Ríastrad: Reflections of Irish National Identity in Depictions of the Ulster Cycle

Visual Culture

NCAD DUBLIN
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Student Name:	Brendan Atkins
Email Address:	19331213@student.ncad.ie
Year of Study:	4
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Visual Culture Tutor:	David Crowley
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National College of Art and Design

Illustration, School of Design

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Brendan Atkins

Submitted to the School of Visual Culture in Candidacy for the Degree of

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I declare that this **Critical Cultures Research Project** is all my own work and that all sources have been fully acknowledged.

Signed: Brendan Atkins

Programme / department: Illustration / Communication Design

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Introduction

Reflecting upon the spread of nationalism in the modern era, Benedict Anderson asked "what makes the shrunken imaginings of recent history generate such colossal sacrifices?" (1993, p. 257). The nation-state is recent, but has legitimised itself to such a degree that people are willing to fight and die for it. Answers to this question can readily be found in the form of depictions of Irish mythology in the visual arts.

Throughout the last hundred years, artists, illustrators and writers have created work adapting from, or inspired by Irish mythology. This body of work is as diverse as the mythology it is based in: reflecting a variety of themes - from tragedy and warfare to comedy and sexuality. Myths and legends are variously commodified, censored, parodied and entirely transformed to create new outputs that keep the tradition of storytelling "alive." However, the work that is the most popular and the most enduring is invariably the work that reflects the views and aspirations of the culture and time period in which it was created.

This essay will seek to explore these overarching themes, examining works created in three distinct time periods to understand how representations of Irish mythology have served to construct a vision of Irish national identity. Particular attention will be paid to depictions concerning the Ulster Cycle (*An Rúraíocht),* especially those concerning Cú Chulainn.

Firstly, works created during the Celtic Revival of the late 19th and early 20th centuries will be investigated. During this time period we see an almost insecure need to elevate Irish mythology, with artists often conspicuously trying to compare it to existing artwork inspired by Greek, Roman and Norse mythology. In keeping with this, writers and artists used the

epics of Irish mythology to create national heroes, solidifying heroes such as Cú Chulainn into symbols of the nation and revolution. The grotesque, the sexual and the indecent were ignored or even erased, in favour of depicting a refined, elegant mythology. This may have been an attempt by the artists to legitimise the nascent Irish state's place in the European canon, to affirm its antiquity, and to harken back to a "Golden Age" of an "Ancient Celtic Past," constructing a national identity worth fighting for (Bhreathnach-Lynch, 1999, p. 148).

Secondly, works created from the 1960s to the 1990s will be investigated, showcasing how schools of thought about Irish mythology seemed to change rapidly. A generation after the work of the Celtic Revival, artists began to rebel against conventions. Some artists began to question the use of visual images in describing what has always been a primarily oral storytelling tradition. Other artists found space to create work that emphasises the absurdity and humour of ancient Irish texts, rebelling against the refinement of the Revival's classical depictions. In addition to this stylistic revolution, Irish mythology holds onto its political relevance as a method for rebellion and propaganda. Murals in Northern Ireland build upon the work created by Celtic Revival artists to create propaganda for nationalist causes, while some Unionists use these same artworks and mythical figures to construct their own propaganda and national identity, attempting to turn figures such as Cú Chulainn into their own heroes.

Finally, this essay will discuss the contemporary state of representations of Irish mythology in popular media. With the fight for independence now a century in the past, and a generation having passed since the Troubles ended, what has become of these representations? What happens to a country's icons and symbols when the country fully enters a neoliberal global system? What happens to revolutionary heroes when the revolution has ended? Figures like

Cú Chulainn can now become merchandise, they can be played in video games or watched on youtube. What happens when a character is presented without the mythology it arose from?

The writings of Benedict Anderson will be consulted to inform how mythology and its depictions can construct a sense of ancient nationhood in a fledgling state. Walter Benjamin's, Theodor Adorno's and Max Horkheimer's works will be referenced to form an understanding of what happens to this mythology and sense of nationhood when it is subsumed into a neoliberal capitalist system, how it must be altered to appeal to wider demographics, and how this fundamentally changes its context and meaning.

