

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ICELANDIC CINEMA by Birgir Thor Möller

The premiere of *Land and Sons* in January 1980 heralded the genesis of regular film production in Iceland. However, the history of Icelandic cinema goes back much further. Movies were shown in Iceland for the first time in 1903, with actual production beginning the following year.

Iceland has remained attractive to visiting filmmakers ever since. The oldest preserved film is a three-minute documentary by the Dane Alfred Lind, dating from 1906, and in 1919 Gunnar Sommerfeldt directed his adaptation of the Icelandic author Gunnar Gunnarsson's *The Story of the Borg Family* (1920), the first feature film to be shot in Iceland.

Though few and far between, there were a number of Icelandic filmmakers working prior to 1980. Perhaps chief amongst them was Loftur Gudmundsson, whose short farce *The Adventures of Jon and Gvendur* (1923) is the first altogether Icelandic fiction film. His subsequent *Between Mountain and Shore* (1949) has the distinction of being the first official Icelandic feature film.

During the 1970s a group of freshly graduated film directors returned home to Iceland after completing their film studies in Europe. Initially they worked primarily for Icelandic television (RUV, 1966), though that changed when the Icelandic Film Fund was established in 1978. The following year saw the production of three entirely Icelandic films, and in January 1980 the first of them, Ágúst Gudmundsson's *Land and Sons*, had its premiere. Since then Iceland has produced a variety of feature films, most of which have found distribution in numerous international territories.

In the 1980s critics and audiences took particular notice of Hrafn Gunnlaugsson's viking films, beginning with the high-energy Berlin festival premiere of *When the Raven Flies*. In the 1990s it was the bitter-sweet and tragicomic films of Fridrik Thor Fridriksson, who's *Children of Nature* (1991) made the final five for foreign films in that year's Academy Awards. The nomination served notice not only on his career, but in Iceland as a nation possessed of a strong and talented film culture. A much wider range of films began to reach international audiences, and the fledgling industry forged strong working relationships with financing and co-production partners all over the world. By the end of the decade Icelandic film was further enforced by a new film law, leading to increased subsidy (raising the average from three to six feature films a year in the new millennium), and in 2003 by the foundation of the Icelandic Film Centre, which replaced the former Icelandic Film Fund.

Icelandic cinema can be principally defined by its diversity, yet the contrast between traditional and modern Iceland, the past and present, has been a central theme throughout its history. The tendency in the new millennium, however, has been to portray modern urban life without that nostalgic longing for a distant past which characterized many earlier films. This development is largely a result of the growing number of directors, who now have a historical film tradition they can play up against. And the new century can boast of a wonderful range of great films, including strong titles from new directors such as Baltasar Kormákur (*101 Reykjavik*, *Jar City*, *The Deep*), Dagur Kári (*Noi the Albino*), Ragnar Bragason (*Children, Parents*), Rúnar Rúnarsson (*Volcano*) and Hafsteinn Gunnar Sigurdsson (*Either Way*). There has also been a wealth of successful short films and documentaries in the recent years. Truly,

the variety in Icelandic cinema has never been more pronounced, which only serves to reinforce the growing interest and acknowledgement it has attained, in Iceland and abroad.

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