

**Björn Norðfjörð\*****ICELAND IN LIVING PICTURES:  
A MEETING-PLACE OF CINEMA AND NATION**

Icelandic cinema has received considerable international attention in recent years. Numerous films have garnered awards at film festivals and subsequently been distributed far and wide – even critics and scholars have begun to take notice. This article approaches an altogether different Icelandic cinema. One that not only dates much further back in time, but also one whose ambitions were inherently national and devoid of global aspirations – although an important exception is discussed in the essay as well.

Divided into two parts; the former addresses films of documentary nature, tracing a thread from the oldest extant film to so-called “Iceland-films”, which developed during the interwar era into the first local films directed at foreign audiences, while the latter follows the trajectory of narrative films leading up to the instigation of the Icelandic Film Fund in 1978 (heralding Icelandic cinema’s modern phase), but conversely expressed at no point any interest in foreign appreciations.

Remarkably, the key figures of both documentary filmmaking and that of narrative feature filmmaking were the same: Loftur Guðmundsson and Óskar Gíslason. The essay addresses their authorship in terms of both subject matters and film style during a period extending from 1923 to 1954. These were times of dramatic upheaval in Iceland (as obviously most anywhere else) that included the instigation of the Republic in 1944, modernization and urbanization, and the essay offers ample evidence on how these influenced the filmmaking of the era. Theoretically, the essay draws upon the works of Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer amongst others in drawing out the film medium’s specificity – not least its affinities with the past. In this, it also offers some ideas on the nature of cinema with a broad applicability despite dealing specifically with a little known period of a little known national cinema.

Key words: Icelandic cinema, world cinema, national cinema, Loftur Guðmundsson, Óskar Gíslason, Erik Balling

In recent years Icelandic cinema has become an integral part of world cinema and can no longer be easily defined as an independent institution. Its films are typically produced and financed in partnership with other countries and intended for distribution abroad no less than at home. Certainly, token films are still made for the local market but as an industry Icelandic cinema could hardly exist on its own. Furthermore, strong cultural ties connect with the outer world in various ways, including the Reykjavik International Film Festival that showcases annually both local and foreign films.

We seem to be quickly forgetting that this has not always been so. In fact, when Icelandic cinema was first institutionalized in the early 1980s it was as an inherently national

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\* University of Iceland; bn@hi.is.

institution. But as many other things Icelandic, the cinema got caught in a whirlwind of changes both local and global, transforming it into a transnational enterprise typical of much of world cinema. I have addressed these changes systematically elsewhere (2007), and would like to go further back in this essay, all the way back to the begin, when long before anything akin to a film industry had been put in place, few pioneers set out to shoot the first Icelandic films. In a world of world cinema, these films stand a particular risk of being forgotten altogether as they do not address a global audience – in fact made at a time when such a notion would have been mostly nonsensical in Iceland. Obviously, by addressing these films in this volume it is hoped that they should be of interest nonetheless to the foreign reader – not least as a reminder of a particular type of filmmaking that is arguably quickly disappearing in Iceland as most anywhere else.

Divided into two parts; the former addresses films of documentary nature, tracing a thread from the oldest extant film to so-called “Iceland-films” of the interwar era, while the latter follows the trajectory of narrative films leading up to the instigation of the Icelandic Film Fund in 1978, which laid the ground for Icelandic cinema’s modern phase<sup>1</sup>.

## 1. ICELAND-FILMS AND THE AURA OF THE PAST

A ramshackle fire-carriage is being pulled along a bumpy street. Wooden houses recede in the background while open spaces are paramount. The children that have gathered on the street are less interested in the carriage than the camera, which has preserved their excitement and curiosity. The Reykjavik one can glimpse here is a little town that seems to have little in common with the city we know today. We might have questioned the location if the title was not so explicit, *Firemen Practice in Reykjavik* (1906, *Slökkviliðsæfing í Reykjavík*, Peter Petersen and Alfred Lind). The scratched black and white images give us a glimpse of the distant past.

Icelandic cinema has never been in synchronization with the history of world cinema. *Firemen’s Practice* belongs neither to the cinema of attractions of the early oughts nor the “primitive” narrative cinema that succeeded it (Gunning 1990). Instead it is typical of the earliest actualities as is evinced by its descriptive title. It is an encounter between a particular place and the medium of film – a celebration of its recording capability. Cinema has caught a glimpse of “life” in the Reykjavik of the year 1906. The popularity of the film when shown in the Reykjavik Biograph-Theater suggests that it held a particular fascination for the locals as it caught on film their own town in the manner of foreign metropolises and exotic locations, which they were by now accustomed to seeing on the screen. For Icelanders today, this little film offers the oldest “living pictures” – as the locals referred to them in the early twentieth century – of the past.

*Firemen’s Practice* was not the first Icelandic film made, but it is the oldest extant one. Unfortunately, most films made prior to 1919 have been lost. A notable increase occurred in film-

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<sup>1</sup> This essay draws extensively on the third chapter of my dissertation *Icelandic Cinema: A National Practice in a Global Context* (2005: 127–154). All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

making productivity in the very late teens and early 1920s, as various local filmmakers were inspired to travel around the country and film the population at work and play. The establishing of a sovereign state in 1918 is likely to have been an important factor in this growth, just as the inauguration of the republic in 1944 was to spur something of a golden era of documentaries.