1. Elevation

Beginning around the 1880s, (Sheehy, 1980, p. 95) the Celtic Revival was a period marked both by a renaissance in Irish, Welsh and Scottish art and literature, and renewed interest in the works of ancient Irish artists and writers. Despite early renown with illustrated manuscripts, Ireland had not produced much in the way of visual art from the Middle Ages through to the eighteenth century; the European Renaissance having occurred during wars of conquests in Ireland. The Irish people became disenfranchised and destitute, unable to fund works of painting and sculpture (de Paor, 1993, p. 119). With the Celtic Revival, this changed, and the visual arts flourished in the country. Irish identity began to be expressed increasingly by a renewed flourishing of the language and heritage of the ancient Irish. (Sheehy, 1980, p.8) Ireland was no longer understood as simply a part of the United Kingdom, but as a nation in its own right, with its own distinct, unified heritage to legitimise itself. Despite this return to ancient Ireland, however, the art created in this period has been called “diverse and fragmented,” with “no single pattern” emerging. (Arnold, 1969, p. 136)

However, when it comes to the depiction of Celtic mythology in the visual culture of this time, a more coherent narrative can be found. The artwork of the nascent Irish Republican movement shows a desire to take existing myths and legends, for example the Fenian and Ulster cycles of storytelling, and elevate them to a higher status, forming comparisons with the art depicting Greek and Roman mythology. Figures like Fionn Mac Cumhaill and Cú Chulainn were shown as heroes analogous to Heracles or Theseus, as symbols of nationhood and ideals to strive towards. In doing this, however, the art assimilated into these romantic styles inspired by other ancient cultures, and Irish art on its own lacked a common style that “could be recognised as an expression of nationality.” (Sheehy, 1980, p.9)

Art historian Jeanne Sheehy points out how this lack of distinction was counteracted:

> "If it wished to proclaim its Irishness it was forced to fall back upon recognisably Irish symbols…upon Irish subject-matter, and upon imitation of models from what was seen as the Golden Age." (1980, p. 9)

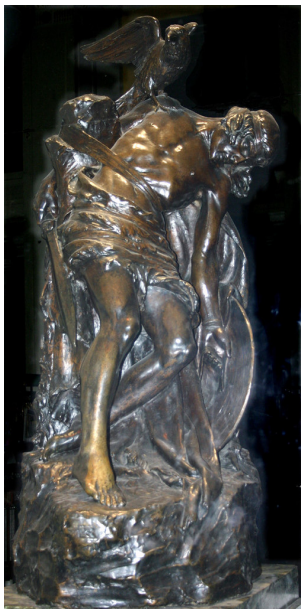

Fig. 1: Sheppard, O. *The Death of Cú Chulainn,* (1914) General Post Office, Dublin

The Death of Cúchulainn (1914) by Oliver Sheppard is a clear example of this trend within Celtic Revival art. It depicts the dying Cú Chulainn at the plain of Muirthemne, having tied himself to a stone so he could die standing up. A crow stands upon his shoulder, signalling to his enemies that this great hero has finally been felled. It is displayed currently in the General Post Office (GPO) on O'Connell Street, Dublin, serving as a memorial to the rebels of the 1916 Rising. (Tracy, 2008, p. 204). In the sculpture's form, a tendency to aestheticise mythology can be found - while it is clear that the male figure is dead, with writers pointing out that it suggests "conventional images of Christ on the Cross," (Tracy, 2008, p. 203) It is not an accurate depiction of the story, being heavily sanitised when compared to the original's more visceral and violent telling. In the translation of *Aided Chon Culainn* (The Death of Cú Chulainn) found in Lady Augusta Gregory's *Cúchulainn of Muirthemne (1902),* for instance,

the spear that strikes him causes his bowels to be spilled “on the cushion of the chariot,” and he has to gather them “into his breast” before taking a drink, washing himself, and then tying himself to the stone so he could die upright (Gregory, 1902, p. 339). It was indeed this same version of the story that inspired Sheppard to model the sculpture in 1911-12 (Tracy, 2008, p. 205).

