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FEMALE PROTAGONISTS IN CONTEMPORARY ICELANDIC CINEMA**

Modern Iceland is a country where women effectively fight for political power and social safety. However, an analysis of female characters appearing in Icelandic movies produced between 1992 and 2012 may lead to a quite different conclusion. Many film scenarios present the heroines as the victims of domestic violence who struggle not only with alcoholism and brutal behaviour of their partners, but also with a hostile social system. Such images refer to historical and literary heritage. Pessimistic perspective of Icelandic cinema serves as a source of social criticism focusing on important problems of everyday life. What is interesting, the cinema of Ulthima Thule also presents certain alternatives to victimized models of female characters. This kind of film figure in contemporary Icelandic cinema is a strong and independent woman who may be considered as a mix of classical *femme fatale* and post-modernistic female warrior. Such a female figure is connected with Icelandic romanticized symbols of nature from the XIX century and their XX and XXI century reinterpretations. The popularity of strong movie heroines proves that women's struggle for political power in Iceland has influenced cinema language and its interests.

Key words: Icelandic cinema, gender equality, feminism, female protagonists, domestic violence, *femme fatale*

The average viewer who could treat contemporary Icelandic cinema as the main and objective source of information about the situation of women in modern Ultima Thule may come to the conclusion that this small volcanic island is a country where women have always lived (and still exist) in very severe social conditions. Although the homeland of the Scandinavian sagas is a place where political activists have successfully improved their rights and privileges, many Icelandic films still present the female protagonists as powerless victims of violence. In 2009 an equal amount of men and women became members of the Icelandic government. In the same year, a female politician became for the first time the Prime Minister of the country. Despite the fact that the statistical number of women present in parliament (43%) and local governments (36%) looks impressive (especially from the Polish perspective), Icelandic activists still feel unsatisfied with the situation in local government and keep fighting for the equal institutional rights¹.

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Social efforts for reform and the fight for equality can be easily seen from a historical perspective. Statistical data show that in 1979 only three women worked in parliament, representing only 5% of its members. In 1983 in Althingi one could find nine of female MPs (15%). Five years later women candidates were elected for 21% of the seats. In the year 1991 female politicians achieved the result of exactly 25% (*Gender Equality in Iceland* 1995: 26).

When we take into consideration the fact that Icelanders often emphasize that the first head of state elected in a democratic election was a woman (Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, who has served three times since 1980), we get an image of a state where the “weaker sex” keeps gaining access to more and more prominent political functions (*Gender Equality in Iceland* 1995: 25)². All the aforementioned figures seem to prove the improving situation of Icelandic women on the social and political scene as well as on the labour market. However, the analysis of female characters appearing in the movies produced in Iceland between 1992³ and 2012 may lead to quite a different conclusion. Most scenarios present the heroines as victims of domestic violence who struggle not only with alcoholism and brutal behaviour of their partners, but also with a hostile social system.

1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: FEMALE CHARACTERS IN NATIONALISTIC NARRATIVES

In the article *Motherhood, Patriarchy, and the Nation: Domestic Violence in Iceland* Julie E. Gurdin points out the problem of marginalization of domestic violence in public debate, proving that for a long time this phenomenon was treated by the media as a result of the negative foreign influences (Gurdin 1996: 126–128). Inga Dóra Björnsdóttir notes that the unique position of women in national symbolism was often also used as a tool for political manipulation. Several times in its history, the authorities of the country used the *nationalistic* rhetoric advocating women “not to contaminate the purity of the idea of the nation” in moments of socio-economic and political instability.

Interesting examples of such strategies may be found in Björnsdóttir’s article *The Mountain Woman and the Presidency* (Björnsdóttir 1996: 106–111). The author presents how the nationalist ideas of Johann Gottfried Herder were reinterpreted to create the mother of the nation figure, which is a popular female symbol in Icelandic paintings and poetry.

Björnsdóttir analyses several phases of combining the symbolism of nature with femininity. Emphasizing the otherness of the mother-country was used to demonstrate the characteristics distinguishing the culture of the island from its political supervisor, Denmark that allegorically appears in some narratives as a male character who may be easily associated with the figure of the king. Such a pattern may be found in the poem *Iceland (1832)* written by the nineteenth-century poet Eggert Ólafsson. In his masterpiece the artist stressed the maternal attributes to

² The Icelandic government also provides many forms of social support, such as a leave for fathers.

³ The beginning of the nineties is considered as the period when Icelandic cinema is gaining some transnational aspects. It is also the time when directors, who studied abroad, came back and start to create films that used different rhetoric and visual language, clearly opposed to the national paradigm of the Icelandic “film spring” that include movies produced at the beginning of the eighties (Norðfjörð 2010: 60–64).

indicate carnal aspects (fertility, reproduction, maternal mortality) of the patronized island. The figures of sons, depicted in this text, represent the generations of Icelanders who are not taking care of their motherland (Björnsdóttir 1996: 106–111).

In the course of time, the physicality of the Olafsson female character becomes more influenced by romantic conceptions. Subsequent incarnations of the mother-country are transformed into sacred and idealized models of virtues. In her text, Björnsdóttir also shows a further transformation of the perception of femininity and its ideological representations, giving more examples from the history of literature and art.

