

ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY

QUESTIONS OF UNCERTAINTY

*Representations of Uncertainty  
in Icelandic Films 2003-2008*

THORA BLONDAL

A thesis in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements of  
Anglia Ruskin University  
for the degree of Master of Arts

April 2009

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# Acknowledgements

I wish to express my gratitude to Laufey Guðjónsdóttir and Laufey Björk Ólafsdóttir at the Icelandic Film Centre, who provided most of the films, for their encouragement and support. I am also grateful to Sigríður Margrét Vigfúsdóttir, from MEDIADESK Iceland and Friðrik H. Jónsson, from the Social Science Research Institute for the information they provided. Many thanks also to Ron and Anne Parker whose help with the formatting and layout was invaluable, and to my family for their continuing support and faith in me. Special thanks are due to Liz and Nero for inspiring me, every single day. And finally I wish to thank my supervisor for his direct criticisms, and commitment to excellence.

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ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY  
ABSTRACT

FACULTY OF ARTS, LAW & SOCIAL SCIENCES

MASTER OF ARTS INTERCULTURAL  
COMMUNICATION IN EUROPE

QUESTIONS OF UNCERTAINTY

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The primary purpose of this thesis was to explore whether research tools in both cultural and film research could support and benefit each other. To this end, two aims were identified. Firstly to create a model of uncertainty themes, rooted mostly in cultural theory, that could be applied to film analysis. And secondly to apply that model to both a group of films and individual films and establish whether findings thus obtained correlated with results of research methods, more commonly used within cultural studies.

The model of uncertainty themes is a two-dimensional axial structure consisting of twenty-two aspects of uncertainty, extracted from the theories of Hofstede and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, Triandis et al and Schwartz et al and Martin-Jones. The twenty-two aspects were then grouped together to create six uncertainty themes; agency, resolution, change, rules, subjective wellbeing and time,

The applicability of the model of uncertainty themes in terms of film analysis was then tested on a corpus of 25 Icelandic films that were released in the years 2003-2008. The examination revealed that the majority of the films portrayed a single protagonist and the films' resolutions were mostly personal rather collective. A distinct majority of films took place in the present, an indication of sequential approach to time and a flexible approach towards both rules and changes was more prevalent than not in most of the films. Where possible the findings were then compared to available statistical data and showed significant correlations. This suggests that there is a link between what is depicted and expounded in films and the environment in which they are created.

(iii)

# 1 Introduction



The focus of this thesis is to identify markers of uncertainty and how uncertainty is managed within Icelandic culture. Uncertainty relates to the sphere of the unknown, the not knowing what, how or when something will happen. A group's relationship with uncertainty has been identified as one of its primary markers by theorists such as Hofstede (2001) and Trompenaars (1997) who discuss it in terms of either a desire to avoid uncertainty or to control it. Other theorists such as Hui and Triandis (1990) explore whether group members prefer to rely on their own means for their safety and wellbeing or on the collective. Schwartz and Bilsky's studies (1992), using Hofstede's dimensions have identified a correlation between value structures and their content. They have established a model of motivational domains in which security and certainty are again confirmed as key contributors to a group's cohesion.

The aim here is to identify specific markers from across this theoretical spectrum and to investigate how they are portrayed as being managed, questioned, negotiated, accepted or dismissed by the group within the medium of contemporary Icelandic feature films. There has been a surge in the theoretical analysis of feature films as an important cultural product and vehicle for both enculturation and the ongoing negotiation of collective cultural identity. This is evidenced by anthologies such as *Cinema and Nation* edited by Hjort & MacKenzie (2000) and *Theorising National Cinema* by Vitali and Willemsen (2006).

Icelandic culture is at the centre of this research. Historically Icelanders have had a homogenous culture; remote geographical location has meant that until the 20th century, external linguistic and cultural influences were limited compared with nations sharing often shifting borders. In addition, due to Danish colonial rule and its monopolistic trade policy, little or no

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trade was allowed, and therefore cultural exchange intrinsic to shared commercial interests did not develop.

An Icelandic Independence Movement was established in the 19th century. By the beginning of the 20th century, it was gathering momentum but it wasn't until the advent of World War II (WWII) and the occupation of Denmark by the Germans that Icelanders were able to claim their independence and establish the Republic of Iceland in June 1944. The island's strategic position between Europe and America meant that during the war Iceland was occupied in 1940 by the British, who were replaced a year later by the Americans. This led to a sudden exposure to foreign culture and capital which, in addition to the subsequent independence, created a springboard for the transformation of Iceland from a poor fishing and farming country to one of the world's richest countries within the space of half a century. This triggered increasing interaction and participation with other cultures in terms of commercial interests such as trade alliances, cultural interests and exposure to other cultures and their values through migration both to and from the country.

Although Icelandic society is today by no means a multifarious one, the changes and developments experienced since WWII have challenged Iceland's homogeneity. The population has increased by approximately 60% to 300.000 since 1945 and the number of foreigners residing in the country has quadrupled in the last 25 years. Demographics aside, the economic situation has radically improved with Gross Domestic Product (GDP) increasing fivefold since the end of WWII. The configuration of industries has altered dramatically with for example the share of fisheries and agriculture changing from 12.4% in 1973 to 6.1% in 2008 (Statistics Iceland, 2009, Internet/Statistics Iceland, 2008, Internet). Söderbergh

Widding in her summary of Icelandic cinema notes that this urbanisation was achieved '... much more quickly in Iceland than in any other European country' (Söderbergh Widding, 1998, p.100). In less than a hundred years Iceland has been transformed from an impoverished social structure that had remained largely the same since the Middle Ages to a high-technology society rated the 6th wealthiest of the OECD<sup>1</sup> countries (Söderbergh Widding, 1998, p100/Ibison, 2008, Internet).

The year 2003 marks the beginning of the period framing this thesis. This year new legislation regarding the Icelandic Film Centre took effect and is therefore highly significant in terms of Icelandic filmmaking (Møller 2008 Internet). The Icelandic Film Centre replaced the older Icelandic Film Fund that had been established in 1978. Up until that time there had been neither strategic nor specific government support for filmmaking and fewer than 20 films had been produced in Iceland. The premier of the first film to receive funding from the Icelandic Film Fund marked the beginning of Icelandic film-making in earnest and was thought to announce the arrival of spring and blossom for this new art form (Indriðason, 1999, p. 910). In the period from 1978-2003 in excess of 70 films were produced and the film industry has both become more structured and more experienced (Icelandic Film Centre, 2008, Internet). This coming of age of Icelandic film-making and the Icelandic film industry was marked with the launch of the Icelandic Film Centre which

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<sup>1</sup> OECD stands for *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development*, here referred to as the club of the world's richest nations (Ibison 2008)

brought the Centre's remit and structure more in line with other Scandinavian Film Centres (Guðjónsdóttir, 2009, Email). The effect of this change in terms of Icelandic filmmaking has been immediate with 25 films released since 2003 and increased international participation.

There is a growing corpus of theorists arguing that films serve a multitude of functions, in addition to entertainment and knowledge-based education. Many of these theories can be traced back to Benedict Anderson's seminal work titled *Imagined Communities* (1983) and to Foucault's theories on the relationship between discourse, power and knowledge. Most deal with the collective group on the level of the 'nation' or the 'nation-state' and within the field of film studies it is common to see cinema classified by country: French cinema, Mexican cinema etc. or by continent, as in European cinema. Hjort and Mackenzie (2000) contend that this is due more to a descriptive approach taken by American scholars, who in the 1960s set about systematising this emerging academic discipline, than any critical theoretical foundation (Hjort & Mackenzie, 2000, p2). However, they also argue that '... the concepts of national cinema and identity belong to the future of film studies...' as much as to its beginning, quoting theorists such as Crofts (1998) and Higson (1989).

In times of increased multiculturalism and cultural hybridity, the nation or the nation-state is being questioned, politically and theoretically in both film and cultural studies. It is therefore important to acknowledge the configuration and composition of the group and depart from an assumed homogeneity and expect heterogeneity. The increased complexity of collective belief structures from discursive ideologies to everyday values and codes poses a challenge in terms of research, but does not alter their presence or power.

It has been argued that films serve as loci for communicating collectively held beliefs, values and behavioural codes (Chow, 1998). This refers not only to collectively acknowledged values such as those expressed through law or religion but also those that are assumed and rarely articulated and therefore, may not be consciously or deliberately addressed. Homi Bhabha (1990) argued that narratives provide a space where histories and identities are addressed and expounded upon in ways that are often not explicit. The medium of film offers additional layers of communication through signifiers such as costume, make-up, sound and mise-en-scène and, as David Martin-Jones (2006) argues, with the use of temporality including flashbacks, flashforwards and multi-temporal chronologies. This thesis will attempt to elicit specific markers for uncertainty through cinematic representations.

In place of traditional etic research methods, involving questionnaires and value scores, films produced within the Icelandic cultural context will provide the vehicle for analysis. The films will be examined in order to identify cinematic expressions of perceived and portrayed markers of uncertainty and their inferred handling, direction or control. The aim is to establish an indicative framework of values and markers for uncertainty and then related them to Icelandic films released since 2003 in order to identify overall trends and tendencies. A smaller selection of films will then be chosen for detailed analysis. Due to its focus, this thesis extends beyond the boundaries of both traditional film and cultural studies and will include theoretical references to other disciplines, such as cultural psychology and sociology.

Schwartz and Bilsky (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1992, p890) have identified the importance of expanding cross-cultural studies, to look beyond single score value studies, and examine ‘...values embedded in ... contexts...’ (ibid). This thesis aims to do just that by using films created within a specific cultural group over a period of time rather than rely on specifically gathered field data. There is no intention of negating the importance of specifically gathered data and extensive use will be made of data gathered for the 3<sup>rd</sup> wave of the *European Value Study* 1999-2000 and *Statistics Iceland*<sup>2 3</sup>. Triandis and Suh, who have focused their research in the field of culture and personality, have also stressed the importance of combining etic and emic research methods. They have remarked that the challenge for the future research, is ‘... to find ways to successfully incorporate emic as well as etic elements of culture into the field’s research methods and theories’ (Triandis & Suh, 2002, p137 & 152). This thesis is, in part, an attempt to respond to these challenges.

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<sup>2</sup> *Statistics Iceland* is the National Statistical Institute of Iceland accessible at <http://www.statice.is>

<sup>3</sup> Statistical data from other sources will be used and referenced appropriately.

## 2 Theoretical context and methodology



Hofstede's dimension of Uncertainty Avoidance forms the point of departure for this research. The construct of Uncertainty Avoidance is one of five dimensions<sup>4</sup> identified by Hofstede to encapsulate what he calls the 'collective programming of the mind'<sup>5</sup> (Hofstede, 2001, pp88-89).

Hofstede's theory is primarily based on two extensive surveys of IBM employees conducted in 1968 and 1972<sup>6</sup> in addition to extensive use of previous and contemporary studies (Hofstede, 2001, pxix). It was first published in 1980 with an updated 2<sup>nd</sup> edition published in 2001. It has become a key text in cultural theory and forms a cornerstone in subsequent research in fields such as anthropology and sociology but even more so in cultural, business-related and cross cultural psychology (Baskerville, 2003, p3/Paulson, 2005, p180).

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<sup>4</sup> Hofstede's dimensions are 1) Power Distance, 2) Uncertainty Avoidance, 3) Individualism and Collectivism, 4) Masculinity and Femininity, 5) Long- Versus Short-Term Orientation.

<sup>5</sup> Hofstede argues that 'Social systems can only exist because human behaviour is not random, but to some extent predictable' and that this predictability is achieved through what he calls mental programs (Hofstede, 2001, p1). According to Hofstede '...we cannot directly observe mental programs. All we can observe is behaviour: words and deeds. When we observe behaviour, we infer from it the presence of stable mental software' (Hofstede, 2001, p2)

<sup>6</sup> The surveys were comprised of '... more than 116,000 questionnaires from 72 countries in 20 languages ... In addition to statistical analysis across individuals, an analysis of variance was performed using country, occupation, gender, and age as criteria, but most crucial were correlation and factor analyses based on matched employees samples across countries' (Hofstede 2001 p41).

Hofstede's findings have been heavily criticised over the years. Baskerville argues that a nation is '... not the proper unit for studying culture' (Baskerville, 2003, p8). McSweeney condemns the empirical methodology and what he describes as '...national cultural determinism' (McSweeney, 2002, p92). He draws particular attention to the dimension of uncertainty avoidance and argues that 'The notion of discrete measurable non-interactive values is ... highly problematic (McSweeney, 2002, p105).

In the fields of social sciences, cultural- and business-studies and psychology, theorists are still using Hofstede's model. Within business studies Paulson argues that although there are limitations to the empirical validity of the underlying research, Hofstede's theory has merit (Paulson, 2005, p180). Schulte and Kim argue that despite criticism '...Hofstede's work ... still provides a sound framework for cross-cultural research' (Schulte & Kim, 2007, p110)<sup>7</sup>. Social scientist Magala argues in his book *Cross-Cultural Competence* that 'Hofstede's voice is important because he has contributed the most robust theoretical framework for exploring ... cross-cultural differences we have seen so far' (Magala, 2005, p2).

