the events of the rest of the sequence. Cut to a Connemara field where singing men build a wall, old Seosamh walks through the entire length of the shot. Cut to archive footage, with images of currachs at sea, people singing. Another clear cut to an elderly Seosamh standing on a familiar Connemara road, then standing in an unknown church. While the other shots are of familiar settings (perfectly mirroring the opening sequence where young Seosamh did similar movements in these same long shots), the church is the first setting in this final sequence which is unfamiliar to the viewer. This visual novelty is brought to the fore by an auditive one: a new genre of music is heard for the first time – namely sacred church music. In a striking instance of diglossia and intermediality, a Catholic hymn in Latin, sung by the congregation, is dissolved by the singing of the birds and the sound of rolling waves. Old Seosamh, having entered the church, stays at the back and watches the congregation sing. An unidentified small boy turns back, kneeling backwards on the pew – thus becoming the only member of the congregation not facing the altar – and stares silently at Seosamh: the previously singing little bird stares gravely at its future agonising self.

This subtle intermedial reference to Laxness seems to have only a remote connection with the actual "biopic", though arguably it could represent old Seosamh's attendance at his own funeral. This apparently remote connection is an exact adaptation of the church passage in Laxness' novel however, but with a different set of characters. This choice of aptly transposing to the screen a meaningful passage from the Icelandic novel, as well as the little boy's haunting look at the camera while in the church, is one of the reasons why I would refute O'Driscoll's argument according to which:

Ó hÉanaí is rooted but unrooted; he has no connection with his children and no sense or interest in lineage (...) Instead for him the songs are the link to the past and to place, they're his offspring, and they hold and express for him the complexity of life. (O'Driscoll 2019)

There appears to be a connection with younger generations in *SoG*, precisely thanks to the Icelandic intermediality: it is this literary intertextuality, and not only the obvious musical intermediality, which is seminal here; the bird flight and motif also represent a bridge between present and past. Furthermore, this creative intermedial connection underscores the implication that a transcultural transmission to future generations is possible, as is equally apparent in the diegetic blurring of multiple narrative levels in *SoG*.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> This passage is too long to quote but can be found in Laxness, 217-18 ("He wandered weeping away from the farm..." to "But he kept the memory of this Sunday ever.").

<sup>19</sup> This idea, beyond the intertext (if this argument were not enough) is in turn underlined by the following scene, for which I offer an alternative interpretation to that of O'Driscoll:

## Intertwining intermedial and transcultural phenomena: a way of bespeaking enunciation issues through the bird metaphor?

How does one account for the emphasis on transcultural intermediality in a film hinging upon the Irish musical tradition of *sean-nós*? On the one hand, this could be interpreted (as I strived to demonstrate above) as a way of conveying the fact that all cultures are constantly aware of one another, maintaining an unrelenting dialogue, despite nationalist or chauvinistic claims that a cultural artefact can embody the essence of a nation and could only ever have been conceived by one particular nation. Even when a tradition is geographically contained (as is *sean-nós* in the Gaeltacht), it derives from other cultures in its very fabric, as suggested in *SoG* by means of a transcultural intermediality. On the other hand, a further explanation might be linked to the question of narrative voices within the film. This final hypothesis may further ground our notion of *SoG*'s being structured around the bird metaphor as an inconspicuous yet constant narrative instance capable of crossing temporal, cultural and medial borders.

The complexity and entanglement of a plurality of voices is most obviously perceptible in the intradiegetic presence of Ó hÉanaí in three ages of life: at times, these appearances are non-chronological, and even simultaneous, and they are always mediated on the highest narrative level by voiceovers of middle-aged or old Seosamh. This makes him the extradiegetic narrator of his own life – even though most of what he says in the voiceovers actually consists in excerpts from various intertexts, which complicates the narration further. This non-linearity of diegetic instances and within the order of enunciation reaches its zenith in one of the final sequences. Older Seosamh is pictured lying in bed, in yet another eery, oneiric shot. Cut to the Connemara mountain landscape of the beginning (where the river, the wind, birds are heard). Older Seosamh enters the shot, walks along the stream and spots a thread flying off the heather. It is the same thread he had tenderly tied around a blade of grass as a child (as shown in the third sequence), having pulled it from his shabby jumper so as to shelter nesting eggs (which once again hint at the bird motif) from the wind and rain. While old Seosamh, still with his back to the camera, turns his head wistfully upon seeing the thread, young Seosamh is sitting further back, in the background of this long shot. He watches his older self go towards him, stands up and walks up to him, approaching the camera from the opposite bank of the stream. During the following dialogue, each character (each one the same) stands on either side of the stream — with all the metaphoric meanings enclosed in their positions in space, even before they start conversing:

**Young Seosamh (YS)** — I haven't seen you here before. How long have you been here?

**Old Seosamh (OS)** — Seven years.

YS — That's a long time.