Petersen's extant films are mostly limited to Reykjavik and the neighboring area. Already in 1919 Reykjavik looks strikingly different than in 1906, but Petersen's approach remains consistent. His films can hardly be said to be conventional documentaries as no attempt is made to articulate any kind of statement regarding their subjects. The camera is first and foremost a recording apparatus, and his films perhaps best described as panoramas (and Petersen systematically pans from right to left). He thus often places the camera at high locations offering a good overview of the city, e.g. in a fascinating panorama of the houses by the downtown pond *Tjörninn*. Often his camera will also linger on important buildings, including the parliament, the cathedral, the women's school and the Danish embassy. However, Petersen's oeuvre was not limited to city panoramas as he also filmed events of interest, e.g. the arrival of the liner *Gullfoss* whose passengers included the Danish football team A.B. and a film crew from the well-known Danish film company Nordisk Film. These films were no doubt shown (presumably before features) in Petersen's own Old Theater (*Gamla bíó*) as they are framed by its title-cards.

Filming outside Reykjavik, Petersen's approach is equally panoramic – almost postcard like. A portrait of the fishing village *Ísafjörður* in the summer of 1923 includes shots taken inside the village, but also shots filmed from a long distance so as to capture the whole village and its mountain scenery in the frame (as if taking a picture for a postcard). A rather more lively portrayal of a typical fishing village is Sveinn Guðnason's film of *Eskifjörður*, shot in 1923–24, as he is much more interested in capturing the daily life of the villagers compared to Petersen's emphasis on the scenery. If thus slight differences can be pinpointed in approach, most films from this period have in common the primary goal of recording the life in the land and its scenery, and as such can be said to be consistent with Petersen's first film, *Firemen's Practice*.

These early Icelandic films are not easily evaluated by conventional categories of film appreciation as they express little or no interest in either narrative or aesthetics. Instead it might be helpful to re-visit Walter Benjamin's thesis on the aura of art. Benjamin considered the aura of an artwork to stem from its history traced back to its origin in a specific time and place. Furthermore, he figured that any reproduction of an artwork did away with this historical specificity, and was thus devoid of any aura. In one of his best known phrases Benjamin wrote: "that which withers away in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art" (1968: 221). His primary example was film, whose "many reproductions (substituted) a plurality of copies for a unique existence" (*ibidem*). In the mid 1930s when Benjamin wrote the essay even very early cinema must have seemed inherently modern, conveying little attachment to the past<sup>2</sup>. Watching early films today, however, it is hard

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting, however, that Benjamin was willing to ascribe certain aura to early portrait photographs. Not only because he considered them related to traditional paintings, but also because of their ability to capture a past moment (1968: 225–226). For a more detailed description of early photography and its aura, see Benjamin's "Little history of photography" (1999).

not to find in them a unique conjuration of the past, with old age imprinted on the black and white photography through severe scratching, missing scenes and speed irregularities, and with film prints often surviving in only one copy traced back to a specific time and place. Early films may not give us the aura of art, but certainly they evoke an aura of the past.

The unique capability of the photographic image is to establish a direct link with the object reproduced (by capturing the light stemming from it on film), whose authenticity cannot be matched by traditional representations (paintings, sculptures, written descriptions, etc.). I would argue that viewing old photographs today conjures up an aura of the past, and that this aura becomes more pronounced with film as it appears to capture daily “life” in all its movements and vibrations<sup>3</sup>. The children seen in *Firemen’s Practice* did run after the camera in this manner in late 1906, in a little town called Reykjavik but otherwise bearing little resemblance to the city it is today. Even this very short film gives some indication of what “life” was like in Reykjavik in the early twentieth century, with a much fuller picture appearing with the help of films made in the late teens and early 1920s. While not substituting for traditional historiography, this aspect of the past is one that can only be mediated by cinema.

The primary value of early Icelandic film is thus found in giving a vibrant look at the past – the sense of days long gone. However, this value is a qualified one as these films are of little interest to anyone except Icelanders (or foreigners with a profound interest in Icelandic culture and history) as they convey no interest in film aesthetics or themes that might transcend their national specificity. Furthermore, the events and places depicted have no relevance outside the island, as compared to important historical events of the twentieth century or daily life in the metropolises of the West (exemplified e.g. by the continuous scholarly interest in daily life in Paris or New York). In this, Iceland is typical of most small and medium-sized nations whose early films have little global relevance. However, for domestic viewers, now and then, these local films constitute the visual history of the nation along with paintings and photographs.

Loftur Guðmundsson’s *Iceland in Living Pictures* (*Ísland í lifandi myndum*), the first locally made feature length film, is in many ways the culmination of this tradition. Shot in 1924, it was a tremendous success when it opened in early 1925. It bore all the hallmarks of Guðmundsson’s oeuvre, which Erlendur Sveinsson has described as “an ode to land and nation” (2002: 19). If the “Iceland” in the title suggests as much, the “Living Pictures” part indicates the particular capability of cinema in capturing that land and nation as discussed above. As in the films preceding *Iceland in Living Pictures*, the recording capabilities of the medium are privileged over organized narrative structure.

