Patagonian road movies and migration from Wales

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Abstract
This paper analyzes two recent films, Patagonia (2011) and Separado! (2010), both produced in Wales and set in Patagonia. It proposes that both take advantage of the codes and tropes of the road movie genre, and of the history of Welsh emigration to Patagonia, to situate Welsh language and culture in both a local and global context.

Key Words
Wales - Patagonia - road movie - emigration.

Las road movies patagónicas y la migración desde Gales

Resumen
Este trabajo analiza dos películas recientes, Patagonia (2011) y Separado! (2010), ambas producidas en Gales y escenificadas en la Patagonia. Propone que ambas se aprovechan de los códigos y tropos de la “road movie” y de la historia de emigración galesa a la Patagonia, para ubicar la cultura y lengua galesas en un contexto que es a la vez local y global.

Palabras claves
Gales - Patagonia - road movie - migración

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“The driving force propelling most road movies,” writes David Laderman, “is an embrace of the journey as a means of cultural critique” (Laderman 2002, 1). In the light of this analysis, this essay begins with two questions: in what ways might Patagonia lend itself- as setting, as landscape, as historically preconceived idea - to the road movie? And how do road movies set in Patagonia intersect with a history of immigrant travel to the region, specifically in the case of the storied nineteenth-century Welsh immigration to Chubut and the Esquel/Trevelin area? My focus here is two bilingual (Spanish-Welsh) films, Patagonia and Separado!, released in 2011 and 2010 respectively in a context of much cultural production – in the form of novels, documentaries, radio programs etc. – that retraces and rewrites episodes of the historic migration in the service of the contemporary moment. And my argument is that while these films may seem peripheral curiosities in many ways, they are in fact engaged in broader debates about the revaluing of the periphery (be that Wales in relation to the UK or Patagonia in relation to Argentina) within a global context. Specifically, I propose that, in common with numerous representations of Patagonia in Wales, they bring the legacy of transnational diaspora to local questions of language and cultural politics.

Patagonia has for centuries fired the imagination of curious adventure travelers wanting to journey beyond the beaten track, to the ill-defined “ends of the earth.” European travelers from Antonio Pigafetta to Thomas Falkner and Charles Darwin portrayed Patagonia as geographically and conceptually boundless, attributing mythical qualities to its animal and human inhabitants. Scholarship by Ernesto Livón-Grosman and Gabriela Nouzeilles, among others, has explored the political and imperial impetus of such travel writing, particularly that of Darwin; an impetus to which the Welsh migration of 1865 was in many ways directly opposed, driven as it was by resistance to British/English oppression of the Welsh language. Both Livón Grosman and Nouzeilles trace the Argentine state’s subsequent co-opting of imperialist travel myths for economic and political benefit, initially through the official, scientifically-endorsed accounts of the region by Francisco (El Perito) Moreno. Thanks to Moreno’s travels and rhetorical talents, writes Nouzeilles, “[g]radually, the idea of Patagonia as an unconquerable desert gave way to the utopian vision of an endless abundant land waiting to be turned into national wealth” (Nouzeilles 1999, 40). Nevertheless, throughout the twentieth century Patagonia continued to provide a landscape for (purportedly independent, rather than imperialist) travelers, wandering slowly through Patagonia, happy to subscribe to earlier myths of its boundlessness (although these are marked now by vast expanses of open road). The emblematic example of such travel, Bruce Chatwin’s In Patagonia, is in fact contemporaneous with the heyday of the road movie and is in many ways its analog.