Fig. 2: Reid, S. *Cuchulainn’s Death* (1904)

However, despite his knowledge of the source material, despite the gruesome description of Cúchulainn’s death in Gregory’s text, the collapsed form of Cú Chulainn shown in the sculpture lacks any visible wounds. Sheppard avoided depicting the grotesque in favour of creating a sculpture of a noble hero. His body is limp, but otherwise classically beautiful, the trauma of fighting and dying is not the focus of this artwork - instead it invites us to appreciate the glory and solemnity of a hero’s martyrdom for his cause. This trend is mirrored within other depictions of Cúchulainn’s death from the period, with Stephen Reid’s illustration (Fig. 2) from Eleanor Hulls’ *The Boys’ Cuchulain (1910)* equally showing Cú Chulainn seemingly unharmed, tied to the stone with his head bowed.

By the time that *The Death of Cúchulainn* was initially sculpted, work was already being undertaken to construct Cú Chulainn into a heroic, national symbol. In 1898, Pádraig Pearse stated at a meeting of the New Ireland Literary Society that

> "The noble personality of Cúchulainn forms a true type of Gaelic nationality, full as it is of youthful life and vigour and hope..." (O'Leary, 1983, p. 22)

He drew upon the figure of Cú Chulainn to create an image of the redeeming quality of sacrifice for Irish freedom (Barber, 2013, p. 14), He created within Cú Chulainn a nationalist icon - a figure that aspiring rebels could strive to align themselves with, a figure of a glorious past to symbolise the fight for an independent future. With this he carried on the tradition of Irish nationalism described by Nicholas Allen, harkening back to an ancient "authenticity of Gaelic culture, whose achievements and antiquity were argued to be of a match with the Romans" (2009, p. 93). By constructing a link to this ancient Gaelic culture, this idea of an Irish golden age, nationalist figures such as Pearse were able to present a vision of nationhood that showed Ireland as distinct from British rule, an ancient civilisation temporarily shackled by colonisation. A need to legitimise the Irish national aspirations among these other ancient nations may also be found in the statue.

Fig. 3: Boa Island Figure, C. 400-800 AD, Boa Island

Fig. 4: Cellini, B. Perseus with the Head of Medusa (1554), Florence, Italy

The idealised, naturalistic depiction of Cú Chulainn is less akin to pre-christian Irish sculptures such as the Boa Island Figure (Fig. 3), and is instead more analogous to statues depicting Greek mythology, such as Cellini's *Perseus with the Head of Medusa (1554, Fig. 4).* The statue was not sculpted using a method that the original recounters of legends such as *Aided Chon Culainn* would have necessarily identified with, but instead with the standards and aesthetic sensibilities set by the ancient Romans and Greeks and carried on through the Renaissance. While the story may have inspired the statue, the aesthetics of the ancient Irish did not.

The view of Irish nationhood that can be gleaned from this is perhaps one of insecurity, one of conscious comparison to better documented ancient nations. Anderson states that an image of antiquity is "central to the subjective idea of a nation" (1993, p. 257). Perhaps, however, some forms of antiquity are more desirable than others. By depicting Irish myths in the style of Greek or Roman inspired sculpture, there is a proclamation that these stories are of the same importance, value and calibre as those cultures' legends, that ancient Irish literature

deserves its own, equal place within the canon of European mythology. Would this statue have been applauded if it had been sculpted in a similar fashion to the aforementioned Boa Island figure, or any other surviving remnant of medieval or pre-christian Irish sculpture? Would the ancient authors of *Aided Chon Culainn* have recognised this statue as belonging to their own literary tradition?