Within the field of cross-cultural and social psychology Schwartz & Bilsky's theory of motivational domains can be directly traced to Hofstede's model (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1992, p878-891). Hofstede's

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<sup>7</sup> Steven K. Paulson works within the field of Business Management and William D. Schulte and Young K. Kim work within the field of Knowledge Management, an area within Business Management.

dimensional approach also influenced Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner who, in 1993, published their own seven dimensional model<sup>8</sup> which, although not explicitly rooted in Hofstede's model, is undoubtedly a response to it<sup>9</sup> (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner 1993).

The most direct parallel between the two models is the dimension of individualism v collectivism. There is also a clear link between what Hofstede defines as long- v short-term orientation and what Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner refer to as sequential v synchronic time (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997, pp120-140). Both these dimensions centre on the concept of time and how that is understood within a culture<sup>10</sup>.

The other dimensions are interrelated but not as clearly as these two. The individualism v collectivism dimension appears to have become '... the most significant cultural difference among cultures...' according to Triandis who quotes Greenfield calling it the 'deep structure' of cultural differences (Triandis, 2001, p907). Triandis argues that while there are a

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<sup>8</sup> The seven dimensions of Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner's model are: 1) Universalism v Particularism, 2) Individualism v Collectivism, 3) Neutral v Affective, 4) Specific v Diffuse, 5) Achievement v Ascription, 6) Sequential v Synchronic 7) Internal v External control.

<sup>10</sup> The collective understanding and interpretation of the concept of time has also been explored within the field of film theory and will be addressed later in this text.

myriad of cultural differences, this one seems to be the most important, both historically and cross-culturally' (ibid).

Because of the apparent lack of further research relating to the dimension of uncertainty avoidance, this thesis relies heavily on research explicating the individualism v collectivism dimension<sup>11</sup>. For instance, Triandis and Suh present the concept of tightness in relation to the dimension of individualism v collectivism (Triandis & Suh, 2001, p907). Tightness is used to describe a culture's tolerance to deviation from cultural norms and in that respect reflects Hofstede's Uncertainty Avoidance Index. (Triandis & Suh, 2002, p139).

These various models are perceived to be tools or constructs applied here to develop our understanding of the world we live in or as Hofstede argues they are a way to simplify the very complex world we inhabit and therefore understandably '...different authors' minds produce different sets of dimensions.' (Hofstede, 2005). A common construct used in all these models is values. Values are used to map and define cultural dimensions and are considered to be a key cultural component. Hofstede and Schwartz in particular make extensive use of values in their work (Hofstede, 2001/ Schwartz & Bilsky, 1992).

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<sup>11</sup> The differences between these models and any value judgement of their relative quality are outside the scope of this thesis.

According to Hofstede we have ‘...developed ways to cope with the inherent uncertainty of living...’ (Hofstede, 2001, p145). He argues that the ‘... ways of coping with uncertainty belong to the cultural heritages of societies’ and form an integral part of our enculturation and socialisation. And although cultures adapt to uncertainty in different ways, they inherently try and defend themselves against uncertainty in three key domains making up a system of values which Hofstede refers to as ‘the uncertainty avoidance norm’ (Hofstede, 2001, pp145-146). The first domain is technology, meaning anything man-made, the second domain includes all formal and informal rules that guide social behaviour and the third domain is religion or faith encompassing all revealed knowledge about the unknown (ibid). Hofstede’s Uncertainty Avoidance Index maps the effort invested by cultures in avoiding any discrepancy from these values.

Schwartz, Sagiv and Boehnke have identified this discrepancy as anxiety expressed as worry<sup>12</sup>. They argue that worry arises when something that is valued becomes discrepant or deviant from its desired state (Schwartz, Sagiv & Boehnke, 2000, p311). Schwartz et al argue that there is a direct link between values and worries and therefore ‘... a person’s worry [is] a function of his or her values (Schwartz, Sagiv & Boehnke, 2000, p312). They argue that one of three main mechanisms in the relationship between values and worries is the attention awarded to goals representative of

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<sup>12</sup> For an in-depth discussion see Davey, G.C.L. & Tallis, F. (Eds.) *Worrying: Perspectives on theory, assessment and treatment*. Chichester, U.K.: Wiley

important values and the subsequent worry if these goals and values are compromised (Schwartz, Sagiv & Boehnke, 2000, pp312-313).

In his book *Anxiety in a Risk Society*, Wilkinson also addresses the significance of attention (2001). He presents '... a conception of anxiety as a reaction to social processes and cultural experiences in which our doubts and uncertainties are encountered as a threat...' (Wilkinson, 2001, pp8-9). He identifies that, since the publication of Ulrich Beck's seminal text *Risk Society* in 1992, increased attention has been accorded to risk, and the risk society, within sociology (Wilkinson, 2001, p5). Wilkinson argues that it is now generally accepted within the field of sociology that [Western] society increasingly experiences the world '...as a place of threatening uncertainty...' and that there is a fast-growing corpus of text addressing the sociological context of risk and uncertainty (Wilkinson 2001 pp5-9). He concurs with Hofstede's statement that '...uncertainty is to risk what anxiety is to fear' and argues that '...the more we recognise ourselves as being "at risk" the more vulnerable we become towards anxiety'<sup>13</sup> (Wilkinson, 2001, p5).

In this thesis an attempt has been made to draw on these varied theoretical approaches and bring them together in a single framework that will be used to identify primary structures, issues and behaviours. This

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<sup>13</sup> This fits in with third mechanism identified by Schwartz et al, which relates to the 'Worries-to-values' feedback loop. This mechanism falls outside the scope of this thesis, please refer to Schwartz et al, 2000 p314.

framework rests on the assumption that discrepancy or deviance from important values is expressed in worry and that this worry is recognisable through the attention awarded to it (Schwartz et al, 2000, p312). One way of awarding such attention is to bring values and norms into the filmic sphere through narratives, behaviours and visual structure.

The worries and uncertainties of characters will be traced back to their values and those values compared with values identified by both Schwartz et al and Hofstede and contextualised with the use of the theories from Trompenaars & Hampden Turner and Triandis et al. Although firmly rooted in these theories, the responsibility for their appropriation, assimilation and application rest entirely with the author.

The central theoretical components of this thesis are the three areas identified by Hofstede as key '...to establish the ... level of anxiety in a country'<sup>14</sup> and a structure of values aligned to two orthogonal dimensions identified by Schwartz et al (Hofstede, 2001, p149/ Schwartz, Sagiv & Boehnke, 2000, pp316-318). Hofstede proposes the examination of the importance placed on the value of rule orientation. This refers to the importance placed on obeying rules even if the validity and appropriateness of the rules is questioned. He also emphasises the importance of maintaining stability and a resistance to change. Finally he

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<sup>14</sup> These questions formed part of the IBM questionnaire and therefore were placed in a corporate context. In this research they are being placed in the context of society at large.

addresses the issues of stress and subjective wellbeing (Hofstede, 2001, pp160-161).

In their article 'Worries and Values' Schwartz et al proposed '... an integrated structure of values [which could] be summarised with two orthogonal dimensions: self-enhancement versus self-transcendence and openness to change versus conservatism where a value will score on both axes. This structure is intended to encapsulate what they identified as '... the conflict and congruities among all the types of values...' which they classified in the following ten value type categories: Power, Achievement, Hedonism, Stimulation, Self-direction, Universalism, Benevolence, Tradition, Conformity and Security<sup>15</sup> (Schwartz, Sagiv & Boehnke, 2000, pp316-18). This means that a value such as hedonism would score high on the axes of self-enhancement and openness to change, whereas a value such as conformity would score high on the axes of self-transcendence and conservatism<sup>16</sup> (ibid).

There is a third aspect to this framework that is implicitly present, and centres on the perception of time. Hofstede has a specific dimension of whether time is perceived in terms of the future or the present (Hofstede, 2001, pp351-372). This temporal dimension focuses on what values and

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<sup>15</sup> For a detailed description of these ten value types and their associated values please refer to the Schwartz et al article 'Worries and Values' (2000)

<sup>16</sup> For a detailed breakdown of the interrelationship between the two axes and the structural relationship between the values please refer to the Schwartz et al article 'Worries and Values' (2000).

behaviours are awarded time and therefore links with the fundamental assumption that attention is directly linked to importance or merit attributed to them.

Schwartz et al do not explicitly refer to orientation or perception of time in terms of values (Schwartz, Sagiv & Boehnke, 2000, pp316-318). However, one could argue that there is an implicit experience of time along the axis of openness to change v conservatism that could be aligned with what Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner refer to as synchronic and sequential time respectively (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997, p120).

Synchronic time refers to time '... conceived of as cyclical and repetitive, compressing past, present and future by what these have in common: seasons and rhythms' (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997, p123).

Sequential time, however, refers to a linear experience of time, meaning time is perceived as '... a series of passing events', forming a sequence starting in the past and finishing in the future (ibid).

The medium of film lends itself masterfully to the construct of time.

Martin-Jones argues that '...during times of historical transformation, films often appear that experiment formally with narrative time' (Martin-Jones, 2006, p1). This suggests that in times of heightened uncertainty, when the dominant order of society is undergoing change, the displacement or fragmentation can be expressed through films both visually and narratively.

Martin-Jones draws primarily on the work of Gilles Deleuze pertaining to the interrelationship between time and the moving image<sup>17</sup>. Deleuze argued that there are two types of images: the movement-image and the time-image (Martin-Jones, 2006, p2). The movement-image refers to films that formally comply with an unbroken linear narrative and are based on the rules of continuity editing originating from Hollywood (ibid). The time-image on the other hand, formally experiments with disrupting the chronological narrative (ibid).

Although Martin-Jones avoids any discussion or definition of national cinema, he argues that films and the use of time in films provides '...a hook through which to explore national identity' (Martin-Jones, 2009, p11 & p3). He argues that understanding the temporal dimension of films will '...enhance our understanding of exactly how formally disruptive films narrate the nation'<sup>18</sup> (Martin-Jones, 2006, p11).

The use of filmic analysis to establish or investigate a collective identity is by now well established. In his book *Imagined Communities* (1991) Anderson argues that '...nationality or nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts...' (Anderson, 1991, p4). Jarvie takes this a step further and argues that cinema functions '...to socialise newly

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<sup>17</sup> For further details please refer to Deleuze, G. (1989) *Cinema 2: the time image*. London: Athlone Press and Deleuze, G. (1992) *Cinema 1: the movement image*. London: Athlone Press

<sup>18</sup> The approach has also been championed by Bill Marshall in his book *Quebec National Cinema* (2001)

emancipated populations ... and continuing [the] hegemony of the governing and cultural elites...' (Jarvie, 2000, p81). According to Hjort and Mackenzie, 'myth-making<sup>19</sup>' is an integral part of the construction of nations (Hjort & Mackenzie, 2000, p2). They argue that poststructuralist theory and psychoanalytic semiotics have evinced that texts such as films are not '... works with distinctive traits expressing ... the intentions of creative agents<sup>20</sup>, but as epiphenomena of language, desire, ideology and a unified "logophallogocentric<sup>21</sup>" Western metaphysics' (Hjort & Mackenzie, 2000, p1).

Within the field of cultural studies concepts such as 'intercultural', 'transcultural' and 'hybridity' are challenging the construct of the nation-state. Castells argues that the nation-state is in decline and presents a new approach, *Network society*, proposing a globally contextualised stratification and modus operandi (Castells, 1996, pp201-279). Others

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<sup>19</sup> Barthes wrote extensively about the idea of the relationship between mythmaking and identity, for example in his text 'Mythology today' from 1968 published in *The Rustle of Language*. Translated from French by Richard Howard and published by University of California Press in 1989

<sup>20</sup> Key texts in this context are Barthes' 'The death of the Author' from 1968 published in *The Rustle of Language*. Translated from French by Richard Howard and published by University of California Press in 1989 and Foucault's 'What is an author?' from 1969 in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology* edited by Preziosi and published in 1998 by Oxford University Press.

<sup>21</sup> This phrase has been used by some to define Western discourse up till the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as driven by a male-dominated perspective. Goldner explains it as an amalgamation of '...all of Western culture prior to Nietzsche' (Goldner 1989 WWW).

argue that although the nation-state is changing, it is still very relevant. Magala argues that even if it is weakening '... the nation-state remains the basic organisational form of contemporary societies – even in an age of globalisation, regional integration and the electronically linked global village...' (Magala, 2005, p2).

Crofts, in his essay *Concepts of national cinema*, argues that the nation-state retains a determining role (Crofts, 1998, p389). He concludes that despite the issues relating to the increasing interpenetration of cultures, globalisation and cyberspace, it is the nation-state that controls its national film industry, regulating funding, censorship, licensing agreements etc<sup>22</sup> (ibid). Within Europe, supranational funding bodies play a significant role in the financing of European film. The European Union is now running the fourth phase of its *MEDIA* programme<sup>23</sup> and the European Council operates *Eurimages*, which has both a cultural and an economic objective<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> The level of state involvement varies, for example state participation in the USA differs greatly from that in Europe and even within Europe there are significant differences.

<sup>23</sup> MEDIA 2007 commenced on 1 January 2007 and will run to 31 December 2013. With a budget of €755 million (around £500 million) MEDIA 2007 supports professional training (screenwriting, business and new technologies), project development (single/slate), and the distribution and promotion of European audiovisual works  
<http://www.mediadesk.co.uk/information>.

<sup>24</sup> *Eurimages* was set up by the *Council of Europe* in 1988, it currently has 33 Member States. The first objective is cultural, in that it endeavours to support works which reflect the multiple facets of a European society and its common roots. The second one is economic, in that the Fund invests in an industry which, while concerned with commercial success, is interested in demonstrating that cinema is one of the arts.