How, I want to consider, are these nineteenth- and twentieth-century narratives of travel to Patagonia, and the peripheral one of sympathetic settlement there, reprised in the twenty-first century? One significant way, I propose, is through reconfiguring the road movie – already rooted in a counter-hegemonic, resolutely unsettled form of displacement from the urban to the unknown – for present-day concerns. This is a reconfiguration that has important manifestations within
Argentine cinema: two of Carlos Sorín’s films, for example – *Historias mínimas* (2002) and *El perro* (2004) - take on the ingrained myths of Patagonia’s remoteness and value as a travel-through destination by resolutely mapping its travel circuits internally. Rather than the grand descent from somewhere north to the “extreme south”, Sorín’s characters begin their journey in small Patagonian towns and pass through slightly bigger ones before ending more or less where they began. It is perhaps their small-scale maps, along with the lack of self-consciousness in their generally humble characters’ turn to adventure that has motivated Jens Andermann to call them “anti-road movies” (Andermann 2011, 63). I disagree with this categorical assessment, principally because of the ubiquitous presence in both films of the open road. The road almost always is the landscape in these films: often bordered by dusty, windswept plains and foothills, it is nevertheless the focal point of outdoor shots, framed doubly by the camera and the windscreen of a pick-up truck. In demarcating their road trips within a small corner of Patagonia, however, these films undercut the grand narratives that have defined the region as periphery, in relation to a distant and hegemonic point of origin. Sorín’s “historias mínimas” – a term we could use for the stories of many of his films – reshape the “road movie” genre for a local map, charting Patagonia in relation largely to itself.

The “minimal” scope of Sorín’s films is taken to the opposite pole – in *Patagonia* and *Separado*, both of which explicitly retrace the transcontinental route to Chubut taken by (real or imagined) Welsh forefathers, hailing this historic trip as “the dream of Patagonia.” Both are also, in some sense at least, more conventional “road movies” in their focus on escaping the tedium of home, finding liberation on the unfamiliar road, and celebrating both advancing technologies and ingrained traditions. *Patagonia* is a drama directed by Marc Evans (a Welsh director whose principal mainstream success was *Snow Cake*, with Alan Rickman and Sigourney Weaver) and has a well-known cast of Welsh stars, including the Grammy award-winning singer Duffy and the well-known actor Matthew Rhys. It tells two stories that travel in different directions: one of a Welsh couple that goes to Patagonia (to take photographs, and “decompress” on the open road) and, through the intervention of a handsome, Welsh-speaking guide, sees its fragile relationship fall apart. Its parallel is the story of an elderly Patagonian woman whose pregnant mother was banished from Wales in disgrace, and who yearns to see, just once, her ancestral farm in the Welsh mountains. Escorted to Buenos Aires by a young neighbor, she persuades him to travel instead to Wales where, after several false starts, they find the reservoir under which the family farm has been submerged; there, at peace, she dies. It is significant for the general trajectory of this movie, I think, that while the Patagonian goes to Wales to die, the Welsh people go to Patagonia to rekindle passion.

*Separado!* is a less predictable, altogether more bizarre film, a documentary of sorts starring Gruff Rhys, lead singer of the rock band Super Furry Animals (very successful in the UK and internationally, particularly in the 1990s). Subtitled “An Odyssey to a Parallel Universe”, with Rhys donning a suitably galactic outfit, its transcontinental voyage has several departure points or pretexts. One is a fight between two horsemen in North Wales in 1882, that motivated one of them (an
ancestor of Rhys’s) to flee to Patagonia. Another is a search for the singer René Griffiths, a Patagonian singer whom Rhys remembers seeing on Welsh television during his childhood coming on stage with horse and poncho. And a third is Rhys’s laconically expressed desire to begin his new CD tour somewhere different. Transposed to the “parallel universe” that is Latin America in this ironic presentation, he lands first in southern Brazil but finds no trace of the Welsh emigrants who settled there in the 1850s. Then he reaches Patagonia and, although the journey there is “like going to Mars” and Puerto Madryn’s landscape “lunar”, he nevertheless finds a host of Welsh-Argentines happy to talk to him about their history and heritage (although perhaps less happy to hear the concerts he gives in Welsh teahouses and schools, given his predilection for loud, home-made instruments). Although he doesn’t find René Griffiths until he returns to Wales, his journey ends when, in Esquel, he meets twin brothers who sing, one in Welsh about lost love and one in Spanish about, “la ruta 40.” They are, he claims, proud bearers of “the romantic tradition of “the Latin Welsh gaucho.”