In 1864, Erikurr Magnússon, a professor of Nordic Studies at Cambridge University, used a vision that he had, to create a figure of a Mountain Woman (Fjalkonan), which would later be often copied in Icelandic art and poetry and employed as a part of the nationalist discourse. The manuscript in the hand of Fjalkonan emphasizes the intellectual independence of the country whose original mythology, language, and traditions survived, handed down through the generations (Björnsdóttir 1996: 106–111).

After the nationalisms of the nineteenth century, the rhetoric of “purity” was used again during and after II World War, when American troops were stationed on the island. In order to stop the exodus of Icelandic women (of which more than three hundred married foreign soldiers and immigrated with them to the U.S.), the authorities of the country launched a campaign that used the hybrid of military and medical language calling for “disease control and removal of dirt from the country”. The refreshed image of a Mountain Woman ought to support the agitation force by emphasizing the connection between Icelandic culture and nature, both symbolizing the strength and purity of the country and loyalty to tradition.

But this time the symbols associated with the characteristics of the mother of the nation did not indicate the uniqueness and moral superiority of Denmark, but were supposed to criticize the presence of U.S. troops in Iceland. Julie E. Gurdin emphasizes in her text that the disastrous effects of this campaign are still affecting the children of mixed couples, and are harmful to women living in relationships with foreigners (Gurdin 1996: 132).

The author writes about the female victims of domestic violence proving that independence is still poorly perceived in Icelandic society, where even nowadays girls from an early age are being prepared for the role of housewives. The best example of such an attachment to the patriarchal order is the meaning of the noun “húsbóndi”, which covers not only a word for husband, but also, literally, “master of the house”, a patriarchal figure that plays a leading role in the family life (Gurdin 1996: 134).

On the other hand, the figure of a Mountain Woman was also successfully used by feminists, who had reinterpreted this national symbol to gain some political support in conservative circles and consequently won a place for their candidates in Althingi.

The knowledge of the historical and sociological context make it easier to understand the sources of ostracism that affects the female protagonists struggling with the problem of male violence in such Icelandic films as *Seagulls Laughter*, *Quiet Storm* or *Agnes* that I am going to analyse in this article. The awareness of the political efforts of Icelandic activists and the understanding of female national symbols role, allow me to find a source of another popular film motif in contemporary Icelandic cinema which may be treated as a mix of a classical femme fatale and post-modernistic female warrior.

2. IN THE GRIP OF FATE AND FEAR. CINEMATIC FEMALE PROTAGONIST AS A MODEL VICTIM OF VIOLENCE

One of the first Icelandic films produced after 1990 that present the tragic situation of women is *Agnes* (1995) directed by Egill Eðvarðsson. The plot of the movie is set in 1820 when the sparsely populated country remains under the jurisdiction of the Danish King. The living conditions on the island may be compared to the Hollywood version of the American Wild West.

The sinister sheriff holds supervision over the country. The main character (played by Maria Elingsen) works in his house as a maid. Her employer uses every opportunity to seduce a young woman. The sheriff's wife, instead of blaming her husband, accuses Agnes. The Maid, together with her small daughter is going to be sold to the person, who offers the biggest amount of money. Fortunately, the girl is saved by her lover, Nathaniel (Baltasar Kormákur), who is a country healer. The charlatan (accused by the Sheriff of contacts with the devil) takes the protagonist to his house. Unfortunately, their romance will not last long, because Nathaniel becomes addicted to the power of the mysterious herb stimulating aggression and sex drive. He starts treating the heroine even worse than the Sheriff did and does not hesitate to seduce other women. Devastated, Agnes tries to regain her beloved, but in the end their tumultuous relationship will end in the tragic death of the man. The jealous and vengeful Sheriff sentences the heroine to death by decapitation. Eðvarðsson finishes his movie with a visionary scene presenting the execution in an ice cave. The moment of decapitation is contrasted with the shots of Agnes' daughter praying in church.

Filmmakers use religious symbols (such as the juxtaposition of the altar and place of execution) to emphasize the overtones of the protagonist's martyrdom. The inspiration by the Biblical passion of Christ is especially visible at the beginning of the trial, where the Sheriff sentences the female protagonist to death, publicly humiliates her and forces his companions to place the woman on the cross-like wooden structure.

Unfortunately, the religious tone of the film seems to be exaggerated. The passion of Agnes is perceived as too pompous, especially when we take into account the fact that the heroine is not an innocent person – she is guilty of Nathan's death. On the other hand, the plot of the movie interestingly reinterprets the popular film conventions of portraying female characters.

At the beginning Agnes is a victim of sexual violence, who tries to keep her dignity and survive in a cruel world ruled by brutal men. Later, the film changes the perspective and story begins to be imbued with eroticism. Now Agnes is presented as a beautiful, young woman, who resembles the classic film model of femme fatale. Male movie figures cannot resist her sexual power and fight for her charming body what consequently leads to the tragic end. The dark atmosphere of the movie is associated with protestant and animistic mix of beliefs which were present in 18th century in Iceland (Erlendsdóttir 2001: 8–15). From such a point of view, Agnes is another victim of merciless fate that encourages her to commit fatal errors.