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"When Ó Confhaola, as Ó hÉanaí, closes his eyes to sing he melts away from the crowd. Even though he holds the hand of a man throughout the song (...), Ó Confhaola exudes the air of someone who is totally alone and unaware of the audience. This is enhanced, arguably, by the fact that the song is in Irish and – unless a native speaker – the viewer feels a voyeur, watching the poetic utterances of a man expressing something no-one else understands."

I would offer a different interpretation: this scene displays a moving and close connection towards the rest of mankind, beyond the homodiegetic level and beyond the radical alterity of an unknown language. This unconditional bond with others is encapsulated in this outstretched hand, which is held tightly for a 6-minute long full shot.

OS — I would wait twice as long for a poem.

YS — Have you caught good poems?

OS — The poems I am fit for. No person can get more than that for a man's readiness is his limit. It was foretold by a man of knowledge that I should receive All Knowledge by the bank of this river.

YS — And then? (...) What would you do with All Knowledge?

OS — A question of great weight. I could answer it if I had All Knowledge, but not until then. What would you do, young man?

YS — I would make a poem. (*SoG* 01:20:47 → 01:26:17)

There is another strong hypotext here, which any viewer acquainted with Irish mythology may spot, namely the “Salmon of Knowledge” (in which Fionn Mac Cumhaill is reported to spend seven years fishing) from the Fenian cycle. Central here is the fact that a legendary hypotext is meshed with a dialogue deliberately disclosing interrogations about the identity of the narrator: the film editing has the effect of suggesting that this scene is a dream by dying Seosamh. Yet this could equally be a dream or fantasy on the part of young Seosamh, who has been seen roaming through this very landscape and protecting eggs (a symbol of arguably artistic fecundity) at the beginning of *SoG*. This is indisputably a creative way to use intermediality: a mythological hypotext is reflected upon metalinguistically within a cinematographic dialogue laden with ontological and narrative meanings; visually, the immemorial landscape underpins the timelessness of myth’s narration. Furthermore, the quest for poetry embedded in the film is another form of intermediality, which is seminal in a “biopic” normally focusing on a man who was a singer – and not a poet. In the dialogue, the poems metaphorically stand for the uncaught fish, but they also synecdochally represent the songs – the poetic dimension being only one aspect of a song. Thereby, the identity of the enunciating subject – singer? Child-poet who “makes the poem” in the dialogue? Mythological hero? – is blurred. However, all these subjects could be encapsulated in the figure of Suibhne, which could justify our initial hypothesis whereby *SoG* is identified as a meditation on *Buile Shuibhne* and Seosamh Ó hÉanaí (as a semi-fictional protagonist) as a modern avatar of mad King-bird Suibhne.

Correspondingly, the use of archive footage is ambitious diegetically speaking, and complicates the narration: as pointed out above, many sequences of *SoG* display confusing voiceovers; one is required to make a guess as to the identity of the person who is talking<sup>20</sup> – a similar phenomenon occurs when one listens to overlapping bird songs in the film. In this instance again, a creative form of intermediality is used: real-life interviews are reenacted in dialogues, and partly rewritten to suit the ambitious enunciation project deployed in the film. This diegetic device corresponds to an intricate form of narrativity already: at first glance, one wonders whether this is the faithful rendition of a real-life interview based on archives, or a made-up interview. After a short research, it appears to be a blend of both, which is seminal but arguably complicates the analysis: old Seosamh is interviewed by Sean Williams (co-author of Ó hÉanaí’s biography *Bright Star of the West* cited above) in the front porch of a country house in the USA. One hears the wind and birds in the background – almost as loud as the actors’ voices:

<sup>20</sup> Such as the unidentified voices of native English speakers with a strong Glaswegian accent. These audio archives appear to be testimonies of Ó hÉanaí’s children, though it is not explicit.