The whole of Iceland is the topic of Guðmundsson’s film as he refuses to limit its scope to a particular area, ways of work or specific themes. After a title-card introduction to the

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<sup>3</sup> Nowhere is the claim on the ontological relationship between film and reality more clearly stated than in André Bazin’s well-known essay “The ontology of the photographic image,” where he goes as far as to claim that: “The photographic image is the object itself” (1967: 14). Arguably, the aura of these early films has only been enhanced by the introduction of digital video, as the latter does not enter into the same ontological relationship as cinema (nor does it register age as evidently). The interrelations of cinema and reality constitute a fundamental debate in classical film theory, which remain outside the scope of this essay. It is ultimately a debate that does not affect my argument as a strong affinity is established between the nation (its past) and cinema – irrespective of whether it is an ontological or representational one.

nation's history and culture, the film begins in Reykjavik with atmospheric high-angled panoramas followed by descriptive intertitles claiming: "Reykjavik has more beautiful and grandiose views than most other capitals. And Reykjavik could easily be called, particularly in summer, the city of the beautiful sunsets". This is somewhat characteristic of the tone of forthcoming intertitles, particularly those which quote patriotic poetry (Guðmundsson's own text is typically more restrained and primarily descriptive), but the images themselves express no such elevation. Guðmundsson is content with recording external reality, shying away from manipulating the images through editing, excessive framing or elaborate camera movement. Although this approach may just as well stem from limited professional knowledge and experience of the medium's technical capabilities as being an aesthetic choice on behalf of Guðmundsson, the effect is one of restraint and respect for the pre-filmic world<sup>4</sup>. Following Reykjavik, larger villages are introduced one by one, including *Ísafjörður*, *Vestmannaeyjar* and *Siglufjörður*. Detailed accounts of both fishing and farming are given, but it is not until close to an hour into the film that an automobile is first seen, rather suggestive of modernity's belated arrival to Iceland. Repeatedly the camera lingers on the inhabitants themselves (ranging from long shots to close-ups) along with domestic animals.

In pointing out the discrepancy between early Icelandic film and traditional film aesthetics, as evidenced in the most limited use of editing, framing, staging, narrative and explicit themes, I do not mean to qualify them as mediocre or being of little interest. In fact, to revert to another influential German cultural critic, many of these films have a profound sense for what Siegfried Kracauer referred to as the cinematic approach, and make unstaged reality its primary object. Kracauer defined film's five inherent affinities as the unstaged, the fortuitous, endlessness, the indeterminate, and finally the "flow of life," (all being common to film and photography save for the last one) (1997: 60–73)<sup>5</sup>. What Kracauer has in mind is exemplified by his D.W. Griffith quote on cinema's ability to capture "the beauty of moving wind in the trees" (60). If Guðmundsson has few things in common with the canonical masters of world cinema discussed by Kracauer in *Theory of Film*, his approach is strikingly cinematic: Waves crashing against the shore, fishermen at work out at sea in high winds, cliffs being climbed for eggs, horses ridden across heavy streams, and colts, puppies, and kittens playing in a field. A popular scene by Guðmundsson and other filmmakers is the short but very hectic haddock season; a notably cinematic subject as fish

<sup>4</sup> An important exception is a self-reflexive scene in which Guðmundsson pans to the right following a typical landscape shot and by doing so reveals his own shadow on a rock in the act of filming.

<sup>5</sup> It is worth pointing out that Kracauer is not making a distinction between fiction films and documentaries, as he finds that documentary makers can be so "exclusively concerned with conveying propositions of an intellectual or ideological nature that they do not even try to elicit them from the visual material they exhibit" (207). As already pointed out, the early Icelandic films make few attempts at manipulating the reality recorded and convey no explicit ideological messages. Earlier, Kracauer had also argued for concrete relations between cinema and nation in his classic study of German national cinema, *From Caligari to Hitler*, if on different grounds, namely cinema being a collaborative cultural product made for the masses (1947). If Kracauer did not continue his work on cinema and nation, the interrelations of history and cinema were to remain integral to his later work. In his last and incomplete work *History: The Last Things Before the Last*, Kracauer went as far as to put forward a historical approach based on his cinematic approach: "Small wonder that camera-reality parallels historical reality in terms of its structure, its general constitution. Exactly as historical reality, it is partly patterned, partly amorphous – a consequence, in both cases, of the half-cooked state of our everyday world" (1995: 58).

is heaved up from boats at harbor, carried in wheelbarrows to cutting tables, thrown into barrels, stacked up to great heights, and shipped out to sea again – all happening at a frantic pace. Another popular scenery among early Icelandic filmmakers is the valley *Laugar* where women in Reykjavik would wash laundry. As steam comes rising up from hot pools and mist floats around the women, the scenes atmospherically capture the unstaged, the fortuitous, endlessness, the indeterminate, and ultimately the “flow of life”.