Another movie that depicts the dramatic situation of Icelandic women from a historical perspective is a cinematic adaptation of Halldór Laxness' novel titled *The Honour of the House* (*Ungfrúin góða og húsið*, 1999). The film presents the story of Rannveig (Ragnhildur

Gísladóttir), who is sent by her parents to Copenhagen in order to find a suitable candidate for a husband. Unfortunately, the protagonist returns home pregnant, seduced by her older sister's ex-lover.

When the protagonist comes back home the women from the family come to a conclusion that the child must be sent to an orphanage in order to save the honour of the house. Rannveig is forced to give her baby away. This decision leads her to mental breakdown. After recovery, she starts an affair with a worker from her family farm and gets pregnant again. This act is a revenge on her family. Again, the older sister and the mother want to save the family honour, this time by forcing Rannveig in to marriage. She protests against their will by choosing the retarded and handicapped Hans for a spouse. After that we see them living in a white marriage trying to raise Rannveig's baby. The movie, directed by Halldór Laxness' daughter Guðný Halldórsdóttir, ends tragically. Although the plot may look similar to the case known from the story of Agnes, presenting the female protagonist as unable to determine her own life, it also adds some other important features to the Icelandic version of the female victim character. Laxness' point of view blames the older women from Rannveig's family accusing them of the main character's tragedy. Their decisions indicate that they are merely a helpless tool used to maintain the patriarchal order. It is significant that in both films, the historical perspective is used to again highlight the theme of the tragic seduction of a main female protagonist by a man from a foreign country – Denmark. This fact may be easily connected with the political and economic dependence of Iceland in the past that we mentioned in a previous paragraph.

The problem of sexual violence and enslaving power of the patriarchal order also appears embedded in the contemporary reality of *Falcons* (*Fálkar*, 2002) directed by Friðrik Þór Friðriksson. Friðriksson returns in this film to the figure of a visitor from abroad, known from *Cold Fever*; and uses the conventions of road movie which had also constituted distinctive elements of his previous films. This multinational co-production tells the story of an old offender from America (acted by Keith Carradine) who comes to Iceland to commit suicide but gets involved in complicated relationships. However, the true star of the film is not Carradine, but Icelandic actress Margrét Vilhjálmsdóttir playing the role of an eccentric artist.

Oversensitive Dúa is sexually assaulted by a local policeman. He unjustly accuses her of stealing a falcon, which in Iceland is a protected species. The girl has to flee from her homeland in the company of an American ex-criminal. As animal enthusiast and a person living in the world of art, Dúa is a figure which represents an intriguing melange of stereotypes and Icelandic role models associated with the perception of femininity. In many scenes of the film one may find traces of the role model of Mountain Woman that is still an important symbol in the culture of this small northern island. Katla Kjartansdóttir in her text ironically concludes that the "ideal woman" is too often portrayed in popular Icelandic texts of culture as a pure, almost uncivilized, emotional person, living in harmony with nature (hence, the multi-level employment of the falcon motif in the movie). The model Icelandic woman should also display a strong connection with the supernatural order, while her character features should antinomically consist of gentleness and fortitude (Kjartansdóttir 2009: 271–280). That is why Dúa does not break down because of the adversities and acts according to the pantheistic admiration of nature, female intuition and... her belief in horoscopes.

The motif of an innocent woman seduced by a foreigner is also present in the plot, though (fortunately) it is treated far less literally. Friðriksson intelligently reverses the meanings of conventions. This time it is the citizen of Iceland who wants to seduce the main protagonist, while the foreigner tries to save her, and, consequently, dies to save her life. Interestingly, the symbolism of falcons refers to the predatory uniqueness of the ostracised couple from the main protagonists. Especially Dúa, who employs the figure of the wild bird in her performances, has been equipped with a whole set of features resembling both the rhetoric of nationalistic movements and slogans taken from the manifests of Icelandic feminists. The recurring in the Icelandic cinema and literature theme of children betrayed by their own father, which is connected with the fear of incest, deeply rooted in this hermetic society, also appears in the plot. It is contrasted with the general aversion towards Icelandic women creating relationships with foreigners. The climax of this aversion falls on the 1950's and 60's. The dénouement of the plot reveals that Dúa is the daughter of Simon, who concealed his past as a soldier serving on her native island. Her fascination and simultaneous fear of her strong, mysterious, cynical and spiritually arid partner can be interpreted as the author's commentary about complicated historical relation of Icelandic and American cultures (this kind of commentary appears in other Friðriksson's movies as well). Unfortunately, the dénouement is tragic. It is a shame that the author did not decide to break with a fatalistic convention of depicting Icelandic women as femme fatales.