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It would seem improbable for cultural factors not to affect the decisions and choices made by these public funding bodies. However, there is not an explicit cultural agenda or criterion applied in the funding approval process related to the content or structure of films.

Whilst bearing this in mind, this thesis will not specifically address issues of globalisation and transculturality or the role of the nation or the nation-state. The emphasis will be on the medium of film as a space in which the beliefs, values and behaviours that collectively contribute to the continuous evolvement of Icelanders' relationship with uncertainty, are communicated, expounded, challenged and negotiated.

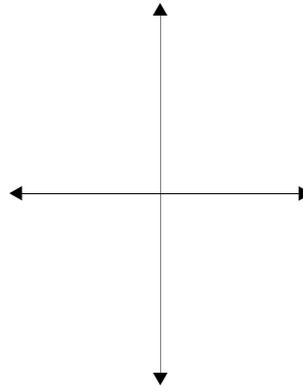
### 3 Icelandic Films and Uncertainty



The integrated model illustrated in Diagram 1 below brings together the common aspects of theories by Hofstede, Schwartz et al, Triandis, Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner and Martin-Jones. This is not to say that they always share an unambiguous and categorical relationship and there are some profound differences. What Schwartz et al mean by self-transcendence, for example stems from a different concept than what Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner mean by outer-directedness or having an external locus of control. The former refers to an individual's motivation to prioritise the group's needs, in the implicit belief that he or she will subsequently benefit. The latter is used to describe cultures that perceive themselves as products of nature rather than separate from nature where '... man must go along with its laws, directions and forces...' as opposed to believing that '...they can and should control nature by imposing their will upon it.' (Schwartz et al, 2000, p317/Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997, p123). In the model presented here, these two aspects are placed in the same category specifically drawing on the common theme of the external prioritised over the internal, i.e. the group over the individual. The model of uncertainty themes emphasis what the aspects have in common and an outline of each aspects is provided in Appendix I.

### A Model of Uncertainty Themes

Agency: Single / Protagonist  
 Internal locus of control  
 Inner-directedness  
 Self-enhancement



“Crystalline” time  
 “Loose” cultures  
 Synchronic time  
 Openness to change  
 Tolerance to change  
 Rules are negotiable  
 More subjective wellbeing

“Organic” time  
 “Tight” cultures  
 Sequential time  
 Conservatism  
 Resistance to change  
 Strict Adherence to rules  
 Less subjective wellbeing

Agency: Plural / Situation  
 External locus of control  
 Outer-directedness  
 Self-transcendence

LEGEND	
Martin-Jones	
Triandis et al	
Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner	
Schwartz et al	
Hofstede	

## Questions of Uncertainty

In this part of the analysis the aspects shown in the diagram will be applied to the whole corpus of the 25 films explored and are intended to provide a structure to identify key trends and themes. Whilst no attempt is made to collect all the films into distinct and neatly plotted groups there are undoubtedly reoccurring features and perspectives that indicate partialities and inclinations. The four dimensional matrix brings together commonalities within the theories and draws attention to six distinct and repeated themes that relate to:

AGENCY: Who or what is the protagonist?

RESOLUTION: Is there a 'beneficiary' of the film's resolution and who is that?

CHANGE: How is change handled and perceived?

RULES: Are rules absolute or negotiable?

SUBJECTIVE WELLBEING: How is subjective wellbeing depicted?

TIME: How is time constructed and employed in the film's narrative and visual structure?

The first theme is one of agency. What or who is the agent within the film's narrative? On the one hand, an individual protagonist carries the narrative and connects each scene to the next. An example of this is the film *Cold Light* (2004) where Grímur appears in almost every scene. Flashbacks are extensive used - it is the past that haunts Grímur and prevents him from fully engaging in his life and enjoy the future offered to him. It is primarily his story that is being told and the film ends with a scene showing Grimur in his new life with Linda and their baby, affirming that he has worked through the horrors of his past.

On the other hand, the narrative is carried by a number of protagonists who may, or may not, be connected and who may or may not connect

scenes across the editing process. Here, time and/or the environment can also feature as a protagonist as they do in the film *Small Mountain* (2008). The events of the film take place within a single day, starting around lunchtime on Election Day. Although the key character is Emil other characters share the filmic space. The journey that Emil undertakes with the ballot box from the election hall to the counting office underpins the film but by no means carries it. Other characters like the young man in charge of technology for election party, keeps having conversations on his mobile phone. He has no direct connection with Emil; it is simply another experience of Election Day that is being told.

About two thirds of the films have a clear protagonist, suggesting that values and beliefs related to an internal sense of control and inner-directedness are prevalent in line with the former category. This concurs with findings by Eyjólfsdóttir and Smith, who argue that even though Icelandic culture shows signs of “collectivist” characteristics, such as prioritising egalitarian values, it carries a ‘...supreme ideal [of] the capacity for individual excellence, to become famous or remembered’ (Eyjólfsdóttir & Smith, 1997, p66). They quote Magnússon who proposes that excellence is not ‘synonymous with success: failure on a grand scale seems no less worthy of remembrance than great success’ (Ibid). This they interpret to mean that what is valued is the effort and the courage to act and preferably be original (ibid). According to their study 92% of Icelandic respondents ‘...preferred jobs that encourage personal initiative over jobs where everybody works together.’ This places Icelanders in league with the most individualistic countries in the world, such as the United States and Australia (Eyjólfsdóttir, & Smith, 1997 p66-7).

This ideal weighs heavily on Dís in the film *Dís* (*Dís* 2004). Dís is a 23-year-old girl living in Reykjavik. She is smart, funny, charming, outgoing and likeable. Nevertheless, she's troubled by the fact that she doesn't quite know what to do with her life and how she imagines she compares with others. The following dialogue illustrates her dilemma in relation to the Icelandic ideal of excellence:

**Dís:** "I just want to do something unique with my life. I've had enough of being mediocre at a bunch of things and not good at goddamn anything. I just want to be something, I'm so ordinary... it's almost extraordinary."

**Blær:** "I'm sorry, but being ordinary is not extraordinary. Everyone is ordinary, so being ordinary is ordinary."

**Dís:** "Wait, how is everyone all of a sudden ordinary?"

(*Dís*, 2004, 51:20-51:55)

The second theme focuses on the film's resolution. Is the resolution brought about by the film's events, personal to a single or a few interconnected protagonists (like a family) or, is there a collective or social aspect to it? Romantic comedies tend to exemplify the former. In these films two people meet in the beginning of the film and as the story develops, so does their relationship, with various obstacles, twists and turns on the way. In this genre the ending belongs to the happy couple. The comic fantasy film *Astropia* (2007) is perhaps the closest and only example of this genre within the corpus of films analysed. Hildur is left homeless and destitute after her boyfriend is arrested for fraud. Through her own efforts and with the help of friends she makes a new life for herself and falls in love with Dagur, who translates romantic novels for a living and teaches dance to the elderly in his spare time. Their first kiss marks the end of the film and the beginning of their future, making this a distinctly personal resolution.

Whilst love stories often form a part of the narrative in the Icelandic films, they are rarely the mainstay, but rather support the primary narrative. More than half of the films is constructed within the format of Drama, another genre in which the resolution is often distinctly personal, although it can reflect social issues. Together, drama and comedy make up over 75% of the Icelandic films studied here.

The prominence of the individual could possibly be explained in terms of a strong sense of individualism, which is evidenced in the results of the *European Value Study*<sup>25</sup>. When asked how much control Icelandic respondents felt they had over their own lives, over 80% scored 7 or higher on the scale 1-10 and over 60% scored 8 or higher (1 meaning “no control” and 10 meaning “a great deal”). According to the *European Value Study* Icelanders also place great value on the individual being recognised for their own merit, with more than 90% of respondents judging it ‘important’ or ‘very important’ (Gesis: Question 76C). This emphasis on the individual also appears in the political context of Iceland. The country’s biggest and hitherto most popular political party is called the *Independence Party*, whose axiological principles are ‘...the freedom to

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<sup>25</sup> All references to the *European Value Study* relate to the 3<sup>rd</sup> wave of the study from 1999-2000.

work and freedom of the individual...'<sup>26</sup> (The Independence Party, 2009, Internet).

Whilst films with a determining primary protagonist often deliver a personal resolution, there are well-established genres where this is not the case. A classic example is the American action movie genre where the protagonist single-handedly saves the world. This makes the resolution both personal, with the survival of the hero against the odds and collective, with the group or world being saved from the imminent threat. Examples of such films include the *Mission Impossible* and *Die Hard* series. However, the use of this narrative structure is negligible in Icelandic films. Films where the protagonist's experience, whilst remaining personal throughout, reflects and expounds societal issues are more prominent. *Eleven Men Out* (2005) by Robert Douglas is most appropriate for this association. The film tells the story of Óttar a professional football player in Iceland's Premier League and his experiences when he announces to his team that he is gay. Although the story is primarily his, it carries with it the collective reflection of the experience of gay people in Iceland.

Where a film's resolution can be perceived to belong to the collective, this is more commonly achieved through the structure of multiple narratives led by a number of minor and major protagonists. The clearest examples of this are the films *Children* (2006) and *Parents* (2007) both by Ragnar

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<sup>26</sup> Appendix II provides an overview of recent socio-economic and political changes in Iceland.

Bragason. The films, although independent of each other, are interrelated both visually and narratively. They are both shot in black and white and use cognate visual grammar such as close-ups, camera-movement and editing. The narrative structure is fragmented, with multiple interrelated and independent storylines, both within each film and across the two films. One of the characters in the film *Children* is Karitas, a single mum of four, who works as a nurse. Her story is prominent in the film *Children* but in the film *Parents* she appears only briefly, as a nurse, whilst her colleague Katrín, who appears in only one scene in the film *Children*, plays an important role. This sense of interconnectedness and interrelation is striking and the *Children/Parents* diptych is in some ways an anomaly in Icelandic filmmaking, both in terms of its filmic duality and narrative plurality<sup>27</sup>.

The third theme is about change. For instance, how is change perceived and handled? Do characters want to conserve stability and are they resistant to change? Are changes accepted or even encouraged? The *European Value Study* poses this question and strikingly, almost 45% of the Icelandic respondents favour acting boldly when faced with major changes and only 27% opt for erring on the side of caution<sup>28</sup> (Gesis: Question 54I).

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<sup>27</sup> The theme of interconnectedness could be explored further in terms of how small the Icelandic population is and the inherent interconnectedness in such a small society. However, due to the size and scope of this paper this has not been pursued.

<sup>28</sup> Question 54I places two statements on the scale of 1-10. 1 is aligned with the statement "One should be cautious about major life changes" whilst 10 is aligned with the

The results from the *European Value Study* seem consonant with the perception of change in Icelandic films. Resistance to change is hardly visible in the films, although this is not to say that change is always presented as easy or welcome; but the overriding impression is one of adaptability and acceptance. Due to the country's remoteness and the volatility of both the Icelandic climate and its geology, Icelanders have been exposed to earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and violent life-threatening weathers throughout their history. The unpredictability of the environment could to some extent account for their enduring adaptability.

The ocean has been Iceland's main source of food and income and the mercurial weather has claimed many fishermen's lives<sup>29</sup>. The daily experience of uncertainty and heartache for fishermen and their families is tangible in the film *Cold Light* (2004). Grimur, the film's protagonist, along with his mother and sister, waits anxiously down at the harbour for the boats to return following bad weather. The weather has claimed the life of a fisherman and although his father returns safely, the sense that it could

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statement that "You will never achieve anything unless you act boldly". Respondents scoring 1-5 are 27%, with 73% scoring 6-10 and 44.10% scoring 8-10, with 12.40% scoring 10 (Gesis: Question 54I).

<sup>29</sup> This is just one of a number of possible contributing factors; there are also both historical and sociological factors that are not included here. The link between ecology and culture is complex as discussed by almost all of the included theorists (e.g. Hofstede 2001/Triandis 2004)

just as easily have been him is compelling. Later in the same film, it is revealed that both Grimur's parents and his sister died in an avalanche.

The commonness of such horrific events, whilst not diminishing their traumatic effects, seems to indicate that to Icelanders resistance is irrelevant. In five of the 25 films, natural disasters feature and decidedly affect the story told. One of the few examples of explicit resistance to change, is in the film *Quiet Storm* by Guðný Halldórsdóttir (2007). Here Hrefna's parents' resistant response to change is pitched against the revolutionary ideas of her boyfriend<sup>30</sup>.

The fourth theme relates to rules. How are rules perceived and handled? Are rules negotiable, depending on the circumstances or are they absolute and should be adhered to regardless? It is practically impossible to find, within the 25 films, an example of strict adherence to rules. In fact, in essentially all 25 films, rules are contextualised and negotiated. Question 21 in the *European Value Study* asks whether there are 'clear and absolute guidelines' about good and evil (Gesis: Question 21). Almost 90% of the Icelandic respondents disagreed, favouring the view that there are no absolutes and that everything depends on circumstances<sup>31</sup> (ibid). Since this

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<sup>30</sup> This scene takes place at the beginning of the film. However, the parents' attitude does not form a major structural theme in the film, but seems to be included for background purposes only.

<sup>31</sup> Question 21 present two statements offering three possible options. The first statement is "There are absolutely clear guidelines about good and evil. These apply to everyone, always" and the second one is "There can be no absolute guidelines about good and evil.

is such an unequivocal and generic perspective in Icelandic films, it will not be explored further within this context but given more attention in the detailed film analysis.