What sets *Iceland in Living Pictures* apart from earlier films, in addition to its extensive length, is it being sold abroad. However, there is little to suggest that this influenced its creative process, as the film is clearly addressed to Icelanders first and foremost. In fact, it appears as if Guðmundsson turned his eye to the foreign market only after he realized that he had little chance of breaking even otherwise, despite the film’s local box-office success and small belated support from the state. Eventually exhibition rights were sold to Germany, Austria, England, France, Czechoslovakia, Finland and Denmark, and at least one print survives with German intertitles (Sveinsson 2002: 31).

As early as film projection was introduced in Iceland, calls began to be made for local productions that would take advantage of the medium to increase tourism, and work as a counterweight against what was perceived to be a most inaccurate, and often unflattering, portrayal in foreign films<sup>6</sup>. Nonetheless, it was arguably first with *Iceland in Living Pictures* that the locals seized control of the country’s image for marketing purposes abroad. Although the film was not made for that particular purpose, numerous films followed in its wake with the explicit purpose of introducing and marketing Iceland abroad, with their numbers peaking in the 1930s. The same decade also saw a considerable increase in foreign productions, primarily German and Danish, hoping to capture the people’s character and the land’s geology. Whether made by locals or foreigners these films were simply referred to as Iceland-films (*Íslandsmyndir*), as despite some variety in approach their subject was the land itself<sup>7</sup>. What is remarkable, however, is that these films that would seem to be the epitome of national film production – the intertwining of cinema and nation – are for the most part a transnational affair. In this, they prefigure much of today’s cinema.

In agitating for state-funding for his own Iceland-film, filmmaker and writer Guðmundur Kamban described in considerable detail the harm inflicted on the country’s image by foreign filmmakers, making his primary example a short from 1932 made by James A. FitzPatrick for MGM. Instead he called for local productions “that present our country and nation as we ourselves wish, supervised and guaranteed by the state” (Sveinsson 1999: 853). Having garnered funding from the National Fishing Agency, which intended to use the film in

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<sup>6</sup> Already in 1901 it was written in the periodical *Þjóðólfur* that: “There is no doubt, that if film exhibitions [of films about Iceland] were held around the globe, they would considerably increase tourism to the country. It would therefore be important, if we ourselves, could guarantee the quality and variety of these films” (quoted in Bernharðsson 1999: 817–818).

<sup>7</sup> For a systematic overview of the Iceland-films of the 1920s and 30s (many of which are lost) see Ásgeir Guðmundsson (2001). Guðmundsson also lists a number of projects that never materialized, due to the state’s unwillingness to contribute financially or otherwise. He considers the state’s lack of enthusiasm to have been primarily due to its dire financial situation, but also concerns regarding the nation’s image abroad (going as far as demanding, what would be called today, a “final cut”). A more recent and more expansive take on the subject can be found in Íris Ellenberger (2007).

marketing Icelandic fish products abroad, Kamban began production in 1935, securing the services of German filmmaker Paul Burkert as director. Ironically, the result of their partnership ended up conforming to the norms of the *kulturfilm* genre, which typically exoticised foreign cultures,<sup>8</sup> by romantically presenting Iceland as a nation living by the land in awesome natural surroundings unspoiled by modernity<sup>9</sup>.

The detailed and minute presentations of the country in the Iceland-films were at least made with one eye on foreign audiences – if they were not foreign productions altogether. The Icelandic documentary that came into prominence halfway through the 1940s had a most different outlook. In retrospect the period could be considered to be something akin to a golden age of the documentary form in Iceland. It is hard not to see this activity as stemming from the founding of the Republic in 1944, and the need to represent/articulate the nation visually (at least two documentaries were made about the inauguration itself). These documentaries shared little with the *kulturfilm* and only rarely manifested anything akin to a nationalist longing for the past, dealing instead primarily with contemporary events, or the sensibility of the day. Although Guðmundsson did make another Iceland-film that was simply titled *Iceland*, almost a color-remake of *Iceland in Living Pictures*.

Various filmmakers filmed the 1947 eruption of the volcano *Hekla*, including Ósvaldur Knudsen who was to become a productive director of documentaries in future decades. The key figure of the late 1940s was, however, Óskar Gíslason who directed an extensive contemporary portrait of the capital titled *Reykjavík of Our Days* (*Reykjavík okkar daga*), which premiered in two parts in 1947 and 1948. The following year he directed what is perhaps Iceland's best known documentary *The Great Látrabjarg Sea-Rescue* (*Björgunaraðferkið við Látrabjarg*), combing re-enactments of a famous rescue of English seamen stranded at the hostile sheer-cliffs of *Látrabjarg* in awful weather conditions, with footage shot on location of what was in a fact a different sea-rescue Gíslason had stumbled upon while filming the re-enactments.

Both Guðmundsson and Gíslason were also soon to become the pioneers of Icelandic narrative cinema as they swapped modes in the late 1940s. And as with much of this golden era of documentary, and most unlike the older and outward-looking Iceland-films, the first narrative features looked only inward.

## 2. EARLY NARRATIVE AND THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN COUNTRY AND CITY

Two peculiar looking figures come walking towards the camera. From the film's title we know their names are Jón and Gvendur, although we do not know who is who. Intertitles tell us that they are about to meet a farmer to display their workmanship, presumably to

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<sup>8</sup> Sabine Hake has defined the *kulturfilm* as “a form of documentary committed to idealized representations of nature, country, and native people” (2002: 22). See also Kracauer (1947: 141–143).