Stormy Weather (Stormviðri), directed in 2003 by Sólveig Anspach, is a story focused on showing women as victims. The land of sagas is presented here from the perspective of a stranger. The plot of the movie, directed by an Icelandic woman-director educated in France, is divided into two parts. The first part takes place in France, where we meet Cora (Élodie Bouchez), who works as a psychiatrist in a mental hospital. The protagonist is completely devoted to an enigmatic, quiet woman, whose apathetic reactions sometimes turn into uncontrolled anger. The young doctor tries to experiment with various methods of therapy. The first positive symptoms start to appear eventually, when the patient calls out Cora's name during a walk among the trees. Unfortunately, a day later, the protagonist is shocked with the information that the police managed to confirm her patient's true identity. Her name is Loa and she is the citizen of Iceland. After this event, the mysterious woman is deported to her homeland. Woeful because of the therapy interruption, Cora pursues her patient. This pursuit is the subject of the second part of the movie that takes place in the land of volcanoes and geysers.

The director exploits the set of formal measures that has been applied many times since the 1990's, presenting the land of sagas in a way that can be easily comprehended by an international audience. Just like in other stories about foreigners visiting the island (for example in the aforementioned *Falcons*), already in the first scene of the second part, the camera depicts the crude, untamed natural conditions of Iceland. A strong wind (which viscously blows the sheet of paper with the hotel's address out of Cora's hands), freezing rain and obviously mountains, and the sea, appear many times throughout the movie. The dramatism of such scenes is additionally highlighted by using a blue filter on the camera. Unpredictable climate and untamed nature may also symbolically characterise Loy's neurotic personality and the uniqueness of her homeland. The cultural dissidence of Iceland is emphasized by references to the mixture of stereotypes and actual character features of its inhabitants. Male characters (played by the most popular Icelandic actors – Baltasar Kormákur and Ingvar Eggert

Sigurðsson) present opinions on the female roles in the society that have remained unaltered since the Vikings times. Gunnar (Sigurðsson), the alcohol-abusing Loy's husband and Einar (Kormákur), who knows about her mental disorder, both are against the protagonist's treatment, because, as they state it, 'her place is at home, with the child'. Despite her willingness, the ambitious psychiatrist fails at her attempt to help her mysterious patient. The movie ends in a dramatic way, which leaves the critic opinion of the Icelandic society lingering in the audience memory. This opinion is based on a depiction of a situation in which incapacitated women struggle to survive despite unfavourable conditions.

The fatalistic image of female protagonists, who cannot overcome their personal dramas, is also depicted in *Silent Storm* (*Vedramot*, 2007), a movie directed by Guðna Halldórsdóttir which explores the subject of violence against women and alcohol abuse. The plot is constructed around Vedramot – an experimental 'teenage prison', youth detention centre established in 1960's by the hippie community. Two of the female characters appearing in the film are victims of sexual harassment. The plot begins in the centre, with the arrival of Dísa, who has been sexually molested by her stepfather with quiet consent from her alcohol-abusing mother. The stepfather, who works as a policeman, sends the teenager to the 'prison' located in a remote area of Iceland, in order to silence her. The girl's traumatic dependence on her oppressor is clearly visible in the scene which shows Dísa trying to convince her stepfather that she is pregnant, trying to force him to take her from Vedramot. What is significant, the constantly lying protagonist does not hesitate to use her sexuality as a weapon against one of her house-masters. Her dishonest and destructive actions symbolically change Dísa's role from victim to oppressor. In this way, she consciously ruins the life of an idealist, who is merely trying to help her and, simultaneously, destroys the already impaired Vedramot's reputation.

The Halldórsdóttir's movie is not only an interesting meditation on the difficulties of the social rehabilitation process, but most importantly, it is a courageous accusation of faulty state politics, which tended to punish rape victims, and not the rapists. What is interesting, the movie in many scenes resembles the cinematic adaptation of Ken Kesey's novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) directed by Milos Forman. In case of the Icelandic movie, however, the consequences of escape from the state's supervision affect not the protagonist, but people surrounding her. Some of the teenagers would eventually steal a Jeep and go for an illegal expedition to a frozen lake. They drown when the ice breaks under the wheels of their car. In this way, the movie's plot antinomically deconstructs the topos of nature, which is extremely important for Icelandic culture and history. Romanticized for centuries, the natural aspects of the island which seem to be a perfect place for social re-socialisation appear as a cruel judge, who takes the lives of young people, suffering unfairly for their parents' sins and the state's faulty politics.

Silent Storm is also a bitter reckoning with the Icelandic fascination with American culture and the depreciation of counter-culture ideals that are connected with it. This reckoning is represented by hippies, who are good-willing, but still they run an oppressive institution. For some of the teenagers with a pathological background who are kept in the house, the institution that 'acts accordingly to the nature's laws' seems to be an embodiment of utopian domestic life, with family members who are open to any behaviour, even the weirdest one. For the malevolent and unacceptable Dísa, who rejects the hippie ideology and the style of country

life, Vedramot is merely a place of incarceration. The character of Dísá may be easily decoded as a metaphorical embodiment of Icelandic protective politics. Paradoxically, her successful escape would eventually bring her to a real prison, in which she can be seen in the first and the last scene which embrace the whole movie. What is distinctive, the male founders of this utopian community, after its dissolution, will not be able to live normal lives. One of them eventually becomes a clergyman, the second one moves to Copenhagen where he succumbs to an existence as a drug addict. The movie's narrator also cuts herself off from the ideals of her youth. At the beginning of the plot, she escapes her bourgeois family home to work socially in the youth detention centre. In the concluding scenes we see that after Vedramot's dissolution, the protagonist fulfils her parents' wishes and becomes a lawyer. Consequently, she turns into a cog in the machine she so strongly opposed in the past. In this way, the Hall-dórsdóttir's movie may be included in the pessimistic trend in Icelandic cinematography. This time, however, the movie democratically juxtaposes adult men, women, and youth as symbolic representations of viscous reality.