The fifth theme pertains to what Hofstede termed, subjective wellbeing. He argues that ‘...subjective measures of wellbeing across countries are strongly negatively related to [the] *Uncertainty Avoidance Index*, meaning that the lower the levels of perceived subjective wellbeing, the more uncomfortable cultures are with uncertainty and the more efforts they will invest in avoiding it (Hofstede, 2001, pp155-158). The Icelandic results from the *European Value Study* show a high level of perceived subjective wellbeing<sup>32</sup>.

Whilst measures of subjective wellbeing include a number of areas such as life satisfaction, housing, healthcare and education, issues relating to mental health are prominent in Hofstede’s argument. He identifies mental health issues and illnesses such as stress, depression and psychosis as key

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It depends on circumstances”. The respondents have three options to agree with one or the other or to disagree with both. 9% agree with the first statement, 88.20% agree with the second statement and 2.80% disagree with both (Gesis: Question 21).

<sup>32</sup> Although originally asked in relation to the *European Value Study*, the results relating to the questions about subjective wellbeing (Questions 85a-l excluding 85e) were not included in the final version of the study’s results. The questions relate to satisfaction with lifestyle, family life, financial situation, health, occupation, housing, healthcare and education. Dr. Jónsson, the director of the Social Science Research Institute, provided the results which showed that on the scale of 1-10, the average level of satisfaction was 7.58 (Dr. Jónsson, 2009, Email)

indicators of subjective wellbeing (Hofstede, 2001, p155). Interpreting presence or absence of stress in film is a challenging task. The experience of stress, which in itself is very subjective, can be expressed in such a variety of ways and indeed suppressed, that it feels peremptory to attempt to do it justice in this study<sup>33</sup>.

However, there is a noticeable presence of mental illness in the Icelandic films. Nine of the 25 films have characters that suffer from mental illnesses, such as depression (*Back Soon* 2008) and psychosis (*Children* 2006). These characters are placed within the environment of the narrative and not separated from other characters unless, because of their illness they become anti-social and dangerous as in *Quiet Storm* (2007) when Sammi sets fire to the farm. Even here his separation is temporary. This could suggest that the uncertainty and unpredictability of mental illness is not avoided, but actively included, within the narrative.

The last theme centres on time. How is time portrayed within the narrative? An example of the presence of time in film is when characters are working towards deadlines or fighting against time. A more subtle illustration of time is when a character is frequently checking his or her watch, or if their lives are punctuated with repetitions of time, like arriving or leaving work at a given time.

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<sup>33</sup> This is indeed something that could lend itself to film analysis and would be interesting to investigate further. However, due to the size and scope of this thesis this is not feasible in this context.

Throughout the film *Niceland* (2004) there is a sense of urgency. Time is running out for Chloe, her life depends on Jed discovering 'the meaning of life', which he does just in the nick of time. On the other hand, even when there is a definitive deadline as in *Small Mountain* (2008), there is little sense of urgency. Emil stops frequently on his way to deliver the ballot box and ends up arriving at the airport, after the airplane assigned to transport it to the central election office, has left. Being the resourceful man that he is, he decides to drive the box to its destination.

Unfortunately, the ballot box ends up falling off a cliff and shattering on the stony beach. Despite this blow to the democratic process, the film's conclusion is that although not desirable, it is not irremediable and another election can be held soon.

The temporal structure of films is another strand to this theme. This refers to the use of cinematic devices such as parallel timelines, flashbacks and flash-forwards and the period in which the film is placed. It is noticeable that 14 of the films take place solely in the present, there are no flashbacks to the characters' history or previous events and the films develop in a sequential fashion, with a clear beginning and end. This structure is closely linked to the theme of agency and adheres to Martin-Jones' definition of the movement or action image, where the protagonist's actions from situation through situation develop '...a causal linear progression to the narrative...' (Martin-Jones, 2006, p21). It is the protagonist that creates an 'unbroken ... continuum and the passing of time is rendered subordinate to the character's movement through space' (ibid). In *The Amazing Truth about Queen Raquela* (2008), Queen Raquela connects every scene and it is her story that is being told, in the present tense.

A further seven films, although using flashbacks to explain and contextualise their characters, are firmly rooted in the present and flashforwards are never used. Within many of the films there is a strong presence of traditional filmic devices such as continuity editing and traditional camera-movements such as panning, tilting and tracking shots. But there are exceptions, *Back Soon* (2008) shows some experimentation with the form by using canted framing and filters. Attention is also drawn to the medium of film with reflexivity devices such as talking to the camera, thereby disrupting sequential time. However, the protagonist's journey is the mainstay of the narrative and in this respect firmly aligns itself with the movement-image and the linear construction of time.

The film that can be seen as the most temporally experimental is *Children/Parents*. Multiple storylines both interconnected and unrelated, evoke a sense of a labyrinth without a distinct centre, which can be read using Martin-Jones' terminology, as a 'time-image'<sup>34</sup> (Martin-Jones, 2006, p22). However, although Karitas in *Children* and Òskar in *Parents* are not the films' sole protagonists, they undoubtedly provide both a narrative and visual anchor and within each of the storylines, events unfold in a sequential fashion.

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<sup>34</sup> As mentioned above, Martin-Jones' work is heavily influenced by Deleuze's work and this relates to Deleuze's ideas of '...a labyrinthine without a centre, whose pathways expand outwards [positing] the existence of ... parallel universes...' (Martin-Jones 2006 p23)

## Questions of Uncertainty

There are only two films that are not, at least to some extent, based in the present. *One Point Zero* (2004) is placed in the near future and *Beowulf and Grendel* (2006) is set in the distant past. Both films make use of a linear and sequential structure. There are two additional films *Cold Light* (2004) and *White Night Wedding* (2008) that although adhering to the chronology of sequential temporal structure, enlase the past and the present in an atypical way. In both films the protagonist is haunted by his past and the events of the present are dependent on his resolving or coming to terms with those of the past.

The protagonist in both films, is the driving force for the narrative in the past and in the present. In that respect both are consistent with the movement-image. However, the manner in which, the past and present unfold in parallel resonates with Deleuze's ideas of time as a '... virtual whole that is constantly in the process of becoming-actual, as a process of labyrinth in the process of becoming a line' (Martin-Jones, 2006, p23-4). In *Cold Light* (2004), the story of how Grìmur's family died unfolds in parallel with the story of the creation of his new family. Only when he is able to let go of the haunting memories of his dead family can he embrace Linda and their newborn child. This circular connection between the past and the present also provides the temporal structure in *White Night Wedding* (2008). The film tells the story of Jòn, a creatively stifled university lecturer. Here the story of the beginning of Jòn's relationship and marriage

to his second wife Þóra is revealed in parallel with the story of the decline and end of his first marriage. Both films anchor the narrative in the experience of death and new life. The final revelation of the past is intercut with the symbolic significance of the new beginning<sup>35</sup>.

The experience of loss and death, so haunting in both these films, is one that is echoed in almost all of the Icelandic films of the period. The human experience of mortality and death is present in films across the genres and is only absent in four films. In some films the presence of death is peripheral as in *Ahead of Time* (2004) where Kristinn is a funeral director or in *Astropia*, where Hildur and her friends slay the villains in the realm of fantasy. But for the most part, death is acutely experienced along with its haunting consequences. The causes of death include murder, illness, suicide and the inevitable forces of nature.

In two of the films, *Cold Light* (2004) and *Noi the Albino* (2003), avalanches wipe out the protagonists' families and homes, leaving them utterly alone. The dangerous reality of Iceland's climate is also present *No Network* (2007) which is kedged in the ghost of a little boy wrongly accused of leading a group of people to their death in a blizzard decades before. Kalli, the young protagonist together with his stepsister Ellen, manages to survive snowstorms and blizzards and recovers the boy's bones.

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<sup>35</sup> Due to its size and scope, this thesis does not attempt any further psychological analysis.

## Questions of Uncertainty

Promising to clear the dead boy's name, Kalli lays him to rest in the town's cemetery.

The harsh Icelandic weather claims the lives of people in six films and the omnipresent power of nature is felt in most of the films. Illness is another frequent cause of death in the films studied here. Whether it be mental illness resulting in suicide as portrayed in *White Night Wedding* (2008) or physical illness as in *Back Soon* (2008), it adds to the sense that man is powerless against the forces of nature. Hofstede refers to death as '...the ultimate certainty and the ultimate source of anxiety...' (Hofstede, 2001, p161).

According to his findings, people in societies where uncertainty avoidance is higher are more conscious of death. He argues that they often feel relatively powerless toward external forces whereas in societies where uncertainty avoidance is less, people feel more able to influence their own lives (ibid). The strong presence of death and mortality could be interpreted as an indicator of higher levels of uncertainty avoidance than previously anticipated when referring to the high scores of subjective wellbeing measures which suggested that in general Icelanders feel in control of their lives<sup>36</sup>.

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<sup>36</sup> This refers to the response to Question 9 in the *European Value Study* referred to earlier that asks how much control the respondent feels he or she has over their own lives.

Icelandic films are primarily about family, family relationships and family dynamics, with only two films where family is completely absent; *Astropia* (2007) and *One Point Zero* (2004). Even in films like *Dìs* (2004) where the friendship between Dìs and Blær forms the film's primary relationship, family structures and relationships are included in the narrative. Films such as the *Children/Parents* dyad explore the complex dynamics of second marriage families and single parenthood. Statistics show that the percentage of single parent families in Iceland is in line with other Nordic countries (Chapple, 2009, pp14-15). Chapple argues that the Nordic countries '...generate very similar group averages, with quite high rates of parental absence' (ibid). The emphasis on family in the Icelandic films studied here could therefore be seen to reflect a common reality of the complex family bonds of single parent families and stepfamilies in Icelandic culture.

Although the films construe and expound the whole gamut of family relations, the relationship between father and son is the most prominent. Firstly, there is the primal uncertainty of paternity. Whilst the maternity of a child can never be in doubt, paternity can. In film *Thicker than Water* (2006), Peter discovers that his son cannot be his when he receives the result of a routine blood test. Heartbroken, he moves out of his home, leaving his pregnant wife and son and starts an affair with his secretary. Realising his own mistakes and the importance of his son in his life as well as his own importance in his son's life, Peter is eventually able to find his way back to his family. In the film *Eleven Men Out* (2005), Gugga assures her son that his gay father is indeed his father, saying that they have the paternity test to prove it. In the film *Dìs* (2004), when Blær finds out that she is pregnant, she confides to Dìs that she is not sure who her baby's father is.

However, it is not only the question of whether the assumed biological father/son relationship is beyond doubt. The second angle to the relationship between father and son is when the son does not know who his father is. Baldur, the protagonist in *Cold Trail* (2006), has never known who his father is. It is only when his father's death is announced in the papers that his mother reveals his father's true identity to him. In the ensuing story, as Baldur uncovers the real reasons behind his father's death, he also discovers what kind of a man his father was. In the film, *Ahead of Time* (2004), Kristinn has no idea that he is a father of Harpa's son until the end. In some films, like *The Higher Force* (2008), the father is simply absent.

The narrative attention awarded to the father/son relationship is compelling and raises the question of just how much of an issue this is within Icelandic society. With a staggering 84% of the films being written at least in part, by the director, it is tempting to infer a personal investment<sup>37</sup>. The issue of paternity and the relationship between father and son will be further explored in the detailed film analysis.

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<sup>37</sup> Seven of the films are written solely by the director, with a further 14 where the director is a co-writer, adding up to a total of 21 out of 25 films. In many cases the director is also the producer or is heavily involved with the production company.

This cursory overview of the 25 Icelandic films released in the period 2003-2008 is not intended to be conclusive and in fact raises more questions than it answers.

A number of prominent themes were deemed extraneous to the approach taken here to the central question of uncertainty. These themes included foreign influences and the interplay between the rural and urban. The presence of foreigners in Icelandic films is noticeable, as is the use of foreign language, sometimes to the complete exclusion of Icelandic in films such as *Dark Horse* (2005) and *Niceland* (2004)<sup>38</sup>. Foreign funding<sup>39</sup> is crucial to Icelandic films as is the films' marketability abroad. These issues raise questions about transculturality and globalisation, which cannot be addressed here<sup>40</sup>.

Landscape and the interplay between the rural and the urban has a powerful presence in the majority of the films studied. The strong emphasis on the landscape has been identified by a number of theorists

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<sup>38</sup> Sveinbjörn I. Baldvinsson has written about interplay between language and filmmaking in his text '“I was young when I was given to Njal” Hugleiðingar um tungumál og kvikmyndagerð', the subtitle meaning contemplation on language and filmmaking. See bibliography for reference.

<sup>39</sup> All 25 films received financial support from the Icelandic Film Centre and 14 of those received funding from MEDIA Programme (6), Eurimages(3), Nordic Film & TV Fund (9) and other film funds (8) (Vigfúsdóttir 2009 Email/Ólafsdóttir 2009 Email)

<sup>40</sup> Birgir Þór Møller has written an article titled 'In and Out of Reykjavik: Framing Iceland in the Global Daze' included in *Transnational Cinema in a Global North: Nordic Cinema in Transition*, edited by Elkington, T. & Nestingen, A. in 2005 by Wayne State University Press in U.S.A.

and Söderbergh Widding argues that the barren Icelandic landscape makes Icelandic films unique 'And that of all the Nordic countries, Iceland has perhaps made the most effective use of nature'<sup>41</sup> (Soila et al 1998 p100). Icelandic theorists have written extensively on this theme and in the first Icelandic textbook on cinema, titled *The World of Cinema (Heimur kvikmyndanna)*, a quarter of the articles dedicated to Icelandic cinema explicitly discuss the role of landscape and nature (Elisson 1999). Whilst both these themes and others are important and do undoubtedly, to some extent, play a role in the filmic representation of uncertainty, they will not be addressed here specifically.