There is much to say about each of these films but I will limit my analysis to the ways in which their adaptations of the “road movie” genre facilitate a broader commentary the relationship between migration from Wales to Patagonia and the local cultural politics of present-day Wales. First is the question of language: both involve constant displacement, by car, within Patagonia, and the dominating perspective of “the road” edits out not only that which is off the road but, curiously, too, speakers of languages other than Welsh. The travelers encounter the occasional Spanish-speaker but the impression one gets is of a Patagonia that is not the natural wonder that nineteenth-century travelers found but, rather, a linguistic one; approaching, in fact, the linguistic utopia that “Welsh Patagonia” was cast as by Wales’s foremost C20 intellectual and nationalist, Saunders Lewis. In a well-known radio broadcast in 1965, Lewis chastised the Welsh of Wales for allowing their native language to be killed off by overuse of English, and held as exemplary the early migrants who went heroic extremes – to Patagonia – to save their language. It is without a doubt this impression of Patagonia as a place where the Welsh language was defended and has survived - and, indeed, is gaining speakers - that has given it such a prominent place in Welsh culture over past decades, and has sent many Welsh tourists to visit. As Gruff Rhys puts it, idiosyncratically, in Separado!, Welsh people are “falling over themselves for the romance of this place.” With regard to language both Patagonia and Separado! - although subtitled in English, and released in markets beyond Wales – fall quite clearly into the practice of traveling to Patagonia to find a marvel of the Welsh language.

In other, important regards, however, they turn their lens away from the historical focus and commemorative practices that have characterized much Welsh cultural production about Patagonia, positing instead a contemporary, style-conscious and forward-looking sense of the relationship between Wales and Patagonia (if not of Patagonia itself). Historical accounts of the 1865 migration have been abundant in Welsh literature and media since the mid twentieth-century, with Welsh-language documentary programming on this topic beginning as early as the 1950s and continuing, unabated, since. Literature has continued to turn to this
episode, and a number of novels that retell aspects of it have been published in Welsh, Spanish or English over the past decade. Much of this accounting emphasizes the physical endurance and, indeed, ideological commitment of the first emigrants; and the survival, in diminished form but against great odds, of their language, community, architecture and traditions.

This historical, commemorative dimension of the Welsh migration to Patagonia is by no means absent from these two films, and in fact sets their stage: Patagonia begins with a clip from a classic BBC Wales documentary narrating its familiar story, and a prominent interviewee in Separado is a well-regarded historian. Indeed, Gruff Rhys, in one of his voice-over musings, finds it a “miracle” that Welsh culture survived in any way, echoing the heroic dimensions this episode has attained within Wales. Traditions certainly have their place here, too, although far more in Patagonia – where ponchos, guitars, chapels and choirs abound – than in Wales, where (in Evans’s film) the anachronism of the Welsh Museum of Folklore is exposed when a woman in traditional costume (who turns out to be the lead actress) grumpily reaches for a packet of cigarettes. But, as Stevan Cohan and Ina Rae Hark have said, in their introduction to The Road Movie Book, “the informing relation of modernity and tradition has repeatedly organized road narratives on film” (Cohan & Hark 1997, 3); and ultra-cool “modernity” is certainly the major aspiration of each of these films: from their casting of young, well-known and much-photographed stars in the main roles to their musical scores, which include some of these stars’ own recent hits. There is little question, in my mind, that the relation between modernity and tradition maps, in both movies, to the relationship between Wales and Patagonia, with Wales being cast as the more modern, urban and technologically advanced, and Patagonia the more seeped in tradition. But this is not an absolute distinction: this is not Chatwin’s account of irretrievably strange and backward Patagonia. Rather than instill a modern-traditional (or metropolis-periphery) model, it is precisely the relationship – the idea of a Welsh-Patagonia, or a Welsh-Patagonian culture – that allows these films to stake their claims vis-à-vis the future. They articulate a version of Welshness for which the idea of Patagonia serves as a transnational anchor, amplifying Wales’s place in the world in a way that is, to my mind, quite consistent with the both the star status of their lead actors and the self-fashioning of Wales and Welsh culture in the present moment. Like Sorín’s films, they selectively take advantage of the codes and tropes of the “road movie” to present a Patagonia whose inhabitants’ perspective matters - although, in their focus on the experience of a particular group of inhabitants, the descendants of Welsh migrants – they bring their particular version of Patagonia into the service of a transnational notion of Welshness.

Works Cited