<sup>9</sup> My reading of their work is based upon the four shorts composed for exhibition in Germany: *Fishing in Iceland* (1935, *Schiffahrt und Fischfang auf Island*), *A Summer in Iceland* (1935, *Sommer auf Island*), *Icelandic Summer* (1935, *Islandssommer*) and *Frightening Earth* (1935, *Unheimliche Erde*).

get work at the farm. However, things do not come to a good start as either Jón or Gvendur steps on a shovel, the foot framed in a close-up, and falls flat. More excitement seems to be headed their way as the farmer's daughter is about to arrive to the scene. However, we never find out how Jón and Gvendur get along with the farmer and his daughter as less than two minutes are extant from what was a 20 minutes long film. Despite the short duration of the surviving portion, the character of either Jón or Gvendur (Tryggvi Magnússon) is most familiar as it is explicitly modeled on Charlie Chaplin, who has evidently arrived to the Icelandic countryside.

*The Adventures of Jón and Gvendur* (1923, *Ævintýri Jóns og Gvendar*) was not only the first Icelandic narrative film to be made, but also the only one until the late 1940s when something of a boom occurred in local feature film production. Loftur Guðmundsson, who had directed *The Adventures of Jón and Gvendur*, now returned to fiction after making a number of documentaries in between. However, if his first foray into narrative fiction was indebted to the most iconic Hollywood figure of them all, the first Icelandic narrative feature *Between Mountain and Shore* (1948, *Milli fjalls og fjöru*) was inherently local in approach. Guðmundsson even apologized for the discrepancy in quality between his film and the Hollywood product on introductory title-cards.

A poor farmer's son Ingvar (Gunnar Eyjólfsson) is accused of theft by the county-magistrate and must clear his name. Along the way he is faced with making a romantic choice between an innocent country-girl and a rich seductress, who happens to be the daughter of the magistrate. The story is set in a far removed past without any traces of modernity. It does, though, clearly take place during Danish rule, but no hostility is expressed towards the former rulers. Instead, the film's arguably most benevolent character is a Danish merchant, who has settled in Iceland and comes to Ingvar's rescue, and thus the film goes against a long historical tradition of accusing Danish merchants of exploiting the local population. The actual thieves, on the other hand, turn out to be foreigners of unspecified origin.

Stylistically the film is most theatrical. Conversations take place within a single frame and preferably without any editing. Long and medium-long shots are primary, rarely angled, and camera-movement is minimal. In general, the camera is used to convey narrative information rather than presenting it aesthetically. If this reserved approach worked well for the earlier Iceland-films, as it benefited its cinematic subjects, it appears out of place in the highly constructed narrative fiction of *Between Mountain and Shore*. Like many other local features of the period the film suffers from comparisons to the sophisticated feature production of the more technically and professionally advanced national cinemas. However, despite the film's many technical drawbacks (of which Guðmundur, and one suspects equally his audience, was very much aware) it was an outstanding box-office success as it broke all previous attendance records at the Old Theater (Sveinsson 2002: 55). Evidently the local audience was more than willing to sacrifice the technical standards of Hollywood for the pleasure of seeing a locally made film.

Another case in point is Óskar Gíslason's first feature *The Last Farm in the Valley* (*Síðasti bærinn í dalnum*) that was not only a remarkable success on its initial run in

1950, but also during repeated re-runs<sup>10</sup>. Primarily intended for children, it was framed as a story told by a grandmother about certain fantastical events of her youth. The scene of her telling the story dissolves into the events narrated. The setting is a traditional Icelandic farm and a field full of domestic animals. Children are seen playing by the farm in shots ranging from close-ups to long shots. Soon these elevated pastoral images make way for a darker setting as a strong mist settles in and bad weather begins to rule the day. The audience is told about the destruction of the land: “Desolated ruins of fallen settlement.” What follows is a fantastical story about the struggle of the grandmother and her brother in their youth against malevolent other-worldly powers, based on traditional Icelandic folklore, over the last farm in the valley. It all ends happily, though, with the promise of “the settlements in the valley blossoming again as the malevolent forces have been laid to rest.”

Gíslason makes use of various visual tricks in depicting the fantastical atmosphere of the story. Most of these are rather simple like stopping the camera and adding or removing objects from the scene before rolling the camera again to give the impression of objects disappearing or appearing miraculously. A little more complicated are scenes of the siblings flying on a magical chest, with point-of-view shots that appear to have been taken from an airplane. The film also often manifests a clever use of color. However, if these special effects suggest a more fluent filmmaking than evidenced by *Between Mountain and Shore* such is hardly the case. The acting is rather static, e.g. conversations will not take place while characters are walking or riding horses, and the use of framing and editing is minimal. The camera is again used to narrate a story, without aesthetic flourishes.