This tenuous view of Irish national identity is compounded when consulting the history and context heroes such as Cú Chulainn existed within. While Cú Chulainn was considered to embody a "true type of Gaelic nationality" by Pearse (O'Leary, 1983, p. 22) this is hardly supported by the mythology itself. Cú Chulainn was not a hero for all of the Gaels, he was not a defender of Ireland - he was instead, specifically, a defender of Ulster. His enemies in the *Táin Bó Cualigne (The Cattle Raid of Cooley)* and *Aided Chon Culainn* are the forces of Connacht - other Irish men and women. When the statue was unveiled as a memorial for 1916, the use of Cú Chulainn as a heroic symbol was met with criticism from papers such as United Ireland:

> "He did not fight, as Finn MacCumhaill is reputed to have fought at times, against foreigners. HE FOUGHT ONLY IRISH MEN." (1935, cited in Tracy, 2008, p. 211)

In this, a problem with using signifiers such as Cú Chulainn as idyllic symbols of Irish nationhood can be identified. The Ulster Cycle was not written in a time when a coherent view of Irish nationhood existed. Throughout much of ancient history, Ireland was fragmented, with multiple kingdoms often battling against each other. At times, historically and mythologically, the island was said to have been ruled by High Kings, but even still the minor kingdoms fought amongst each other. It is within this context that the story of Cú Chulainn emerges - a story of wars between separate nations within Ireland, not of a unified Irish nation standing on its own.

2. Revolution

From the 1960s to the 1980s, there was a revolution in the type of mythologically inspired art in Ireland, with artists consciously breaking away from the standards set by the Celtic Revival fifty years earlier to create work distinct in style and tone. At the same time as this stylistic revolution, the work created during the Celtic Revival was being appropriated and rehashed to create work with politically revolutionary purposes. In the tradition of mural painting in Northern Ireland, examples of mythological figures being painted as nationalistic symbols can clearly be seen, carrying on from the work created by nationalist artists in the early 20th century. This multitude of works can be investigated to form a broader narrative about the societal changes Ireland was undergoing during this point in history.

Fig. 5: Le Brocquy, L. *Cúchulainn in Warp Spasm,* (1969)

Fig. 6: Le Brocquy, L. *Medb Relieving Herself* (1969)

Thomas Kinsella's 1969 translation of *The Táin,* with illustrations by artist Louis le Brocquy, is a clear example of this stylistic revolution in art inspired by Irish mythology. A generation after the work of the Celtic Revival, this work attempts to be everything that the elevated,

refined Celtic Revival work was not. Instead of taking inspiration from romantic and Renaissance art, with detailed figures, the work is instead expressive and abstracted. While the Celtic Revival's art shied away from depicting the grotesque or improper, le Brocquy does not. The second last illustration from *The Táin* is Medb, squatting down and "relieving" herself after getting her period on the battlefield (Kinsella, 1969, p. 250). Also in le Brocquy's illustrations is one of the first attempts to depict the Ríastrad, or "warp spasm" as Kinsella translates it. In the heat of battle, Cú Chulainn becomes a monstrous, formless creature.

> "His body made a furious twist inside his skin, so that his feet and shins switched to the rear and his heels and calves switched to the front... On his head the temple-sinews stretched to the nape of his neck, each mighty, immense, measureless knob as big as the head of a month-old child... he sucked one eye so deep into his head that a wild crane couldn't probe it onto his cheek out of the depths of his skull; the other eye fell out along his cheek. His mouth weirdly distorted: his cheek peeled back from his jaws until the gullet appeared." (Kinsella, 1969, p. 150)

Depictions of this seem largely absent within the work of Celtic Revival artists. The horrific and grotesque nature of the ríastrad perhaps represented too unseemly a topic for a group seeking to establish the refinement and elegance of these ancient myths. Le Brocquy, on the other hand, does not impose this same standard. His abstracted figures representing the ríastrad have a striking immediacy to them, showing contorting limbs and splashes of ink that evoke sprays of blood. A generation after the founding of the Irish state, perhaps a new confidence can be seen within these illustrations. There was little need to compare the mythology to the legends of other cultures, it could stand on its own feet. The unseemly or indecent parts of the story were illustrated, as their depiction no longer posed any existential threat to the identity of this established nation. With this confidence, there is also the opportunity for artists to explore humour in relation to mythology.