In order to explore the issues and themes further, it becomes necessary to narrow the scope and delve deeper into individual films. Hence it was considered prudent to select three films for this detailed analysis. The number was deliberately chosen to avoid a potentially implicit 'either/or' comparison if only two films were to be selected whilst still allowing for in-depth analysis.

The selection criteria were fourfold: Firstly, to choose films released in the years 2003-2008. Secondly, to select films from each of the dominant genres thus reducing the risk of genre-related constraints. Thirdly, to choose films by both experienced and debut directors and to include at

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<sup>41</sup> The use of nature and landscape has indeed become one of the defining features of Nordic cinemas (Söderbergh Widding 1998 p100)

least one film by a female director<sup>42</sup>. Finally, to select films that approached the two key narrative themes of mortality and paternity/family in different ways and are as varied as possible in terms of the six uncertainty themes.

The films that were chosen are *Noi the Albino* by Dagur Kàri, *Jar City* by Baltasar Kormàkur and *Country Wedding* by Valdís Òskarsdóttir. The drama *Noi the Albinoi*, by Dagur Kàri is his first feature film and was released in 2003<sup>43</sup>. The thriller *Jar City* is Baltasar Kormàkur's 2<sup>nd</sup> film of this period, released in 2006<sup>44</sup>. Valdís Òskarsdóttir is one of the four female directors of this period and the comic farce *Country Wedding* is her debut film, released in 2008<sup>45</sup>.

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<sup>42</sup> Out of the 25 films, women directed only four and although statistically this is not a 1/3 ratio, it was considered important to include at least one female director. 16 out of the 20 directors only directed one film during this period and for ten of those it was their debut film. Three directors directed two films and for all three it was their first and second film. Only one director directed three films, he is an experienced director with a number of films under his belt.

<sup>43</sup> Dagur Kàri's second film *Dark Horse* was released in 2005.

<sup>44</sup> Baltasar Kormàkur's first film of the period released in 2004 is *Little trip to heaven*. He then released *White Night Wedding* in 2008.

<sup>45</sup> Although this is her debut film as a director, Valdís Òskarsdóttir has worked for over a decade as an primary editor on films such as *Vantage Point* by Pete Travis, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* by Michel Gondry and *Finding Forester* by Gus Van Sant

## Questions of Uncertainty

A detailed analysis will be performed on each film individually; however, comparisons with the other two films and indeed the other 23 films will be made where appropriate.

## 4 Noi the Albino



The film *Noi the Albino* takes place in a small village on the West fjords of Iceland, in the depths of winter. Snowy mountains tower over the village and there is little to suggest a connection to an exterior world.

This geographical and physical isolation is echoed through Nòi's own experiences. He too is isolated and disconnected from the world around him. Although he is not an albino as suggested in the title, he looks distinctly different from his peers, with his pale complexion, bald head and nonchalant attitude. He places little value on school attendance, choosing to spend his time in the company of animals, playing mastermind games with Òskar, the owner of the local bookshop and fiddling the slotmachine at the petrol station to fund his cigarette and Malt drink habit<sup>46</sup>. His life is mostly solitary and whether that is by choice or by circumstance is left undetermined. He lives with his paternal grandmother who spends most of her time solving jigsaw puzzles. His alcoholic father Kiddi lives nearby, but there is little to suggest any other family relations and there is no mention of his mother at any point during the film. He seems to have no friends at school and when he does reach out to his classmate Dabbi, he is kept at a distance. Nòi has made himself a little refuge below the basement in his house that he accesses through a trap door that provides him with a safe place, away from the outside world.

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<sup>46</sup> The Icelandic soft drink Malt is similar to a non-alcoholic Guinness or stout beer. It's a produced by one of Iceland's leading soft drink manufacturers *Ölgerð Egil's Skallagrimssonar*, a distinctly Icelandic and iconic brand name

Here he spends his time in quiet contemplation or simply staring into space, with a small heater, a lamp and his Zippo lighter for company.

Nòi's introspective and quiet daily routines are disrupted when a new girl called Ìris greets him at the petrol station. It turns out that she is Òskar's daughter who says that '...she needs to take a break form the crazy city life' [*Noi the Albino* 13:20-14:52]. Although Ìris is reluctant at first to encourage Nòi's advances, they soon find themselves on their first date. The barrenness and isolation of the village is typified in the scene where they are standing outside in the freezing cold with nowhere to go. Nòi hits upon the idea to break into the local natural history museum and in the company of stuffed animals such as foxes and polar bears, they have their first kiss.

When someone approaches, demanding to know who is there, they take refuge in a storage room. Hidden under a sheet Ìris finds a large map of the world, it has a panel with buttons to illuminate names and locations of countries and cities. Here their remoteness and isolation is emphasised and made complete. Iceland appears a mere spit on the map and there is no button to illuminate it. Ìris suggests they take off somewhere and, covering Nòi's eyes encourages him to press a button: Hawaii is illuminated.

Whilst Nòi's relationship with Ìris develops and grows, his school attendance goes from bad to worse and he is sent for a psychological evaluation and Intelligence Quotient test. The results suggest that Nòi may not be avoiding school because he does not comprehend what is being taught, but may indeed, be so bright that the education provided is not enough to keep him interested. It is never made explicit whether this is

true or not. Scenes with Nòi handing in a maths exam of which he has only filled in his name and later sleeping in class are juxtaposed with scenes of Nòi absentmindedly solving the Rubik's cube puzzle, whilst answering the psychologist's questions and showing a marked interest in the Danish philosopher Søren Kirkegaard. When Dabbi, Nòi's classmate, brings a Dictaphone to act as Nòi's substitute in class, the teacher loses his already thin-wearing patience and threatens to resign unless Nòi is expelled.

Nòi's grandmother and father deal differently with this situation. His grandmother goes to Gylfi, the local mechanic, who is also known for being able to read the future and persuades him to give Nòi a reading and guidance. His father, however, gets him a job helping the priest with odd jobs around the cemetery. During his lunch break Nòi goes to see Gylfi, stopping on his way to telephone Ìris at work. She's sceptical about Gylfi's ability to see the future, arguing that all such people ever do is to tell you that you'll meet someone special, have lots of money and go travelling. Nòi's response is that this sounds about right, he has just met some special, they have just been talking about going to Hawaii and all they need now is the money. In good humour he arrives at Gylfi's for his reading but it brings neither a special someone nor money. Gylfi can only see imminent death.

Under the shadow of the mountain Nòi works his way through the frozen soil to dig a grave. Despite dismissing Gylfi's reading, he cannot help but be affected by its message. He leaves the grave half dug and goes in search of the alternative reading offered by Ìris of love, money and travel. Determined to get his hands on money, he attempts to rob the local bank but despite waving a shotgun at the cashier, she does not take him

seriously and advises him to stop this nonsense. The bank manager comes to take the shotgun away from him and throws him out saying 'You shouldn't play with firearms Nòi' [*Noi the Albino* 1:10:01-1.10.39]. Snubbed, Nòi goes back into the bank to withdraw all his savings. Dressed up to the nines in an expensive suit he has just bought and driving a stolen Cadillac, he shows up at the petrol station to whisk Ìris away. But Ìris hesitates and infuriated and hurt Nòi drives off. The inappropriateness of the Cadillac to the Icelandic winter conditions mean that it is not long before the police catch up with him.

Back at home, Nòi once more seeks refuge in his underground chamber. Preceded only by a small tremor, an avalanche hits the village. The imminent death foreseen by Gylfi was not Nòi's own, but the death of those around him. His grandmother dies, his father dies, both Ìris and her father die, Gylfi, the Headmaster and Dabbi, all die and the list goes on. But Nòi's underground refuge protects him and after hours of confinement he is rescued from underneath the rubble. The camera pulls away from a forlorn Nòi as he sits on top of the rubble looking through his View-Master, his latest birthday present from his grandmother. There is a cut to the image inside the View-Master of beautiful palm trees on a beach and then the View-Master image expands, becoming a moving image with palm trees gently swaying in the breeze.

## Questions of Uncertainty

The film's protagonist is Nòi himself and explores who Nòi is, how he responds to the world around him and how he is responded to in return. The agency of the film is singularly his and to him belongs the film's conclusion<sup>47</sup>. He is present in all but three of the film's scenes. The first is a conversation between the teacher and the headmaster at Nòi's school, where the teacher threatens to resign unless Nòi is expelled. The second scene shows his grandmother going to Gylfi asking him to help Nòi. The third scene shows Kiddi, Nòi's father, drunk at the piano. His creative frustrations mount in sync with his alcohol levels until he loses his temper and attacks the piano with an axe. The next scene shows Nòi arriving and in the midst of all the debris he tells his father that he has been expelled from school.

Nòi is shown to have an affinity with animals that in turn, welcome his company, like the dog that he meets walking to the petrol station, the rabbits in the school laboratory and the fly that walks across his hands like a pet. Nòi's affinity with animals and nature draws attention to the role of the mountain that towers over the village. Shots of the mountain punctuate the narrative at four key points. The first is the opening sequence where the camera pans across the sea to the mountain linking into the next shot of Nòi shovelling snow from his front door. The second mountain shot is just before Nòi meets Iris for the first time and again following their first kiss. The next shot is when Nòi is working in the

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<sup>47</sup> This means that the first two of the six uncertainty themes will be dealt with together in this section.

graveyard; here the mountain is no longer seen from across the fjord, but is included in the shot with Nòi who is seen looking over his shoulder as he is digging the grave. The final appearance of the mountain is not visual but implied with a black screen and the sounds of the avalanche tearing down the mountain, through the village and through Nòi's house, trapping him underground.

The film's final shot portrays a gentler nature with swaying palm trees and waves lapping against the beach. Whether its purpose is to gesture that Nòi has made his dream of travelling to Hawaii a reality or to suggest psychological escape is impossible to tell and the audience does not really know what happens to Nòi next. The interplay between Nòi and nature is clearly, albeit obscurely, present and however ambiguous the ending may be, it is personal to Nòi.

The issue of change is not so prominent in *Noi the Albino*. Until Ìris arrives, Nòi's life seems set in a monotonous groove of fiddling the slotmachine for money, visiting Òskar in the bookshop for a game or two, watching television or listening to the shipping news on the radio. Then there is the occasional visit to school and to his father, Kiddi.

The arrival of Ìris in Nòi's life is a welcome change from that monotony. The effect of being expelled from school however, is a most unwelcome change. Although, in light of his already poor attendance, this does not significantly affect his daily life, the change in his status is radical. His grandmother's response is to seek help from Gylfi the medium. Nòi's own response is to sit in contemplation and observe the movements of a fly and dream of distant lands with the aid of his View-Master. His father however, after throttling Nòi when he finds out about his expulsion, takes

Nòi out for dinner to celebrate. Kiddi then shows up a few days later, hauling Nòi out of bed and sending him off to work in the cemetery, which Kiddi has managed to arrange. The most significant change in Nòi's life, the loss of all his loved ones in the avalanche, takes place right at the end of the film<sup>48</sup> leaving little scope to explore its effect on Nòi. His quiet composure upon hearing the news gives little information about his inner experience.

The more striking theme in the film is the attitude to rules and norms. When Nòi first enters the bookshop, Òskar the owner is reading from a book by the Danish philosopher Søren Kirkegaard<sup>49</sup>. The reading is about the conundrum of life phrased as 'either/or' statements such as 'Laugh at the stupidity of the world; you will regret it/ Cry over it; you will also regret it... Either you laugh at the stupidity of the world or you cry over it; you will regret both... This ...is the core of all human wisdom' [*Noi the Albino* 7:31-9:05]. Whilst Òskar considers this book to be utter rubbish, it catches Nòi's interest and in a way sets the tone for the film.

There are a number of instances in the film where the situation of either/or arises. For instance, the teacher threatens the headmaster saying 'Either Nòi is expelled or I resign' [*Noi the Albino* 32:35-34:08]. Another

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<sup>48</sup> The scene where the priest breaks the news to Noi starts at 1:20:25 and finishes at 1:21:50 with only just over three minutes left of the film.

<sup>49</sup> Based on the section read in the film, this is most likely from Kirkegaard's most famous book *Either/Or* published in 1843

example is when Nòi first meets Iris in the petrol station. He has ordered a bottle of Malt and she offers him either to pay for the bottle and its content or to only pay for the content and drink the bottle there and then [*Noi the Albinoi* 10:55-12:57].

This binary view could be read in relation to Triandis' ideas of high levels of 'tightness' in isolated societies and where the ecology includes '...large mountains and wide seas...' (Triandis & Suh, 2002, p138). According to Triandis, '...in such cultures people have clear ideas about what behaviours are appropriate...' (Triandis, 2001, p911). Triandis also argues that in 'tight' cultures '...many norms ... are strictly observed [and] people are likely to be punished when they deviate from those norms' (Triandis, 2004, p33).