What these two first Icelandic features have in common above everything else is their nostalgia for the countryside. If the instigation of the republic in 1944 encouraged the production of these films, neither one expressed any interest in contemporary Icelandic society or the future of the young republic, along the lines of the documentaries of the late 1940s. Instead both *The Last Farm in the Valley* and *Between Mountain and Shore* display a remarkable romantic longing for the country of the past, very much in the manner of early twentieth-century nationalism. As evinced by its title, *The Last Farm in the Valley* reflects the fear of the supposed demise of the countryside, with the other-worldly powers standing in for modernity and urbanization. Following local habitats *Between Mountain and Shore* is simply a metonym for the farm, which is celebrated in all its traditional values – the farmer’s son Ingvar representing the ideal Icelander. The Reykjavik of the twentieth century is indeed far removed from these tales.

Raymond Williams begins his classic study of *The Country and the City* by pointing out that: “In English, ‘country’ is both a nation and a part of the ‘land’; ‘the country’ can

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<sup>10</sup> Although Ævar Kvaran is credited as the director (and continues to be credited as such in some recent publications) of *The Last Farm in the Valley*, Gíslason is the film’s director in the conventional understanding of film direction despite “only” being credited as a producer and a cinematographer. Kvaran, a veteran of the stage, was brought in to help with the acting as Gíslason had little experience in directing actors being a photographer whose earlier films had all been documentaries. The same work division is found in his other two features, and Gíslason relies on the assistance of other stage directors in his shorter fiction. In all cases I will credit Gíslason for directing the films.

be the whole society or its rural area” (1973: 1)<sup>11</sup>. To a certain extent this is also true of the Icelandic language as “land” has roughly the same meaning in English and Icelandic, and can both indicate the “country” and the “nation,” in addition to its geological and natural qualities. However, the more commonly used “sveit” does not refer to the nation, although strong affiliations are clearly believed to exist between the two. Even during the rapid modernization and urbanization at mid twentieth century, there seems to be little doubt that the countryside was still seen to be the heart and soul of the nation. Guðmundsson’s second narrative feature and last film, *The Displaced One* (1951, *Niðursetningurinn*), was equally preoccupied with the countryside, as it was set in a nineteenth-century farm and displayed many stock characters of country fiction.

Reykjavik was, however, more prominent in Gíslason’s future work. His second feature, *The Reykjavik Adventure of the Bakka-Brothers* (1951, *Reykjavíkurlævistýri Bakka-bræðra*), can be seen to occupy an in-between position as it updated the fairytales of the Bakka-brothers by having them visit the capital. The comedy stems from the brothers’ unfamiliarity with city-life having not left the countryside prior. The corresponding conflict between past and modernity is manifested in slapstick scenes where the brothers come across various modern gadgets with which they are not familiar. Gíslason’s third and final narrative feature *New Role* (1954, *Nýtt hlutverk*) was a contemporary adult drama set in Reykjavik, but dealt thematically with the conflict between traditional values and modern ones<sup>12</sup>. Stylistically both films were very much along the lines of *The Last Farm in the Valley*: minimal editing, static camera, no angles, and theatrical acting style<sup>13</sup>.

Whether set in country or city, the mid-century features of Guðmundsson and Gíslason have in common an inherently local approach. They rely on well-known Icelandic fairytales and other traditional sources. The films are addressed to Icelanders only, as no attempt is made to explain local particularities to the audience, and were clearly never intended for foreign exhibition in any form. This is manifested not only in their subject matters and

<sup>11</sup> It is also worth noting that despite Williams emphasizing the heterogeneous forms characterizing the opposition between country and city, the case of Iceland mostly falls within his general summary: “On the country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence, and simple virtue. On the city has gathered the idea of an achieved centre: of learning, communication, light. Powerful hostile associations have also developed: on the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation” (1973: 1). In Iceland at mid twentieth century the country continues to be mostly perceived as virtuous, while the city is accordingly approached with more hostility.

<sup>12</sup> As both *The Reykjavik Adventure of the Bakka-Brothers* and *New Role* were shot on location in Reykjavik they give a most vivid account of the city at mid century whose historical value may very well be paramount. In fact, Gíslason’s documentary *Reykjavik of Our Days* had in many ways done the same for the capital as Guðmundsson’s *Iceland in Living Pictures* had done for the country at large. Rather than being a traditional documentary, it is something akin to a city symphony. If not comparable to those of Dziga Vertov and Walter Ruttmann, it is characterized by a cinematic approach and rhythmic editing. It is a subject better suited to Gíslason’s filmic sensibility and in many ways a fascinating account of the city and an invaluable visual documentation of its growth, depicting its changing ways of work and leisure, and shot on earth, sky and underwater. However, its cinematic approach is somewhat compromised by the occasional narrative intrusion of a bourgeois couple leisurely touring Reykjavik.

<sup>13</sup> It is worth noting that Gíslason’s short *Covetousness* (1952, *Ágirnd*) is stylistically of a different sort altogether, as its expressionistic stage setting is supported by playful camera work, skewed angles, graphic framing, and often rapid editing.

narratives, but also their style – or perhaps more to the point a lack thereof. As the camera is entirely subjected to the narrative and never allowed any aesthetic flourishes of its own, the films at no point register a transnational appeal through style.