A little bit less pessimistic plot of *White Night Wedding* (*Brúðguminn*, 2008), written and directed by Baltasar Kormákur, departs from the motifs of sexual violence. Set in the crude space of Flatey Island, lying in the north of Iceland, the plot is divided into two parts. One of them focuses on the subject of the matrimonial crisis of Jón, an academic teacher involved in a relationship with a depressive artist. The second one focuses on the preparations for Jón's second wedding with a student, who is eighteen years younger than him. The film of Kormákur is an interesting collection of character portraits, which present two models of female characters, characteristic of Icelandic cinematography. The first of those models is a type of over-sensitive artist, presented for instance in *Falcons* (in both movies the female character of similar features is even played by the same actress). In the case of *White Night Wedding*, Anna, played by Margrét Vilhjálmsdóttir is an artist, whose works are entirely connected with nature – she creates three-dimensional sculptures made of sea plants. The woman-nature relationship is highlighted in both productions by the scenes which focus on female sensitivity towards the beauty of landscapes. After her arrival in Europe, Dúa becomes ecstatic when seeing trees and leaves, while Anna, when settling down on an island, decides to make use of its flora in her art. Emotional connection with nature is also emphasized by similar themes of 'sensitivity towards the animals'. Living in the outskirts and performing events as a falcon, Dúa not only takes in a pack of dogs, but also refuses to sell a precious bird, which she rescued from death. Anna in turn decides to leave the city and settle down in the countryside, after she accidentally hit a swan with her car.

Both characters demonstrate an emotional and intuitive approach towards life. They have to struggle against their male partners' empirical and somewhat cynical opinions on everyday reality. The tragic death of the protagonist of *White Night Wedding* also paradoxically binds her character with an idea of return to nature (represented by the ocean) – she commits suicide by sailing to the sea in a leaky boat. What is interesting, Jon's second wife, young Þóra, is also a 'child of the island' and feels a strong connection to her homeland. Her 'naturalism' is emphasized not only through her clothes (sweater, hat and gloves made of sheep wool) and a lack of make-up, but also through the fact that her first intimate intercourse takes place on a wild beach, which fascinated mentally impaired Anna. The movie of Kormákur through

the presentation of the tragic fate of Anna, is an accusation made towards main male figures. In both of his relationships, Jón acts like a character ‘without any features’, touched by some kind of enigmatic crisis. The traits of ‘feminist perspective’ may be found for instance in the last scene of the film, when it becomes obvious that not only Jón could not help his first wife, but also could not take advantage of another chance for creating a happy relationship.

3. HISTORIES OF VAMPS AND WARRIORS AS NEW MODELS OF INDEPENDENT WOMEN

Fortunately, modern Icelandic cinema is able to present more optimistic creations of female protagonists. The movie which effectively breaks the convention of a woman as a victim is *Ingaló* (1992). Shot at 16mm tape, the movie was a successful feature debut of Ásdís Thoroddsen. It has gained international recognition and was screened at the Cannes Festival. Educated in Germany, the director managed to depict a crude image of life in the Icelandic countryside, with no place for outsiders, especially if they are young women. The movie’s protagonist learns it the hard way. Ingaló, an eighteen-years-old, somewhat androgynous woman, lives in a small fishing village with her parents and younger brother. Nes the city in the north of Iceland, is presented as a place where one can only dream about intellectual development, interesting career or great love. The life of the main character is focused merely on work on a fishing cutter and provoking furious and frantic rows during dance organized for fishermen. The protagonist’s psychological profile is drawn already in the first scene of the movie. We see Ingaló returning home alone from fishing. She is wearing red fishing apparel which distinguishes her from the grey background. At the end of the scene, without a word she sells some fish to a gloomy man. In the next scene, her wild temperament comes into prominence. The protagonist’s fury comes into light during dinner, when her father forbids her to go to a party. During the argument, she mentions her desire to escape to the south – to the capital city. Soon however, fate will become more favourable for the young rebel. After starting another fight (this time in defence of her younger brother during the party), Ingaló will be arrested and actually forced to go to Reykjavík. There, she will be examined by doctors to check whether her temper has some connection with a head injury she suffered as a seven-year-old girl. In the next scene, the doctor comments on the examination results and informs Ingaló that she possesses eminent intelligence as well as rich history in the police files. Documented instances of aggression include attacking her teacher, attempting to beat up her mother with a broomstick and threatening her employer with a knife. The medical tests prove, however, that the rebellious girl is completely healthy and (how her doctor puts it) her only problem is that she is ‘too hot-headed’.