**Seosamh:** (*in English*) I probably didn't sing it... well... or with any feeling, you know, because I... I didn't know what I was doing or understand what I was doing. But I developed my own way of doing it. I put myself in Suibhne's place. (*SoG* 01:08:17)

This assessment, combined with the sound entanglement (the birdsongs covering the man's voice) further justifies the connection between King Suibhne, the bird motif and Ó hÉanaí. However, I could not find any strong evidence to suggest that this scene represents a reenactment of a real-life interview: it appears to have been entirely invented by Collins and Mac Giolla Bhríde, in a fecund case of intermediality – filmic fiction reinforcing a message conveyed by audio archives (i.e. that Ó hÉanaí had indeed a great awareness of what he was doing narratively as a performer<sup>21</sup>), by adding an extra layer of poetry:

**Seosamh** (*in Irish*) — Do you know in all the old stories why it is that the warrior always kills the beast?

**Sean Williams** — I don't know.

Seosamh — Because it is the warrior who tells the story.

Williams — How do you mean?

Seosamh — Sometimes I don't know if I'm the warrior or the beast. (*SoG* 01:15:09 → 01:15:39)

This medley of voices of narration in a number of sequences in close succession – some of which are mentioned above: invented dialogue as a voiceover, followed by a real-life dialogue about Fionn Mac Cumhaill, followed by another invented bit of interview, then by a fairy tale (“The Story of Tuan Mac Cairill” from Stephens’ *Irish Fairy Tales*) – all of this within 7 minutes, highlights the blurring of identities (narrator, singer, storyteller): who narrates the story? In spite of the presence of double quotation marks or italics, there is something slightly unsettling in the entanglement of different narrative levels. Going back to Ricœur, cited at the beginning of the present work, this brings to the fore a broader interrogation about the status of enunciation, which is perhaps what is at stake in any form of intermediality – why use different supports at all if the narrative which one wishes to convey is straightforwardly self-sufficient? Nonetheless, the last two quotes from the film support this article’s statement that the bird motif functions as a metaphor throughout the film, echoing both transcultural mobility within the film narrative (Ó hÉanaí as a modern avatar of mad King-bird Suibhne) and transmedial endeavours in the very conception of *SoG*.

<sup>21</sup> As apparent in this excerpt from audio archives that follows as a voiceover:

"(*in English*) **Sean Williams** : — when there are several characters in a song or story, how do you decide which character you become?

**Seosamh** : — I put myself in the place of the man who is telling, who is the main part of that story. (...)

— Seosamh, what you mean is you get the feelings *as if* you were him?

— Yeah, well thats what it means, yeah."

(*SoG* 01:16:09 → 01:17:21)

## In sum

This juxtaposition or at times superposition of an apparently non-problematic, quintessentially Irish intertext on the one hand, and invented dialogues which reflect upon the status of the narrator and the nature of enunciation in a non-conventional biopic is seminal in *SoG*. So is the last shot of the film as regards intermediality. In the first completely silent shot of the film, right after Seosamh, in his dying hallucination, pictures going back to his childhood, an unidentified hand traces on a white wall. It is the last strophe of "Scél lem dúib" ("*I bring a story*"), which is thought to be one of the oldest poems in the Irish language (8<sup>th</sup> century):

Ro gab úacht  
etti én;  
aigre ré;  
é mo scél.<sup>22</sup>

Is this ultimate instance of intertextuality simply another pretext to reflect on the meaning of narration through a final reference to the bird metaphor? The lyrical 'I' of the old Irish poem is taken up post-mortem by an imagined rendition of Ó hÉanaí within the film's fictive diegesis. Is this a quintessentially Irish way to close the narrative circle of *SoG*? The obsessive image of birds, ultimately building yet another bridge to the Icelandic hypotext of *SoG* seems to speak against this interpretation. However, this last shot certainly underpins a metalinguistic form of intermediality: at the end of a film shot almost entirely in Irish, this is the first time one sees the Irish language in its written form, in the physicality of its words. But significantly, it is not the most logical way to represent the language, since it is a version of Irish that has become a stranger to itself: it has its ancient form (which differs from the modern Irish heard throughout *SoG*), and even its former alphabet (the traditional Gaelic type, although not displayed in the original semi-uncial script). That one only sees this written form in the closing shot, by an unknown hand, has two effects: on the one hand, it stands in sharp contrast to a film that is narratively organised around a musical but more generally auditive form of intermediality; on the other hand, it emphasises once again how simultaneously enriched and blurred narration can become through the mediations of added intermedial layers.