Fig. 7: Ferran, B. *Táin 5* (1989)

Brian Ferran's 1975 *Táin Series* (Fig. 7) took certain elements and colours from celtic art, but was unafraid to find humour in the more extreme sides of the source material.

> "The wild exaggeration of the prose description of Cúchulainn…may have been composed to strike fears into the hearts of enemies centuries ago, but now it has a funny side to it." (Catto, 1991, p. 53)

This could be seen as being emblematic of the social changes that Ireland was experiencing during this time period, with the loosening of strict, repressive morality giving way to allow more freedom of expression. These social changes are reflected in other media of the time - The Late Late Show, for example, began broadcasting in 1962, and along with its presenter Gay Byrne, it has been credited with "breaking the dominant power of the Catholic Church in Ireland" (Kenny, 2021, p. 175).

Le Brocquy grappled with the idea of depicting through images a story that had primarily been transmitted through an oral tradition. While the artists that had come before had been happy to depict the Ulster Cycle in traditional fashion, relying on their conceptions of ancient Irish dress and life, le Brocquy "felt it was inappropriate to describe circumstances, the

clothes, the shields" (cited in Hunt Museum, 2006, p. 24). He instead drew inspiration from Japanese brushwork and calligraphy, admiring the spontaneity and movement they gave his illustrations, while also capitalising on the potential of avoiding explicit depictions or imposing his own view upon the subject matter. He was "intent on not describing" or "commenting directly." (cited in Hunt Museum, 2006, p. 24)

Within this, a respect for oral nature of Irish storytelling is shown, something which is absent in the work of the Celtic Revival. The culture of Ireland has historically been passed through word of mouth and in song or poem format, with visual depictions being sparse (de Paor, 1993, p. 119). While the works of the Revival saw this as something to rectify, artists such as le Brocquy took a different approach, questioning the need for there to be visual depictions in the first place. The work defers to the written text, emphasising the energy and action without influencing the reader's interpretation of character appearances or setting. This method shows more confidence in the traditions of Ireland. The fact that Irish mythology lacks as many illustrations and visual depictions as the mythology of Greece or Rome is seen not as a fault, but as an integral part of the mythological tradition.

While artists such as Louis le Brocquy may serve to reflect a metaphorical revolution in style and subject matter, Irish mythology in this time period equally had a socio-politically revolutionary role to play. The murals of Northern Ireland often reference mythological themes, carrying on the tradition set by the Celtic Revival of turning legendary heroes into political idols. A complex example of this can be seen in the depictions of Cú Chulainn.

Fig. 8: Moloney, P. *Defender of Ulster From Irish Attacks,* (1991) digital photograph

Nationalist depictions of Cú Chulainn built upon the groundwork laid by the Celtic Revival. *The Death of Cú Chulainn* makes an appearance in a number of republican murals (Rolston, 2004, p. 122), proving its tenacity as a symbol of Irish nationalism. However, at the same time, Unionist depictions of Cú Chulainn proved the malleability of mythological figures as national symbols. One mural at Freedom Corner in East Belfast in 1992 (Fig 8) displayed an image of *The Death of Cúchulainn* resting upon a union flag. It proclaimed that Cú Chulainn was the "Ancient Defender of Ulster From Irish Attacks over 2000 years ago."

Certain Unionist leaders believed, at this point, that Cú Chulainn was not a Gaelic figure, but instead a "Cruthin or Pict, a member of a racially distinct clan resident in the Northern part of Ireland" (Rolston, 2004, p. 122). This echoes, to some degree, United Ireland's criticisms of the Oliver Sheppard statue being erected as a memorial (1935, cited in Tracy, 2008, p. 211). While Cú Chulainn may have exemplified, to Pearse and others, a "true type of Gaelic Nationality" (O'Leary, 1983, p. 22), he is still equally able to be a true type of Unionist Nationality to others. Cú Chulainn's status as an aspirational idol is not fixed, it is instead constructed. Even artwork of him made by someone sympathetic to revolutionary nationalists

and used as a memorial to the 1916 rebels can be repurposed into propaganda for an opposing political movement. Like the Irish nationalists of the Celtic Revival, this was perhaps a similar attempt to establish “an image of antiquity” as described by Anderson (1993, p. 261).