This statement constitutes not only an important tip for the audience, but also it is a factor which influences the girl’s future actions. What is especially interesting, her feelings are as spontaneous as the returning fury. A good example of this kind of behaviour (or maybe an attempt to get away from her old life?) would be a romance with a mature man, whom she will meet in the hospital. He would appear to be an owner of a ship, where Ingaló will find a job as a cook. The girl’s entrance to the hermetically male world has a reason behind it.

She would like to keep her eye on her brother and to approach Skúli, another member of the ‘Matthildur’ ship’s crew, who she finds very attractive. The woman working in a highly male profession seems to be an oddity. One should keep in mind, however, that the reality of Ingaló is almost entirely masculine. It is depicted by the movie’s authors many times, without any attempt of mythisation. The drunken party, during which the girl is literally thrown around by her intoxicated partner, a hedonistic binge in the fishing barracks or pathetic fishing industry plant beauty contest (finished with sexual abuse of the drunken winner) – all of those scenes present the mentality of society in which no one probably heard about the notions of ‘emancipation’ or ‘feminism’ Romanticism and intimacy are also not present. The younger brother of the protagonist learns it the hard way when he becomes a victim of an unrefined sexual prank, organized by his colleagues and indirectly leading to his tragic death. It is no wonder then that Ingaló feels out of place in this kind of society. She does not possess the ability or opportunity to change it though. Although she organizes the strike of the cutters’ crews, she does so as not to fight for a better life for the working class, but merely because she does not want Skúli to have sex with the new ‘miss of the fishermen’.

What is interesting, Thoroddsen’s movie displays some romantic features and conventions. Female relationships with wild, untamed elements, so characteristic for Icelandic cinema, can be easily spotted. Ingaló’s connection to nature’s laws is depicted for the first time in the scene of a date with the rich owner of ‘Matthildur’. The ill-mannered girl from the small village accepts the invitation for an expensive dinner, but is almost proud of her cultural faux pas, when she drinks the hand-wash water, confusing it for a lemon soup. The motif of a woman-nature relationship is also emphasized by contrasting Ingaló’s androgynous appearance with the crude beauty of Icelandic landscapes. Some of the scenes show her among wild cliffs, while the onyric ending of the movie highlights unexpectedly the young rebel’s connection with a supernatural world, designating the slow changes in her character. The first sign of the girl’s acceptance and her opening to the supernatural is her reaction to the rumour about her brother’s death. Without a word, Ingaló leaves her workplace and goes straight ahead, along a narrow road among cliffs. The retarded man – Kall, who travels only by his imaginary taxi – finds her eventually and helps her to get home. By entering the unreal vehicle, the girl seems to accept the presence of some forces and events which cannot be influenced by her anger. This marks the end of her rebellious youth and the beginning of facing reality alongside the man she loves.

The movie ends with a metaphorical augury of change. Awakened by the ghost of her brother, Ingaló leaves her family home at dawn to meet with her lover, whose ship is just entering the harbour. The pointless and tragic death of her brother (for which Ingaló is also partly responsible) becomes a rite of entering adulthood, where the director abandons the history of Ingaló, giving the audience no details concerning her further lot. Whether the protagonist would break down under her cruel fate or would she live with her lover and remain a ferocious warrior, is a matter of personal interpretation of the viewer.

Seagull’s Laughter (*Mávahlátur*, 2001), directed by Ágúst Guðmundsson, constitutes a vivid juxtaposition of woman-victim and femme fatale characters. Based on Marja Baldursdóttir’s novel, the movie tells the stories of four women, but its plot is mainly focused on two female characters. The first, Freyja (again, acted by Margrét Vilhjálmsdóttir), during

the II World War was an obese teenager, who married an American soldier and went to the USA. The movie's plot begins with her return to Iceland at the beginning of the 1950's. The protagonist is initially presented as a mature widow, who curiously enough does not weep over her late husband, who died very recently. The return of Freyja becomes a sensation and draws the attention of a second key-character of the film. It is Agga, an adolescent girl who will live in one room with the 'aunt from America'. The first half of this dynamic story focuses on depicting the incongruous character of Freyja from the perspective of Agga. However, there are other interesting female characters. Kidda, emancipated cousin of conservative and cultivating the patriarchal tradition grandma, seems to be a direct opposite of her relative. Kidda is lonely, she despises grandma's husband, who works at sea, she wears male clothes, does not comb her hair, and smokes a pipe. Dóddó, the youngest of grandma's daughters, represents a romantic type of an 'Icelandic virgin', unhappily in love with an alcohol abusing two-timer. Retarded, but emotionally connected with everyone Ninna, the oldest of the sisters, is another overdrawn embodiment of goodness. Dísá, Freyja's cross-eyed friend, a woman of explicit kindness who is also unhappy in her relationship, is the last important female character in the movie.