Aware of the technical shortcomings of such local productions, the company Edda-film sought a foreign co-producer for what was to become its first and only narrative feature *The Girl Gogo* (1962, *79 af stöðinni*), although it had earlier participated in the Swedish production of *Salka Valka* (1954, Arne Mattson)<sup>14</sup>. Danish director Erik Balling and cinematographer Jürgen Skov were assigned to the project, and arrived with extensive film equipment from Nordisk Film. Certainly, there is no comparing the professionalism of *The Girl Gogo* to the earlier features. In fact, it is in many ways an exciting film stylistically – drawing equally on Italian neo-realism in its stark location shooting and Scandinavian symbolism in often elaborate pictorial compositions. Its camera-work is characterized by extensive, if unobtrusive, camera movements, meaningful framing and *mise-en-scène* arrangements, and occasional claustrophobic close-ups.

The narrative itself, however, is very much indebted to the city and country opposition characteristic of the earlier films. Like the novel by Indriði Þorsteinsson from which it is adapted, *The Girl Gogo* is the story of Ragnar (Gunnar Eyjólfsson) who has moved from the country to the city where he makes a living by driving a taxi-cab and handling liquor on the side in the early 1950s<sup>15</sup>. After driving a drunken American soldier from Reykjavik to the military base at Keflavik, he meets Gógó (Kristbjörg Kjeld) whose Cadillac has broken down and helps her back to town. Not long after they have consummated an adulterous affair, with her husband hospitalized in Denmark, but she is also having an affair with an American soldier, Bill (John Teasy), behind Ragnar's back. His good friend, Guðmundur (Róbert Arnfinnsson) is in the know, but hesitates to inform Ragnar despite objecting to the relationship.

An extensive national allegory is set up in novel and film as Gógó is faced with choosing between three men. If by no means a saint along the lines of Ingvar (also played by Eyjólfsson) in *Between Mountain and Shore* considering his adulterous affair and black market activities, Ragnar is very much rooted in the unspoiled country-boy figure, and clearly represents Iceland. Although the film does not succumb to the easy solution of presenting Bill as a villain, the US presence which he symbolizes is clearly an undesirable one. Finally, despite never explicitly identified as Danish, Gógó's husband is connected to Denmark in various ways, most notably the family name Faxen, his absence due to hospitalization in Denmark, and his upper-class social status. Just as Denmark no longer rules Iceland, the husband's time with Gógó is up and he passes away midway through the film. The question facing Gógó and the Icelandic nation is whether to uphold the traditional values of the Icelandic countryside or go the way of American modernization.

When Ragnar first meets Gógó she is clearly depicted as a somewhat Americanized city-girl through her clothing, nick-name (with Ragnar preferring her Icelandic name Guðríður), Cadillac, and assertive behavior that instigates their relationship. Again to

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<sup>14</sup> On Edda-film see Arnaldur Indriðason (1999).

<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting that the original Icelandic title *79 from the station* (*79 af stöðinni*) refers to Ragnar as 79 is his call number at the taxi-station.

Balling's credit, he resists turning Gógó into an unsympathetic seductress, and emphasizes instead her fragility and unenviable position. Nonetheless, the film upholds the opposition between the spoiled city-girl and the innocent country-boy. Ragnar is, in fact, systematically tied to both the countryside and nation, whose mutual affinities are explicitly stated in a dialogue between Guðmundur and Ragnar in the novel:

- It is good to find the country-boy in you, Guðmundur said.
- It has been a long time...
- Still he has lived in me and you and many others.
- There is no reason for him to die, I said.
- No, said Guðmundur.
- Not while he preserves some of his renewal in the countryside, in its power and productivity and its hurt pride.
- If he dies.
- Then nobody knows this land anymore, he said. (Þorsteinsson 2004: 311)

Even though this exchange is not found in the film, the visit to the farm of Ragnar's parents in which the dialogue occurs is of central importance in it. Gógó's husband has just passed away and Ragnar goes to the country to clear his head. There are striking visual and aural differences in the country scenes, as the stark and often dreary, even claustrophobic, city scenes make way for bright panoramas. The music becomes more upbeat, and dialogue is not heard for the longest time as if it would disrupt the country's quaintness. The film-makers also take advantage of the novel's brief reference to a treasured visit by Gógó and Ragnar to *Pingvellir*, a national symbol par excellence as the site of the original Althing parliament, and develop it into an extensive scene where the atmospheric natural settings redeem the adulterous affair. Rowing on the sunlit lake *Pingvallavatn*, Ragnar's voice can be heard saying: "This land. It is as if it just stepped down from the heavens." Even in the city Ragnar is visually tied to the countryside, e.g. when in a medium shot his head is neatly framed within a landscape painting, right after the audience has been informed of Gógó's affair with Bill.

Gógó eventually makes the choice held up by the film as the only right one, but she makes it too late. Ragnar has already found out about Bill, and come to blows with Guðmundur when defending her honor regardless. Driving exhausted home to the farm he stops to take gas. "I am going home," he says to a concerned gas-service man, "nobody is tired when on their way home." Not long after, he loses control of the car and crashes it into a river. Guðmundur and Gógó receive the news of his death on the radio when on their way to the farm. In another exemplary visual composition their car slows down to a halt in a long shot, remains still for a considerable time, before slowly turning around and driving back. The film ends with Guðmundur letting Gógó out of his car in a dark and gloomy city scene.