By claiming Cú Chulainn for themselves, Unionists could point to thousands of years of history to establish their right to be a separate nation from the Republic of Ireland, to make a case for their own indigeneity to the island. They claimed they were descendants of the Cruthins, a group they believed had lived in Ireland before being driven out by the Gaelic people to Scotland, and the 17th century planters had come to Ireland not as colonisers, but as an indigenous group reclaiming their old lands. (Moore, 2002, p. 12) With this framework, the nation of Ulster stretched back further into history than the concept of an Irish nation, and therefore held more right to exist as a separate entity (Graham, 1994, p. 271).

3. Commodification

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, more changes has occurred within depictions of Irish mythology. While earlier periods used Irish mythology for the purpose of nation-building, or for the production of art, the last two decades have seen the rise of depictions of Irish mythology which are decontextualised and depoliticised. The characters of Irish mythology are lifted out of their stories, repurposed and repackaged as stand-alone figures. Cú Chulainn is no longer just a hero from mythology, or a national symbol. He is now a video game character, a distance learning college, and a rollercoaster in Tayto Park. This itself may present a glimpse into Ireland in an era of globalisation.

Fig 9. Eckert, S. *Smite Cu Chulainn* (2017)

Smite is a 2014 multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) produced by Hi-Rez studios where players compete in matches as one of over a hundred characters derived from gods and

mythological figures. These gods come from various pantheons found in cultures across the world - from Roman, Greek, and Chinese mythology to Arthurian legend, encompassing also more modern consciously constructed mythos, such as the work of HP Lovecraft. The Celtic pantheon was introduced in 2017 with the release of The Morrigan as a playable character. Cú Chulainn and the continental Celtic gods Cernunnos and Artio were released as characters later the same year. Smite presents an interesting glimpse into the treatment of Cú Chulainn in contemporary times, along with a complex view of how this reflects Irish national identity.

Playing as Cú Chulainn, players are able to utilise skills inspired by Irish mythology: One of his attacks is his *Barbed Spear*, a reference to the Gae Bolga, the spiked spear that Cú Chulainn wields in the *Táin Bó Cuailgne*. Another, *Salmon's Leap,* may be a reference to the Salmon of Knowledge, a fish found in the Fenian cycle able to bestow knowledge on the first person to catch and eat it.. His most distinctive skill, however, is his *Berserk* ability, which allows him to transform into a monstrous form - a clear depiction of the ríastrad he undergoes in the Ulster Cycle. As seen in Fig. 9, his depiction is faithful to the source material, and accurate in parts- he swells in size, his muscles bulging, one eye grows to immense size, the other growing small, his nails and teeth sharpen. However, the more fanciful aspects - the blood that sprays from his head, the shining light from his forehead, the backwards-bending knees, the ripped open jaw (Kinsella, 1969, p.150 - 153) are omitted. The game seems interested in depicting this aspect of mythology only as far as its Teen rating will allow. Equally, the design of Cú Chulainn - a tall, muscular, blonde-haired warrior - is far tamer and more attractive and conventional to the modern consumer than the version given in the Táin. Cú Chulainn lacks the seven digits on each hand and foot, the seven pupils in each eye, the multi-coloured hair and sharp, eagle-like nails that Kinsella's translation provides (Kinsella, 1969, p. 156-158). Cú Chulainn is also almost entirely removed from his original context

within the game. He is called the “Hound of Ulster” and is remarked to have “kept an entire army at bay” (Smite, 2017), however it is never stated who he fighted against - The forces of Connacht are never named, nor is their queen, Medb. He is the “third born child of Gods and Kings,” (Ibid.) but there is no explanation of who these Gods are. He is the hero of a contextless kingdom, defender against an anonymous army. Most tellingly, the story of how he got his name is stripped of all background information deemed unnecessary - instead of killing the Hound of Culann with a hurley and sliotar (Kinsella, 1969, p. 83) he is described as killing the hound with his bare hands (Smite, 2017). The figure of Cú Chulainn has been extracted from his stories - the character has become more important than the mythology.