The fact of a stereotypical construction of all of those characters cannot be concealed. They all act as a counter-balance for the extravagant Freyja, who represents a model of cinematographic femme fatale, which was popular during her stay in the USA. There are many tips in Guðmundsson's movie that guide us towards this kind of interpretation of her character. Already in one of the initial scenes, the protagonist boasts about using the same brand of perfumes as Rita Hayworth, while her relatives, shocked with her unconstrained lifestyle, when they asked about her husband's death, get the jocular answer that she murdered him. It is telling that most of the movie's characters (both male and female) admire the Hollywood image of Freyja. For them, she is an embodiment of the American dream. This fact is emphasized in a scene showing the ceremony of coffee drinking. When Freyja's relatives try on her foreign clothes, one of them comes up with a sentence: 'that's how they always do it in the movies'. Nevertheless, Freyja is first of all an independent, psychologically strong, and dominating character. She is not afraid to sell prohibited alcohol to homeless people, despite the fact that she is repeatedly rebuked not to do so by the shop manager. She is also somewhat fond of shamelessly flirting with men. One night she goes barefoot to the outskirts of town, in order, as grandma tells it to Ada, to 'dance with the elves'. By this term she means simply having sex with an unmarried man. What is more, the protagonist does not care about making a misalliance by getting married with rich and educated Theódór. Moreover, she is consequent in her persistence to struggle against adversities and ruthlessly punishes men who mistreat women.

The plot of the movie merely suggests that it was her who caused the fire which was the direct cause of death of Dísá's husband, who kept abusing her physically. However, what we know for sure is that the protagonist does not hesitate to beat up boys who attack Dísá and repeatedly tries to make her hateful mother-in-law die of a heart attack (she eventually succeeds). Several traces given by the plot suggest that Freyja is responsible for the murder of her second husband and forcing other women to destroy the evidence. Despite the fact that the account of the crime is given by a teenager, who is known for her inclination for making up stories, Freyja's guilt seems to be confirmed by events such as Agga's vomiting

just after Theódór ‘fell off the stairs’, or Ninna’s acknowledgement of guilt in preparing the murder. Through introducing to Icelandic cinema, a figure of triumphant female punisher, Guðmundsson not only effectively deconstructs stereotypic conventions of female victims, but also eloquently engages in polemics with a classical model of female vamps, who are symbolically punished for their strength and independence.

The Sea (*Hafið*, 2002), produced just a year later and set in modern times, is a movie directed by Baltazar Kormákur. It also presents unconventional images of Icelandic women. In comparison to them, a French girl arriving in Iceland with the main male character seems to be an angel. Ragnheiður, the oldest sister of Ágúst, an ex-student of a Polish Film School in Łódź, is the first of them. She is depicted as a cynical, unfulfilled film director, who has a reputation of being a sexually depraved person. Áslaug, Ágúst’s sister-in-law, is in turn shown as a greedy and frustrated woman, who does not hesitate to use her sexuality to seduce her banker and consequently get rid of her debts. It is significant that both protagonists are also able to get their revenge on the men who hurt them. Kristin uses her reputation of a ‘slut’ to initiate a sexual intercourse with one of her admirers in a pub’s toilet. Eventually, she decides to turn him down, ridiculing him and people observing the whole situation. Áslaug in turn does not only destroy the car of her banker, but also would inform his wife about his adultery. Maria is another strong female character in Kormákur’s movie. She would not restrain herself from fighting for her old lover and seducing the main male character, even despite the fact that she is aware of her kinship with Ágúst and that he is engaged with pregnant Françoise. The last unconventional female figure is the family elder, who constantly smokes cigarettes and watches TV with her headphones on. She keeps rebuking all of the people who live in the house.

Just like in *The Seagull’s Laughter*, all female characters are obsessed with the motif of revenge. It is symbolized by the image of purifying fire, which destroys the hateful paternal world order of their homeland. The figure of the elder who demands of her children the respect of the tradition is closely connected with history of modern Icelandic cinema and directly refers to paternal figures of fathers expecting their children to stay in their homeland. The reference consists of such classic movies as *The Sons and the Land* (*Land og synir*, 1980) by Ágúst Guðmundsson or *The Fatherland* (*Óðal feðranna*, 1980) by Hrafn Gunnlaugsson. *The Sea* depicts Icelandic countryside as a place where both men and women are afraid of their father’s power. The whole spatial area of the movie is full of fear and hate towards the head of the family, who represents the old paternal rule. He is terrifying not only for his co-workers and labourers, but also for the local sheriff and his own wife and children. However, his power is gradually loses its impact and would eventually be diminished by the united forces of his offspring. The figure of angry and unshaken father, apart from obvious references connected with Freud’s psychoanalysis, possesses also some religious connotations and is bounded with protestant perspectives on faith and God. No wonder then, that in one of the last scenes of Kormákur’s movie, the father severely punishes his youngest, prodigal son⁴ by beating him up to blood with his walking stick. However, even this last burst of anger would not

⁴ The protagonist was sent by his father to Paris to study economics. His new skills, gained abroad, ought to recover the family company from the economic crisis. Unfortunately, Ágúst has failed to fulfil his task. He comes back to his homeland to tell the family that he decided to stay in France where he lives a life of a rock musician.