However, in the film, scenes with a clear 'either/or' message are juxtaposed with scenes where people seem comfortable to adapt their behaviours and deviations go unpunished. When the priest informs Nòi that the grave he is to dig needs to be three metres deep as per government standards, this becomes negotiable. Nòi points out to the priest the difficulty of digging so deep into frozen soil. The environmental realities of the situation provide a basis for a flexible approach and a compromise is reached, they agree that the grave should be two metres and twenty centimetres deep, clearly overriding the government standards.

Later, when Nòi attempts to rob the bank, he is not faced with an either/or situation or indeed punished for waving a firearm and threatening to shoot the cashier. He is merely instructed not to be silly, has his firearm removed and is promptly served when he wishes to withdraw his savings. This latter approach runs counter to Triandis' ideas,

suggesting a tolerance more in line with relativism than the 'tight' absolutism of the 'either/or'.

As mentioned earlier, the theme of subjective wellbeing has proven to be the most complex one to apply within the films selected. According to Hofstede, measures such as life satisfaction, happiness and stress are inextricably linked to socio-economic factors such as Gross National Product / Per capita (GNP/Capita). This means that poverty and wealth greatly affect individuals' experiences and their responses to questions related to subjective wellbeing (Hofstede, 2001, p159). There are few signs of wealth in *Noi the Albino* and only a handful of references to money. Scenes of Nòi fiddling the slotmachine for his daily expenditure are juxtaposed with scenes like the one at the bank where he is able to draw on his savings when the bank robbery is foiled.

A fundamental element of subjective wellbeing is emotion and perceived emotional states such as happiness. Any interpretation becomes complex and can only be inferred rather than argued<sup>50</sup>. Nòi for example, is rarely depicted as either distinctly unhappy or unmistakably happy, but as Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner point out 'The amount of visible "emoting" is a major difference between cultures' (Trompenaars &

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<sup>50</sup> This is not to say that emotional states do not have a behavioural expression. However, it is important to emphasise that any interpretation of such behaviour without access to information about its internal source is bound to be at best limited and at worst perfunctory.

Hampden-Turner, 1997, p72). They argue that affectivity and effusion are cultural constructs with demographic and ecological components such as population density; adding that types of communication such as verbal and non-verbal are also culture specific (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997, p69-78). Despite indicators such as Nòi's alcoholic father and the sense of isolation and want throughout the film, it is difficult to assess or suggest levels of subjective wellbeing.

The theme of time and temporality is the last of the six uncertainty themes. The film *Noi the Albino* is set in a single period of time with no temporal experimentation and the film develops sequentially from one scene to the next. The film is set in the present tense, but markers of the 21st century such as laptops, mobile phones and iPods are distinctly absent<sup>51</sup>. Connections to the outside world such as the radio and the television reveal nothing. Nòi and his grandmother listen to the shipping news whilst having their breakfast and at other times the weather forecast is audible in the background. The film progresses in a sequential fashion and in line with Martin-Jones' definition of movement-image, Nòi, whose story this is, connects every scene.

This temporal structure has a clear beginning, middle and end and the filmic world has a sense of being complete in itself. There is neither diegetic nor non-diegetic soundscape that indicates a time for the

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<sup>51</sup> This could be interpreted as placing the film in a time before this technology or as an indication of being so remote that this type of technology is not available.

audience, with all the music being composed specifically for the film<sup>52</sup> (Sverrisson, 2003, Documentary). The chromatic palate is distinctly green/blue and enhances the sense of a separate world. The village itself is never named or situated in space. This aural and visual construction gives a sense of a world suspended in time and space.

The depiction of death in *Noi the Albino* is abrupt and precipitous. For both the characters of the film and the viewer there is little warning of the approaching avalanche. The first experience of mortality is Nòi's own. He is trapped in the underground chamber, unable to open the trap door, apparently lost to the world where no one can hear his calls. Finally he lies down staring into the flickering flame of his Zippo lighter. At the eleventh hour, he can detect the sounds of the search and rescue team and after almost three minutes of screen-time, Nòi is rescued, barely conscious. Having just survived his own brush with death, Nòi then finds out that both his father and grandmother have died. Although appearing stunned by the news, there is little indication of Nòi's own internal emotional response.

The next scene shows Nòi in the rescue shelter, pouring ketchup on his spaghetti whilst watching the news. The pouring of the red coloured ketchup creates a visual reference to an earlier scene showing Nòi dropping a large saucepan full of sheep blood over his father Kiddi and

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<sup>52</sup> The music is mostly influenced by American hillbilly music, South American and Hawaiian music (Sverrisson 2003)

his grandmother when making slàtur<sup>53</sup>. Whether this reference is deliberate or what it signifies is unclear but it does reflect that whilst Kiddi and Nòi's grandmother got drenched in blood Nòi escapes with hardly a stain. Sitting alone at a table with his spaghetti and ketchup Nòi receives the final shock, when pictures of those who died in the avalanche appear one after the other on a nearby television screen whilst the newsreader reads out their names. Despite all those who died having had a personal connection to Nòi, the film spends little time on the psychological experience and consequences of such a huge loss. The following sequence shows the image, at first stuck inside the View-Master, coming alive on the screen. Is the film suggesting that with all his personal connections severed Nòi is finally free to pursue the dream created with Ìris of life in a faraway land? Or is it a response to the reality of life in this harsh environment, where the only fitting response is to move on?

Nòi's family is small with only his father Kiddi and his grandmother. Nòi's relationship with her is one of gentle and familiar co-existence and the reasons why he is living with her and not his father are never discussed. Nòi's relationship with his father however, is nebulous. His father's drinking affects almost all of their interactions and Nòi is wary of him. When Nòi is expelled from school he pleads with the headmaster saying 'My dad will go crazy' [*Noi the Albino* 41:30-44:44]. When Nòi tells his father about it, Kiddi launches into him, throttling him into submission

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<sup>53</sup> Slàtur is a traditional Icelandic dish not dissimilar to the Scottish haggis and involves the mixing of sheep blood with sheep liver and suet

yet later wants to hug him and take him out to dinner. There is no reference made to Nòi's mother and no visual suggestion of her existence. Apart from Nòi's grandmother, whom Kiddi treats with disrespect, there is little reference to mothers at all. Iris is living with her father and there is no reference to her mother either; even when Nòi visits his friend Dabbi it is his father who opens the door and there is no reference made to Dabbi's mother.

These family structures are neither condemned nor commended and are never discussed, challenged or altered. The dominance of what Simon Chapple calls non-intact families is accepted in the film *Noi the Albino* (Chapple, 2009, p14). This acceptance can be viewed in light of the high rate of sole parenthood in Iceland, although the numbers are significantly higher where the mother is the sole parent as opposed to the father (Chapple, 2009, pp14-16). This suggests that sole parenthood could be considered part of the societal norm and not something that in itself heightens a sense of uncertainty or warrants specific attention<sup>54</sup> (ibid).

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<sup>54</sup> In Simon Chapple's article 'Child Wellbeing and Sole-Parent Family Structure in the OECD: An Analysis' the 2003 statistics for Iceland are as follows: Families where the father is absent 25%, families where the mother is absent 5%. The rate of children living with a sole parent 2005/6 in Iceland 15% with 14% of children living with stepfamilies or other types of families such as foster families (Chapple 2009 pp 14-16)

## 5 Jar City



The film *Jar City* is a detective story or thriller set in the Reykjavík of today. The film's opening sequence shows an anxious and uneasy Örn working late<sup>55</sup>. When he arrives at the hospital, the source of his distress becomes clear; his young daughter Kola is terminally ill. Kola's death is not shown but the preparation of her body for burial precedes the opening credits and the Police Choir singing a haunting traditional funeral hymn creates both an aural and visual connection between Kola's death and the introduction of Inspector Erlendur, subtly suggesting a link between the two.

When Inspector Erlendur arrives at the scene of the murder of an elderly man in Reykjavík, his colleague sums up the incident '... a typical Icelandic murder, messy and pointless' [*Jar City* 05:16-08:26]. A thorough search of the dead man's flat reveals only a photograph stuck under a locked drawer. The photograph is of the grave of a young girl who died in 1974.

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<sup>55</sup> Örn's place of work is deCODE, a bio-pharmaceutical company that both develops pharmaceutical products and conducts DNA based reference laboratory tests and consumer genome analysis. An explanation of the company's role and aims is provided further into the film when in the background of Örn arriving for work, Kàri Stefànsson, the company's director is being interviewed for television [*Jar City* 11:58-12:40]. The reference and meaning of this company will be clear to Icelanders and those who are familiar with bio-pharmacology and genetics. The company has access to the genetic and medical data of Icelanders for its research purposes. For further information please visit [www.decode.com](http://www.decode.com)

Inspector Erlendur and his aides Sigurður Òli and Elinborg begin their investigation by identifying and tracing the young girl, Auður. They discover that following young Auður's death, her mother Kolbrùn had taken her own life. When Inspector Erlendur goes to visit Kolbrùn's sister, Elin, he finds that she is unwilling to talk, accusing the police of corruption. During a conversation with Rúnar Gíslason<sup>56</sup> who was the Chief of Police at the time of the young girl's death, Inspector Erlendur discovers that Kolbrùn had come to the police accusing three men of rape. One of the men was Holberg. The other two men were Grètar, who has been reported missing since around the time around the rape, and Elliði, considered one of Iceland's most notorious criminals and now serving a prison sentence.

Armed with this information and appalled at discovering that Rúnar Gíslason had turned Kolbrùn away, telling her that the police and the courts had better things to do than listen to promiscuous women, Inspector Erlendur attempts to speak to Elin again. She tells him that Auður, Kolbrùn's daughter, had been the result of that rape. Convinced of the importance of the connection between young Auður and Holberg, Inspector Erlendur and his team decide to pay Elliði a visit in prison.

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<sup>56</sup> Iceland is a patronymic society and as is evident throughout the film, in common parlance, people are addressed by their first names. In the case of Rúnar Gíslason the retired Chief of Police, he is mostly referred to by both his first and last name. This is highly unusual and seems to act as an aid to distance and separate him from others in the film.

The interview is by no means pleasant with Elliði attacking Erlendur and Sigurður Òli both verbally and physically. Nevertheless, it proves productive when Elliði accidentally reveals the existence of another woman who accused the trio of rape, making obscure remarks about the involvement of retired Chief of Police, Rúnar Gíslason. With a possible link established Inspector Erlendur orders the exhumation of young Auður's body. In a gruesome scene with the morgue's pathologist, Inspector Erlendur discovers that Auður's brain is missing. The pathologist explains that since she died of a brain tumour it is likely that the post-mortem of her brain was not complete in time for the burial. He suggests that it is most likely kept at the Human Organ Museum colloquially called 'Jar City', now in the charge of the bio-pharmaceutical company deCODE. The person greeting Inspector Erlendur as he arrives at deCODE, is Örn. He explains to Inspector Erlendur that Auður died of a genetic disease called neurofibromatosis. Örn takes Inspector Erlendur to the building where the Human Organ Collection is kept. There, amidst a myriad of formaldehyde filled jars they locate the brain of young Auður.

Parallel to Erlendur's quest to find Holberg's killer, is Örn's quest to discover how it came to be that his little girl died of the genetic disease neurofibromatosis. Determined to uncover the genetic lineage, he abuses his position at deCODE to gain access to classified data. Örn discovers that the last traceable carrier of the disease is Holberg. He pressures his mother to confirm his suspicions, that he isn't his father's son, but actually, the son of Holberg. Mad with grief and anger Örn confronts Holberg, a confrontation that ends in murder.

When Inspector Erlendur and his team finally locate the mystery woman, they discover that she has a son, Örn whom Inspector Erlendur had met at

deCODE. They also discover that Örn's daughter has recently died of the same genetic disease as Auður. When the police arrive at Örn's house they find it bearing the hallmarks of a man obsessed. There are notes, pictures and genealogy charts covering walls and floors, but Örn is nowhere to be found. When the exhumed body of Auður is reported stolen from the morgue Inspector Erlendur suspects Örn and the film's ultimate scene takes place at Auður's grave where Inspector Erlendur finds Örn with her coffin and a shotgun. His anger at Holberg, a man with no family who should have taken this disease with him to the grave, is palpable. His anger is coupled with confusion about his own identity and paternity. Looking at Inspector Erlendur he asks 'Who are you if you are not yourself' [*Jar City* 1:21:07-1:24:43]. Unable to answer his own question, Örn aims the gun at himself and pulls the trigger.

As is often the case in crime thrillers, the narrative is carried and shared between two key characters: the murderer and the detective and so it is in *Jar City*. Örn's and Inspector Erlendur's storylines are both introduced right at the beginning of the film: both are triggered by a death and the film follows their quest for the person responsible. Örn's quest starts when his daughter Kola dies. Inspector Erlendur's quest starts with the discovery of Holberg's body. The fact that it is Örn who is responsible for Holberg's death is not made explicit at the outset and whilst the genetic connection between Auður and Holberg is established early on, their connection to Örn and his daughter doesn't become apparent until the final scenes.

Although the narrative is framed within the troubling reality of Örn, this is primarily the story of Inspector Erlendur. He leads the investigation into Holberg's murder and he has a secondary storyline, involving his daughter Eva. Inspector Erlendur's screen time is approximately 60

minutes compared to Örn's roughly 25 minutes. This visual aspect confirms the narrative focus awarded to Inspector Erlendur.