<sup>22</sup> The translation displayed on the screen is rather loose and incomplete: 'Birds don't sing songs of glory. Ice wrapped wings. That's my story'. Seaghan Mac an tSionnaigh remarks that the English subtitles do not match the writing on the wall: only line two and four are translated. "*Más ea, ní fhreagraíonn na fotheidil Bhéarla don sliocht seo a roghnaíodh. Is é atá sna fotheidil Bhéarla ná 'ice wrapped wings, that's my story' – gan ansin ach líne a dó agus líne a ceathair amháin.*" (Mac an tSionnaigh 24)

Perhaps the freedom in the last translation hints to a fundamental deficiency of translingual communication, which is thought to be overcome by this final use of transmediality on screen.



In line with what I have tried to demonstrate throughout this article, one could say that intermediality in the shape of a dense literary (poetry, myths, essays, novels) transcultural intertext is as paramount in *Song of Granite* as musical and filmic intermediality is. This in turn is inconspicuously but obsessively compounded by the bird metaphor throughout the film – a narrative figure capable of crossing cultural, temporal and medial borders. By way of concluding, I would like to reflect on the notion of intermediality again: one scene, situated right at the end of the first part of *SoG* (focused on Ó hÉanaí's childhood, though young Seosamh reappears at the end alongside his older self) underlines the aporetic dimension of the prefix *inter-*.



This shot (see still above) lasts for about five minutes, while Seosamh's father (sitting on the left), sings in the microphone for the recorder. Sitting on the right of the table, a scholar has come (presumably from the city) to record sean-nós songs. While his father sings, Seosamh appears far in the background, through both doorways, roaming through the field. He then walks through both doors and appears for several seconds with a strong backlight, which turns him into shadow. This highlights the extent to which Ó hÉanaí, like a migratory bird, is constantly in a state of transition, dwelling on a permanent "threshold" (as noted by O'Driscoll, hence the long scenes showing him as a doorman in New York). And indeed, this last childhood scene epitomises such an understanding: while he is still crossing the field in the background, Seosamh is in the tender, protected narrative space of his Connemara village. Once he has reached the foreground, he has irrevocably entered the wider, more hostile world. Upon a subsequent conversation with the folklore collector, who offers to record his voice as well, Seosamh is made aware of the interest the outside world may have for the idiosyncratic culture of his village and the Gaeltacht as a whole. This is the narrative point where young Seosamh realises he can bring his sean-nós songs to the greater world, and indeed he will eventually record them for posterity later in the film, having flown away like Suibhne, the King-bird. Music (represented by the recorder on the table), stories (the lyrics of the song tell a non-subtitled story, thus excluding non-fluent Irish speakers from its ancient and rare form of culture), and highly-mastered filmic techniques are intertwined in this scene. This superposition reflects the

narrative idea of transition, embodied by Seosamh himself throughout his life and conveyed on every level of narration through the motif of the flying and singing bird throughout the film.

What does this last analysis imply for the concept of intermediality? As explained in the introduction, I had chosen to use the prefix *trans-* to refer to the phenomena of cross-cultural *transfers* in this article. This is why I have been using the prefix *inter-* to identify the cross-medial dimensions in *SoG*. However, the idea of Ó hÉanaí incarnating the concept of *transition*, meshed with the versatile use of a rich transcultural intermediality in the film, would make the use of the term *transmediality* particularly helpful in the case of *Song of Granite*, similarly to Genette coining his hyperonym *transtextuality* to account for all forms of relationships between texts in *Palimpsests*<sup>23</sup>. In *Song of Granite*, Collins conveys these ideas of cultural and narrative thresholds, transfers and transitions precisely by using constant mediation – not unlike a transmedial palimpsest, itself made up of different words, sounds, images stemming from various cultures and artefacts.

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<sup>23</sup> This is precisely why I have been using "transtextuality" throughout this article (see footnote n°5; Genette 1982)

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