In his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproduction (1935)*, Walter Benjamin stated that:

> “In even the most perfect reproduction, one thing is lacking - the here and now of the work of art - its unique existence in a particular place.” (1935, p. 61)

This concept of contextualisation being of key importance to the work of art, when applied to Irish mythology and storytelling, is arguably more relevant than in works of art. The myths and legends of Ireland have been transmitted through the oral tradition. This makes them transient, they exist temporarily within the words of the person telling the story, and within the minds of those listening. Any depiction of these myths or legends through the written word or through imagery therefore naturally changes the “here and now” or “aura” of the myth as described by Benjamin. The natural inconsistencies that come from retelling: the variability in character appearance that comes from not having a picture to base a mental image on, these are too altered or taken away when the story is recorded in a permanent medium. However, the representation of Cú Chulainn within Smite takes this a step further. Now, a player can themselves become Cú Chulainn, direct him and fight against Thor, Ra, or

Cthulhu; all without ever knowing of the contexts and stories concerning him. His existence is no longer confined to the tales of which he is a part - in fact, for the players of smite, he exists specifically outside of these stories. As Benjamin might say, the reproduction has been placed into a situation that the original cannot attain (Ibid.)

Writing on the Culture Industry, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer stated that “culture now imposes the same stamp on everything” (1944, p. 406),that mass culture has become largely identical. In such a system, the grotesque, or erotic elements of a tradition such as the Ulster Cycle cannot be replicated. Cú Chulainn is a well known figure in Irish culture, and reproducing him within the context of a game is designed to encourage interest and engagement, but reproducing him in his entirety would not be feasible; worse still, it would be bad for business. To Adorno and Horkheimer, the culture industry is fundamentally unable to deliver on what it promises, the “diner must be satisfied with the menu” (1944, p. 412). From this perspective, an understanding of this depiction of Cú Chulainn may be formed. A faithful adaptation of the myth of Cú Chulainn is impossible in contemporary mass culture, as to do so would require alienating certain demographics, running counter to consumerist tendencies. Can it be mentioned that he fought against Connacht if teenagers from Connacht form a potential consumer base? Is it possible to talk about his feats of hurling when the game’s worldwide audience may not be familiar with the sport? Can his strange appearance as described in *The Táin* be shown to audiences when it differs from the mould of heroic figures?

What reflection of Irish nationhood does this depiction of Cú Chulainn bring? While this version is more attuned to Celtic Revival depictions than the work of le Brocquy, with Cú Chulainn depicted in a more broadly Western idealised form: the athletic, handsome,

muscular hero, it is not an attempt to elevate Irish mythology for political purposes. This version of Cú Chulainn is not an idealistic hero, he is not a symbol to aspire to - He is in fact, fundamentally attainable. To become Cú Chulainn, one does not need to embody a certain type of "Gaelic nationality" (O'Leary, 1983, p. 22), - one only needs to download and install a video game. Nor does this version of Cú Chulainn attempt to defer to the written text, in respect for a tradition of oral representation. The bards, storytellers and *seanchaís* who told this story are not mentioned. This version of Cú Chulainn has no text to defer to. As Benjamin might put it, the work has been emancipated from "its parasitic service to ritual" (1935, p. 64). If le Brocquy's illustrations derived their substance "as shadows thrown by the text" (1969, p. 255), what does this version derive its substance from?

It derives its substance from capital itself. As Adorno and Horkheimer stated, cultural products "no longer pretend to be art. The truth that they are just business is made into an ideology in order to justify the rubbish they deliberately produce" (1944, p. 406). Cú Chulainn, as he appears in Smite, does not have to attempt to be a national hero to rally support for a cause - unless that cause is simply the continued playing of the video game, or for the purchase of merchandise. He does not have to convey any political or cultural weight - indeed, he must not, for fear of alienating consumer markets. If this is a reflection of Irish nationhood, it is a reflection of a nation generations after its revolutionary beginning. It is, perhaps, a reflection of a nation that has entered into a global neoliberal hegemony. Its cultural products no longer have to serve as symbols of revolution, nor do they have to consider their own existence or utility. All they need to do is be marketable products, consumable by wide demographics.