The film adheres to the principles of the movement-image with the film's two protagonists carrying the narrative and connecting scene with scene although in some scenes other characters act as their proxy. There is, however, one event in the film that is not directly related to either Örn or Inspector Erlendur, and this is the murder of retired Chief of Police, Rúnar Gíslason. His murder is not essential for the conclusion of the film but seems to serve as an act of justice, to bring a symbolic end to police abuse and corruption.

In the end both Örn and Inspector Erlendur find what they are looking for. Örn discovers that he is not his father's son, but Holberg's son. Örn accuses Holberg of carrying forward a disease that he should have taken with him to the grave and driven by grief and fury he kills the man he holds responsible for his daughter's death. But Holberg's death seems to give him little comfort and angered at Auður's exhumation, he breaks into the city morgue, taking her bones and coffin to place them back in their final resting-place. A sawn-off shotgun signifies that he may intend it to also be his own final resting-place. His story has come to an end. For Inspector Erlendur solving the case brings little comfort. Despite finding Holberg's killer, finding Grètar's body that has been missing for thirty years and making amends for police injustice, he is bruised by the experience of human suffering that he has witnessed. In an epilogue to the film's denouement, he reflects on his experience of the case and his experience in relation to his daughter whom he has by now rescued from the folds of Reykjavík's underbelly.

The theme of change is not overtly present in *Jar City*. For Örn, the biggest change in his life is undoubtedly the death of his daughter. Unlike his wife, he is unable to accept what is happening, thereby setting the film's storyline in motion. His obsession with the disease and where it came from becomes his absolute focus, even at the cost of his marriage<sup>57</sup>. It is evident that Örn is not coping and he is often depicted as agitated, distressed and dishevelled. When he discovers that he must be Holberg's son, the last known carrier of the disease, he tries to make sense of it all by asking his mother "Did he rape you?" [*Jar City* 1:07:14-1:08:58]. Örn's response to the intensity of his experience and the depth of these primary changes is violence; his final act is violence towards himself.

Inspector Erlendur's response to the events around him, however, is very different. Paying homage to the classic sleuth, he is a chain-smoking and gruff middle-aged man, living alone, married to his work and surviving on take-away meals. Inspector Erlendur is a distinctly Icelandic version of the sleuth; his take-away dinner isn't pizza or burgers but a singed head of lamb, his favourite meal is traditional Icelandic meat soup and he is rarely seen without his Icelandic woolen jumper. He is a man of few words, preferring action. When he finds his pregnant daughter passed out on his doorstep he takes her in. When he finds that she's back on illicit drugs he brings her back home again. With him there are no big discussions or confrontations. When faced with the possibility of discovering Grètar's

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<sup>57</sup> The departure of Gunnur, Örn's wife seems to hardly register with him [*Jar City* 27:56-28:32]

body after thirty years, it makes no difference to him that it is Sunday. He appears to take life and death in his stride, dealing with events and incidents in a stoic and methodical manner. It is only in the film's final scene, with his daughter that there is a glimpse of what lies behind his aloof and laconic façade, when he says:

'You think you can put on armour and defend yourself against it. That you can watch the filth around you from a distance like it's none of your business. But all this repulsion haunts you like an evil spirit. In the end you even forget how ordinary people live their lives.'

[*Jar City* 1:24:55-1:26:40]

The fourth uncertainty theme is related to rules and in this regard *Jar City* does throw up interesting examples. Rules are certainly not strictly adhered to and an attitude of flexibility and situation dependent interpretation of rules is consistent throughout the film.

The opening scene shows Örn signing papers at work, it later emerges that he was forging signatures on an application to the Data Protection Committee to gain access to confidential medical records. When Inspector Erlendur arrives at deCODE, he discovers that the company were already aware of the security breach but hadn't notified the police. When Inspector Erlendur arrives at the prison to interview Elliði, they discover that he had not returned from his weekend leave on time and the police hadn't been notified. Again later when Elliði escapes from prison the police is not notified. Although Inspector Erlendur is displeased by the discovery of these breaches of security, he takes no action.

There is, however, an implicit value judgement regarding what is acceptable and unacceptable in terms of deviating from a rule. Rúnar Gíslason's abuse of his powers is clearly denounced and when he is murdered, there is a sense of justice served. The moral judgement of what is permissible rests firmly with Inspector Erlendur. When Sigurður Òli suggests blaming Elliði for Holberg's murder, he snorts "Is that what they taught you in America?" [*Jar City* 40:10-41:33]. This suggests a flexible approach to rules in line with the results from the *European Value Study* that found that Icelanders are more inclined to view them in light of circumstances rather than as absolute<sup>58</sup> (Gesis Question 21)

In *Jar City*, as in *Noi the Albino*, it is difficult to identify specific markers of subjective wellbeing. There are certainly mental health issues such as Eva's drug addiction, Kolbrún's suicide, Örn's obsession and Elliði's psychopathic behaviour that may infer subjective wellbeing. There is little attention given to either affluence or poverty and money is only relevant to the narrative on two occasions. The first is the blackmail of Örn's mother Katrín. The fact that when she had sex with Holberg, Grètar was taking photographs without her knowledge suggests premeditation with a financial gain as a motive. The second is Eva's debt. When Inspector Erlendur goes to pay off his daughter's debt, he discovers two things,

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<sup>58</sup> The question poses two statements. The first is 'There are absolutely clear guidelines ... These apply to everyone always.' The other is 'There can be no absolute guidelines ... It depends on circumstances.' Of the Icelandic respondents 88.2% agreed with the latter and only 9% agreed with the former (Gesis Question 21)

firstly that Elliði has escaped prison and secondly Eva's whereabouts. In both cases money serves as a link for the narrative rather than having social or subjective wellbeing significance.

Other markers such as healthcare, education and housing are given little attention. The role of police and the issues of police enforcement in a small community are clearly visible<sup>59</sup> with a sense of confidence in today's police and that police corruption is a thing of the past. There are no questions raised in terms of Inspector Erlendur's ability and he has discretionary powers to assess situations and apply rules according to his own moral judgement. In terms of the *European Value Study*, 83% of Icelanders have either 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' of confidence in the police<sup>60</sup>, suggesting a possible link between the film's depiction of the police and the generally held perception of the police (Gesis Question 58F).

The last theme of uncertainty is that of time and the temporal structure. *Jar City* is constructed along two converging but distinctly different

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<sup>59</sup> Experiences in terms of the police or feeling safe and protected are not explicitly included in Hofstede's explanations regarding uncertainty avoidance, however this reference is considered to have some bearing on subjective wellbeing and is therefore included. For Hofstede's definition and discussion of uncertainty avoidance please refer to Hofstede's *Culture's Consequences* from 2001, pp145-208.

<sup>60</sup> The statistics are 21.5% have a great deal of confidence in the police, 61.50% have quite a lot of confidence, 15.5% do not have very much confidence and 1.5% have non at all (Gesis Question 58F)

chronologies. In the beginning it is not clear what the temporal relationship is between the two and it appears that the two quests are unfolding in parallel. There is no indication that the opening sequence led by Örn is taking place over a longer period of time, starting somewhat prior to the discovery of Holberg's body and the two quests unfold in parallel in the present tense. Only when the scene where Inspector Erlendur interviews Katrín and discovers that Örn is her son and Holberg his father, is intercut with the scene of Örn's arriving at Holberg's apartment, confronting and ultimately killing him, does the temporal disparity between the two become clear. The two chronologies intercross when Inspector Erlendur goes to deCODE to discover the whereabouts of Jar City. The final convergence both in spatial and temporal terms takes place in the film's climactic scene when Inspector Erlendur finds Örn in Auður's grave.

Within the film, there is little to place the narrative in time. The opening sequence has an explicit reference to Christmas but there is no indication as to how much time passes from Christmas until Kola's death and from the time of her death to Holberg's murder. The weather, so often significant in Icelandic films, has no narrative function. Seasonal indicators such as snow or sun are barely detectable and clothing could suggest either spring or autumn. This absence of references to a specific time is also evident in the absence of visual references to a calendar and rarely is there a clock or even a wristwatch in sight. This absence of time suggests that it is the protagonists and the situations they find themselves in, that primarily drive the narrative.

The first of the two dominant narrative themes addressed here is death and mortality. Death is the catalyst for the stories in *Jar City*; without Kola's death there would be no story.

It is her death that provokes Örn's obsession and the subsequent discovery of his own paternity. When the significance of the connection between Holberg and Örn is pointed out to Katrín, Örn's mother, she assumes responsibility for Kola's death, exclaiming 'Oh my God, what have I done? I killed Kola. Holberg and I killed the little angel' [*Jar City* 1:12:50-1:13:48]. The same sense of responsibility is evident in Örn's confrontation with Holberg, when he says 'The disease should have died out with you' [*Jar City* 1:14:00-1:15:10]. The circumstances surrounding the other deaths in the film vary; Kolbrún's suicide, like Örn's, is driven by the impossibility of coping with the loss of a child. Grètar was disposed of to protect the interests of Holberg, Elliði and the Chief of Police Rúnar Gíslason who in turn was killed by Elliði<sup>61</sup>.

Mortality is also present in the experience of loss and grief. Elin tells Inspector Erlendur that there is nothing worse than losing a child [*Jar City* 21:40-22:32]. Kolbrún's and Örn's suicides show just how unbearable this loss can be<sup>62</sup>. Moreover, a different experience of losing a child is also

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<sup>61</sup> The character of Rúnar Gíslason is depicted as so amoral and corrupt that he is hated not just by Inspector Erlendur but also the criminal Elliði.

<sup>62</sup> There is little attention awarded to the impact of Kola's death on her mother Gunnur and her ability or inability to cope. What is made clear is that Gunnur and Örn's marriage does not survive.

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explored, where Inspector Erlendur's own daughter is putting herself at risk of death. In the beginning of the film, Inspector Erlendur's daughter Eva is living on the streets of Reykjavik addicted to drugs. His sense of helplessness and loss is tangible. Her pregnancy and the prospect of a new life impel her to reach out to her father for support. As the film progresses their fractured relationship starts to heal and in the film's final scene he confides to her how affected he is by what he has experienced at work and how distressing it is for him to know of her in that world.

The second narrative theme of family and specifically paternity is equally integral to the film's plot and narrative structure.

When the police enter Örn's house and see the maps of genealogy and family trees on the walls Sigurður Òli exclaims 'Icelandic paternity, can we ever be sure of that?' [*Jar City* 1:17:15-1:17:53]. The uncertainty that relates to unknown or misattributed paternity is present in no less than eleven of the 25 films studied here.

This suggests that the issue of paternity solicits considerable attention in Iceland. However, whether this can be considered to reflect a cultural reality is questionable. Gilding and Bellis et al argue that the statistics of paternal discrepancy and misattributed paternity have been grossly exaggerated (Bellis et al, 2005 & Gilding, 2005). Gilding even goes so far as to call it an urban myth (Gilding, 2005, p1). Both argue that the common

perception that misattributed paternity or paternal discrepancy applies to up to 30% of all births in Western societies, bears little resemblance to a reality that it is more likely to be only a few percent<sup>63</sup>. Both also agree that socio-economic factors play a significant role, possibly linking with the measures of subjective wellbeing but further research is necessary before any such link can be confidently asserted. Bellis' article brings attention to the impact that disclosures of misattributed paternity can have on those involved particularly their mental health arguing that such discovery '...can have substantial health consequences' (Bellis et al, 2005, p749). The effect of Örn's discovery of his paternity is a stark example of that impact. For him the discovery of his paternity not only explains his daughter's death but also destabilises his own sense of self. Kola's death and Örn's suicide mark the beginning and the end of *Jar City*.

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<sup>63</sup> Both Bellis et al and Gilding argue that these statistics vary between cultures and countries and list reasons for both the perception and the possible economic interests related to that perception (Bellis et al, 2005/Gilding, 2005). Both also agree that there is a significant lack of empirical evidence and that further research is paramount (ibid). Gilding also identifies some of the stakeholders in that (mis-) perception such as genetics and socio-biologists and evolutionary psychologists, fathers' uncertainty that their child support payments are for their own progeny and paternity testing clinics (Gilding, 2005, pp7-9). Bellis' primary focus is on the consequence of paternal discrepancy particularly in terms of public health including family break-ups and violence (Bellis et al, 2005, p749). He also stresses the importance of clear population measures regarding paternal discrepancy to ensure the best possible protection of public health (Bellis et al, 2005, p753).

## 6 Country Wedding



As the title suggests, the film *Country Wedding* is all about a wedding. Inga and Barði are getting married and Inga has always dreamt of having a country church wedding with only the nearest and dearest present.

They and their families live in Reykjavík and the reception, following the ceremony in the bucolic setting of a traditional Icelandic country church, will take place back in the capital. The groom's best man has hired two coaches, one for the bride's party and the other for the groom's.

The film is a fast-paced comedy and centres on the journey from the father's house to the church. The opening sequence shows the bride getting ready and the groom, already aboard his coach, frantically trying to get hold of his best man who has yet to show up. As family and friends arrive and pile into their allotted coaches, their interrelationships are established. In the bride's coach, Tommi, Inga's father and Imba her mother, are both present. They are divorced and Imba has brought her new partner Svanur. Atli, Inga's brother, feeling protective of his sister and her happiness is determined that she will have the day she's always dreamed of. Làra is Inga's best friend and bridesmaid. She has brought along her grandmother who is suffering from dementia and needs constant care. She has also invited Egill, her financial advisor from the bank, to join her for the day.