*The Girl Gogo* was the only Icelandic narrative feature made in span of over two decades. It was finally followed up in 1977 with *Murder Story* (*Morðsaga*, Reynir Oddsson), which was also the first film set in Reykjavik without drawing extensively on the countryside. It is a film often dismissed as an oddity, or a cult-film due to its splatter-like finale, but is perhaps first and foremost a parody of the rising Reykjavik bourgeoisie and modern

suburbia. It acknowledged its debt to Claude Chabrol within the diegesis, but drew perhaps more on Luis Buñuel, as evinced in a sexually charged but ultimately absurd and surreal dinner scene. Its critique of patriarchy tied together the abusive father of the household, and the general rise of the bourgeoisie and modern business practices. However, in neither its city setting nor its indebtedness to the European art film did *Murder Story* foreshadow what lay ahead when Icelandic film production finally took off in the early 1980s. Aspiring to establish itself as a national institution, Icelandic cinema followed the example of early twentieth-century Icelandic nationalism by turning to the country, the past and the literary heritage. Its first major film, *Land and Sons* (1980, *Land og synir*, Ágúst Guðmundsson), was based upon a novel from the same trilogy as *The Girl Gogo*. Set in an earlier time period, *Land and Sons* nostalgically depicted the countryside before its tragic demise and concluded with the country-boy leaving his home for the city.

In this, the so-called Icelandic Film Spring of the 1980s has arguably more in common with the now-almost-forgotten mid century narrative features of Guðmundsson and Gíslason than today's Icelandic cinema. Both are far removed from the transnational co-productions of contemporary Icelandic cinema – itself interestingly somewhat prefigured in the even older tradition of the Iceland-film. In conclusion it is worth pondering whether Icelandic cinema, not least in light of the economic collapse of 2008, is once again at a crossroads. Tellingly, its most renowned director Friðrik Þór Friðriksson takes an inward turn in his latest feature *Mamma Gógó* (2010), a retelling of the struggle of his mother Gógó (also played by actress Kristbjörg Kjeld) with Alzheimer's disease, whose past is evoked by scenes borrowed from *The Girl Gogo*. Similar to the way Gógó's vague memories animate her past, the Icelandic cinema discussed in this essay conjures up an aura of an Iceland long gone<sup>16</sup>. It is also the suppressed history of today's cinema, but one that can apparently erupt to the scene at any moment, and whose filmmaking practices may not be extinct yet. Perhaps, the past is nearer than we have been lead to believe.

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<sup>16</sup> In this context it is also worth noting the opening credits of *Private Lives* (1995, *Einkalíf*, Þráinn Bertelsson), a film about filmmaking, which make extensive use of clips from *Iceland in Living Pictures*.

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#### ISLANDIA W RUCHOMYCH OBRAZACH. BLISKIE SPOTKANIA KINEMATOGRAFII Z TOŻSAMOŚCIĄ NARODOWĄ

W ostatnich latach kino islandzkie wzbudziło szerokie międzynarodowe zainteresowanie. Wiele filmów otrzymało nagrody na festiwalach filmowych, w wyniku czego były one szeroko dystrybuowane – co zwróciło uwagę krytyków i ludzi nauki. Artykuł traktuje o całkiem innym kinie islandzkim. O takim, które jest nie tylko znacznie starsze, ale powstało wyłącznie na użytek narodowy i pozbawione było aspiracji globalnych – chociaż opisany został również ważny wyjątek od tej zasady. Esej został podzielony na dwie części: w pierwszej autor poświęca uwagę filmom o naturze dokumentalnej, śledząc wątek od najstarszych zachowanych filmów, poprzez tzw. „filmy Islandii”, które powstały w okresie międzywojennym, aż do pierwszych filmów lokalnych, skierowanych do publiczności zagranicznej; w drugiej zaś śledzi trajektorię powstawania filmów narracyjnych, które doprowadziły do ukonstytuowania się w 1978 r. Islandzkiego Funduszu Filmowego (zwiastującego fazę modernistyczną w kinie islandzkim), choć ich twórcy nie byli w żadnej mierze nastawieni na uznanie międzynarodowe. Warto zwrócić uwagę, że kluczowymi postaciami zarówno dla twórczości dokumentalnej, jak i narracyjnej, były te same osoby: Loftur Guðmundsson oraz Óskar Gíslason. W artykule został opisany ich autorski wkład zarówno w tematykę, jak i styl filmów powstałych w latach od 1923–1954. Były to czasy

dramatycznych zmian w Islandii (jak również wszędzie indziej na świecie), obejmujące powstanie Republiki w 1944 r., modernizację i urbanizację kraju. Artykuł zawiera wiele dowodów na to, jak te zmiany wpłynęły na powstawanie filmów w tym trudnym czasie. W warstwie teoretycznej esej bazuje m.in. na pracach Waltera Benjamina oraz Siegfrieda Kracauera, którzy wskazują na specyfikę medium kina oraz jego związki z przeszłością. W tej kwestii artykuł oferuje także refleksje na temat natury kina o szerokim zastosowaniu, pomimo tego, iż skupia się wyłącznie na mało znanym okresie mało znanego kina narodowego.

Słowa kluczowe: kino islandzkie, kino światowe, kino narodowe, Loftur Guðmundsson, Óskar Gíslason, Erik Balling