Conclusion

In the Celtic Revival, there was a clear trend towards the elevation of Irish mythology. A nascent Irish nationalist movement required a mythological tradition to legitimise itself, to claim a coherent history that stretched back into antiquity. To do this, the artists of the time took reference from ancient Irish texts and the artistic traditions of other European countries, forging a new, classical canon. *The Death of Cúchulainn* by Oliver Sheppard ignores the less palatable, violent description of Lady Augusta Gregory's translation of *Aided Con Chulainn,* instead depicting Cú Chulainn in a heroic, solemn fashion. This can be seen to reflect a view of an insecure fledgling nation, one which is consumed with depicting itself as glorious, civilised and refined. Writers such as Padraig Pearse turned Cú Chulainn into a symbol of Ireland itself, as an aspirational figure to strive to emulate. As the nation found its footing, it could not allow for scandalous or salacious depictions of its ancient mythology. To do so might even pose an existential threat to the nation - giving political opponents potential opportunity to stereotype the nation as crude or uncivilised.

A generation later, the artists of the 1960s to the 1990s revolted against the notions imposed by the Celtic Revival. The work of Louis le Brocquy does not shy away from depicting the grotesque and the crude - it defers instead to the text, representing what is there without trying to twist it into glorious imagery. Artists like le Brocquy equally questioned the reasoning behind depicting this mythology in visual format in the first place - while the artists of the Celtic Revival may have seen the lack of visual depiction as something to be rectified, le Brocquy saw it as a feature of the tradition itself. A new respect for the mythology is seen in this, an acknowledgement that to depict it respectfully, the stories themselves must take precedence over the imagery. This shows a newfound confidence in Irish nationhood, the existential fear of the Celtic Revival is over. Ireland was now here to stay, and as such space

was allowed for the mythology to be depicted in its entirety. At the same time, the artists of Northern Ireland continued the tradition of using Cú Chulainn as a political figure. Unionist murals claimed Cú Chulainn as a defender of Ireland, using the exact same imagery as earlier Irish nationalist artwork to transform a Gaelic figure into a Loyalist hero. This betrays the inherent difficulties of using mythological figures as national symbols - the same character that represents one nation's sovereignty and identity can be a hero to a group that opposes it.

In contemporary times, a further shift has occurred. As Ireland has taken its place among other nations, as the revolutions within its borders have finished or come to stalemates, myths and legends have been disentangled from national identity. Cú Chulainn can now appear as a rollercoaster, his name can be given to a sports college, and he can appear in American video games. At the same time, however, he is presented without context - he has become an individual product, the mythology he comes from has become irrelevant. Excised from his mythology, Cú Chulainn becomes a strange, contextless being. He is no longer a representation of Irish nationalism, indeed any link with the Gaels has been diminished. The legacy of Unionist reinterpretation of him is equally ignored. He is no longer a figure to represent a nation, these depictions represent little more than business decisions. This may reflect the current state of Ireland - a nation that has now become a part of the capitalist world, one without a rebellion to politically motivate its artists and citizens, one without need of national heroes or figures.

In his book "The Complete History of Irish Art," Bruce Arnold stated that:

> "Artists tend to be the least patriotic of men, and the question of nationalism is not one with which they are greatly concerned." (1969, p.10)

This statement would seem to be refuted by much of the work of artists depicting Irish mythology throughout the last two centuries. Artists can indeed be extremely patriotic - their

work can become nationalist iconography, and these works can themselves then be represented a generation later by new nationalist artists. However, the subject matter itself is not always objectively patriotic. The same subject can be utilised by opposing political factions for their own ends. The subject may be stripped of all political weight, and be represented simply as a product. Ultimately, however, the treatment of that subject will offer a glimpse into the character of the culture that has produced the media the subject has been depicted within.

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