save his beliefs. At the end of the movie, the old man survives a stroke and loses his speech. Therefore, he cannot oppose the decision of his own children to get rid of him and send him to a nursing home. Hence, the fire in the plant which the 'ruler of the city' devoted his whole life, becomes a symbol of the departure of old regime, destroyed by rebellious descendants. In this way Kormákur's movie presents female characters as equally mean as the men, who are addicted to them. Unfortunately, the vision of the country is again highly pessimistic. The space of the small town from *The Sea* represents a hyperbole of Icelandic hell, where apart from the foreigner figure of a French girl, one cannot find an innocent and pure person. That is why its gloomy ending does not come as a surprise. The film ends with a declaration of trust made by the father to his worst enemy and not to his kin.

4. CONCLUSION: *DÍS* – TOWARDS NORMALITY

In his doctoral dissertation, Björn Ægir Norðfjörð proves that Icelandic cinema is deprived of a vivid feminist trend (Norðfjörð 2005: 68–72). Norðfjörð does not notice however, that Icelandic moviemakers have not yet focused seriously on the characters of common women, suffering because of the benefits of post-modern reality. *Dís* (2004) directed by Silji Hauksdóttir is a movie which tries to emphatically depict woman's everyday struggle for a better tomorrow, instead of their radical political engagement. The introduction of the film begins in a pub, where two foreigners try to initiate a flirt with Icelandic girls. The main protagonist, *Dís*, is one of those young women. She explains with indignation, that the set of stereotypes describing the Icelandic women is far from reality:

You should learn something about Icelandic sluts. Women here built houses and caused wars. Nowadays, we work twelve hours a day ... we raise our children, reach the mountains tops, take part in political life and sing in choirs ... Still, we have time to look adorable and be dangerous.

After such a declaration, the film may appear to be a feminist movie that overthrows stereotypes concerning sexual profligacy of Icelandic society and attempt to depict female characters from a different perspective. That is not the case, however. The plot of Hauksdóttir's movie copies the conventions known from many other romantic comedies that tell about ostracised protagonists of the Brigid Jones' type. *Dís* is a twenty-three year old girl, living in an imaginary world and looking for 'the only one', who cannot determine her own place in the community and her goal in life. The protagonist eats excessive amounts of sweets and hot-dogs, lives with her friend and takes up a part-time job in a hotel while dreaming about a career as a photographer in New York. More interesting than the somewhat naive plot of the movie are its attempts to portray the generation of people in their twenties and thirties without the ironical (or even cynical) perspective of Baltasar Kormákur's movie *101 Reykjavík* (2000), which has been screened in Poland as well. Hauksdóttir's film is based on a more realistic image of a modern, tolerant society, which sometimes abuses 'freedom' and is represented mainly by alcoholic beverages and free sexual intercourses. The idea of the screenplay author is not a continuation of femme fatale, nor the return to a female-victim model, it is an attempt to find a 'middle of the road' approach. The protagonist possesses

some features that are characteristic of Icelandic cinema – she is a little bit crazy, romantic, and artistic, living in her unreal world of dreams. Nevertheless, she can make decisions about her life and feelings, she directly communicates her needs to her partners, while her future seems not to be controlled by the traditional model of a paternal family. For her, Iceland is just a normal country, while Icelandic men, even though they sometimes are fraudulent bastards, are merely an element that can be controlled.

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POSTACIE KOBIET WE WSPÓŁCZESNYM KINIE ISLANDZKIM

Islandia jest krajem, w którym polityczne aktywistki skutecznie walczą o poprawę praw i przywilejów dla kobiet. Jednak analiza postaci kobiecych pojawiających się w filmach wyprodukowanych w latach 1992 i 2012 ukazuje zupełnie inne oblicze życia w ojczyźnie skandynawskich sag. Wiele scenariuszy filmowych prezentuje bohaterki jako ofiary przemocy domowej, walczące nie tylko z alkoholizmem swoich partnerów, lecz również z wrogim systemem społecznym. Fatalistyczny charakter islandzkiego kina jest ściśle związany z dziedzictwem historycznym i literackim wyspy. Filmowy pesymizm służy twórcom jako efektowne narzędzie krytyki społecznej, koncentrującej się na piętnowaniu najważniejszych problemów życia codziennego. Na szczęście kinematografia współczesnego Ultima Thule przedstawia również alternatywne modele filmowych heroin. Inną popularną postacią jest silna i niezależna kobieta, w której kreacji można doszukać się zarówno inspiracji klasyczną *femme fatale*, jak i fascynacji postmodernistycznym wzorem kobiety wojownika. Ten nowy model postaci filmowej wiąże się z reinterpretacją romantycznych symboli natury z XIX wieku. Jego popularność w produkcjach z ostatniej dekady dowodzi, że działalność ruchów feministycznych w Islandii ma również znaczący wpływ na język kina i obszary jego zainteresowań.

Słowa kluczowe: kino islandzkie, równouprawnienie płci, feminizm, postacie kobiece, przemoc domowa, *femme fatale*