In the other coach, joining the groom Barði, are his parents Lùðvík and Brynhildur and his sister Auður. When his father's cousin Stefàn appears with a friend, both Barði and his mother are appalled that Lùðvík has invited a cousin he has not seen for over 20 years to his son's private wedding. It turns out that Barði's mother has her own reasons for wishing Stefàn away. It emerges later that Stefàn's friend Hafsteinn, is actually his

boyfriend and that he is seriously questioning both their relationship and his own sexuality. Despite being an historian and working in the National library, Stefàn introduces him as a psychologist, jesting that 'he can help out if anyone has any psychological problems' [*Country Wedding* 05:45-06:38], something that various people from both coaches take advantage of. The groom's best man Grjòni, unable to make it in time has sent their friend Sidi to deputise. When Sidi joins the wedding party, both Atli and Lára are up in arms. Not only is Sidi not invited, he is in the bride's black books for instigating Barði's full body shave at the stag night.

It is the confined space of the two coaches and the journey itself that anchor the film and although it is about Inga's and Barði's wedding they by no means dominate either in terms of narrative significance or in terms of screen time. As the two coaches set off from Reykjavík the dynamics and relationships command the filmic space. The casual preparations of the groom and his best man mean that the actual location of the church is unclear. The distinguishing features of a white church with a red roof located just off the country's ring-road turn out not to be unique to a single church, but in fact describes the traditional appearance of most Icelandic country churches.

After pulling up to not only one but two wrong churches emotions are running high. The rapid editing cuts between both dialogue and coaches enhancing the sense of escalating tensions and increasing bedlam. Egill, Lára's date is feeling more and more like a babysitter for her grandmother rather than a date. Imba suspects Lára and Svanur to be having an affair and when she confronts Lára, she is banished from the bride's coach. Her own affair with her ex husband is teetering on the edge, as Tommi demands that she leave Svanur. Inga has discovered that Sidi is on board

and her distress, magnified by Barði's blunder with the churches, has so infuriated her brother Atli that they end up in a scuffle involving men from both coaches.

In the end it is the bride's arrival and her declaration that she is pregnant that brings an end to the fight, but tensions are by no means resolved. In a conversation between Brynhildur and Stefàn it transpires that her husband, Lùðvík, is not the father of her daughter Auður, but that Stefàn is. Lùðvík's drinking has in the meantime increased to the level of embarrassing Auður, and Stefàn's boyfriend Hafsteinn is getting more and more uncomfortable about his presence and his counseling role.

When they finally arrive at the right church they have to wait until the priest has finished watching a televised football match. When he finally appears in a drunken state, things go from bad to worse. The priest has not performed a wedding in six years and is feeling rather under par. Stefàn's response to Hafsteinn's increased withdrawal is to propose to him on the church's doorstep, increasing the priest's discomfiture by requesting an additional wedding service for that day. When Stefàn then goes on to reveal the fact that he is Auður's father, all hell breaks loose and Lùðvík has a heart attack. Amidst accusations flying in all directions, Lùðvík finally regains consciousness and Barði and Inga withdraw agreeing that maybe it is best that they arrange another wedding, without the family, just for the two of them.

In terms of the first of the six uncertainty themes: agency, *Country Wedding* has by far the most fragmented and shared agency. Although the narrative's goal is to see Inga and Barði married, their story is just one of the various dynamics and interrelationships; neither bride nor groom or

indeed any of the other characters, individually dominate the film. The numerable stops made en route in search of the right church provide the space for the two parties to mix, mingle and argue. As the film progresses, tensions spill over with altercations and arguments that were at first confined within each coach, eventually breaking out between the two parties. The film's editing adds to the sense of fragmentation with rapid intercuts and crosscuts of people in and out of coaches and diegetic sound displaced from its originating source onto different shots. This visual structure of fragmented shots reflects the narrative structure of the film's multiple characters and their fragmented relationships. The film would have a sense of almost continuous flow were it not for sporadic landscape shots. These are almost always level wide shots<sup>64</sup> of the coaches approaching or driving away into the distance and whilst the landscape provides the *mise-en-scène* little attention is paid directly to it; the landscape is rather serving as a sort of punctuation to the film's flow.

It is difficult to attribute the chaos that reigns at the end of the film as a resolution for any or all of the characters. Instead of the journey to the country church culminating in the happy occasion of Inga and Barði's wedding, it culminates in the chaos caused by the revelations of the various overtly and covertly hidden habits, agendas and secrets. Auður's paternity, Barði's claustrophobia, Lùðvík's drinking, Svanur's spectacular failure as a businessman are now out in the open as are the clandestine affairs of Svanur and Lára and Imba and Tommi. The nature of Stefàn and

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<sup>64</sup> In this context 'level' is meant as not slanted or using Dutch tilt.

Hafsteinn's relationship is no longer beyond doubt and neither is the fact that Sidi has joined the groom's coach contrary to Inga's strict instructions. Despite the pandemonium reigning at the end, the narrative's goal of the marriage of Inga and Barði has not been thwarted. The final shot of the two of them sitting on a bench agreeing to get married without the families present suggests that the shattering experience of the pursuit of the bucolic idyll may have been sobering for the young couple, but that their relationship has survived the journey.

In terms of attitude to change, the second of the six uncertainty themes, there are a multitude of examples of changes and responses to change. Some seem to take the changes in their stride, like Inga's father Tommi whose stock question is 'everything ok?' [*Country Wedding* 04:01-05:08], for others such as Atli, Inga's brother, each change escalates his anger and frustration at what he perceives to be the ruination of his sister's perfect day. For others, the immediate response may be distress, anger and frustration but in the end, it will be all right. This sense is present when Imba presents her daughter with the pearl earrings. Inga wants to wear the same pearls that her mother wore for her own wedding to Inga's father Tommi. But as Inga opens the jewelry box she notices that one pearl is bigger than the other. Imba recalls that she had lost one at some point and replaced it but says reassuringly 'It doesn't matter' [*Country Wedding* 15:30:16:09]. The same sense of adaptability is present when they have to take an hour's drive detour because Barði, unbeknownst to his bride, suffers from claustrophobia and can't drive through the underground tunnel. Despite the gamut of attitudes to change, it is the sense of adaptability exemplified by the young couple that sets the tone for the overall depiction of change.

*Country Wedding* does not contain explicit references to rules in the sense of law or procedures as in *Jar City*. However, there are a few noticeable examples of the transgression of unwritten rules or customs. The first is Svanur's use of Tommi's mobile phone. The fact that Svanur is using the mobile phone to call Korea upsets Tommi and he complains about it to his son Atli, but that does not stop Tommi from lending it to him again later. Although this could and probably is an expression of Tommi's non-confrontational character, it could also suggest a tolerance towards minor transgressions. Làra's affair with Imba's boyfriend Svanur, is another example. Imba accuses Làra of flirting with Svanur and although few give this accusation any credence, at least in the beginning, it is Imba and not Làra that is relegated to the other coach.

There is also the age-old custom that the groom should not see his bride before the wedding ceremony itself. This is the norm that governs the decision to have two coaches and it is strictly adhered to until at one of the stops a scuffle breaks out between Barði and Atli with others getting involved as they try to separate the two. It is not until Inga arrives on the scene and announces that she is pregnant that the fight stops. A few shots later, they are cuddled up in the backseat together and no attention is drawn to the fact that this rule has been transgressed. These examples suggest that transgression, of at least some societal norms and customs is not condemned outright but dependent on circumstances. This is in line with the results of the question about absolutism or relativism in the *European Value Study* where 88% of Icelanders agree that 'There can be no absolute guidelines ... it depends on circumstances' (Gesis Question 21).

In terms of identifying any of the measures of subjective wellbeing in *Country Wedding*, it is the sense of stress that is the most visible. The

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agitation and frustration associated with stress is present from the opening sequence and continues to escalate over the course of the film. The characters' responses to stress and the situations they encounter are almost entirely originated and dealt with through what is taking place on the journey. There are only a few references to money. Tommi has paid for the wedding, Imba believes that Lùðvík is tight-fisted and he in turn advises Inga to keep a close eye on Barði's wallet as it has a tendency to be empty. Apart from these remarks there is little to suggest attitudes to money or levels of wealth although there are no signs of poverty. In terms of mental health, stress aside, the only explicit reference is the grandmother's dementia. It is never explicitly discussed but it is clear that her family, rather than health professionals, is caring for her. She has been brought along because it is Làra's week to look after her.

There are suggestions that Imba either is or was an alcoholic but this does not have a direct affect on the narrative and she does not drink for the duration of the journey. Lùðvík however, started drinking almost as soon as the coaches left Reykjavík and by the time they finally arrive at the right church he is drunk. He is not as drunk though as the priest, who struggles to stand and is slurring his words arriving in his habit and Wellington's to greet the wedding party. This excess and inappropriateness of drinking is noticed but seemingly not condemned.

The inclusion of excessive drinking in the film could be construed in relation to what Peele argues is a perceived level of alcohol problems (Peele, 2009, Chapter II, item 8). But alcoholism and social consequences of alcohol consumption are complex and stand alone statistics or measurement can be deceptive. Peele uses as an example that Iceland has the highest rate of AA groups whereas Portugal has the lowest<sup>65</sup>. This according to Peele, suggests that the perceived scale of alcohol related problems in Iceland is greater than in Portugal despite the fact that Portugal consumes two and a half times as much alcohol per capita as Iceland (ibid). The presence and depiction of alcohol in *Country Wedding* cannot be interpreted as indicative of a wider context; however it could be of interest to pursue this theme further in terms of other Icelandic films.

The last of the six uncertainty themes is time. *Country Wedding* does not have the single protagonist necessary for Martin-Jones' definition of the action-image<sup>66</sup> but it does not have the characteristics of the time-image<sup>67</sup> either (Martin-Jones, 2006, p21). The narrative confined within the

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<sup>65</sup> According to data compiled by Alcoholics Anonymous World Headquarters, Iceland has almost 800 groups per million population whereas Portugal had 0.6 groups per million population (Peele 2009 Chapter II, item 8)

<sup>66</sup> The action-image is characterised by a single protagonist who '... is central to the narrative.' (Martin-Jones, 2006, p21). He writes: 'The time of the narrative condenses around the body of the protagonist, the rules of continuity editing ensuring that the narrative focuses on their physical movement through space.' (Ibid). Martin-Jones uses the term movement-image interchangeably with the term action-image.

<sup>67</sup> One of the distinguishing features of the time-image is the formal experimentation with the chronological narrative, that means distinctly not linear (Martin-Jones, 2006, p1-2)

intimate setting of the coaches is primarily driven by the emotions, dynamics and interactions both within each family and between them. The temporal dimension within the film is only about twice the duration of the film itself. The rapid editing with intercuts and crosscuts supports a linear chronology, giving the impression that conversations and interactions are unfolding as witnessed.

The film starts at Tommi's house and ends outside the church and the chronological narrative is neither jumbled nor reversed; there are no flashbacks, flashforwards, jumpcuts or parallel chronologies. In terms of time as it is experienced within the film's narrative, there are some distinct references. The best man's failure to arrive in time for the departure and the extra time it will take to drive around Hvalfjörður as opposed to driving through the underground tunnel are both examples of time-specific stress. The wedding party fails to arrive at the church at the time that the priest clearly stipulated, that is, before the football match. When they do arrive they have to wait until the match has finished. There is a distinct sense of time being finite. Therefore, adhering to specific time deadlines is given importance and the fear of not meeting those deadlines causes stress. However, the consequences of not meeting those time deadlines are not severe; there are no penalties and in fact once a deadline has been missed, it is given little attention.

Mortality or death is not an integral narrative theme in *Country Wedding*. However, the heart attack that Lùðvík suffers does serve a narrative function in the film. It has become increasingly clear that Lùðvík suffers from some sort of heart condition, which he uses as an excuse for his drinking. The shock he receives when in his drunken state, he finds out that his daughter is not biologically his proves too much and he collapses

unconscious apparently having suffered a heart attack. The effect this has on the group is interesting. Nobody knows what to do, there is discussion about how to perform CPR and who should do it; to add to the commotion there is no network signal to call an ambulance. The priest, well under the influence of alcohol demands that the 'body' is removed, nobody had ordered a funeral.

The farcical situation continues, only pausing briefly when Lùðvík miraculously regains consciousness<sup>68</sup>. This in a sense predicates the gathering speed of untrammled emotion. Not even the possibility of death can stop it. Despite its treatment, Lùðvík's heart attack does indicate the severity of the impact the news of the misattributed paternity can have. As mentioned in terms of *Jar City* theorists and scientists have started to raise the issue of the consequences when such discrepancy is discovered.

*Country Wedding* is first and foremost about family, family dynamics and family secrets. Almost all of the characters in the film are family and although the family relationships are clearly established hardly any reference is given to their status or roles outside of the family. The only two characters whose profession is given any significant attention are Svanur and Hafsteinn. Svanur's status as a businessman though is rather dubious and Hafsteinn turns out to be not a psychologist but an historian.

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<sup>68</sup> Lùðvík's recovery could be explored in terms of one of the hallmarks of the farce the *deus ex machina* but since this is outside the scope of this thesis it will not be addressed.

The two families have different structures. Barði's family has the markings of the classic nuclear family and is what Chapple terms intact (Chapple, 2009, p14). What the longer-term impact on the family will be in terms of Stefàn's revelation about Auður's paternity is unknown at the end of the film. Inga's parents are divorced, making it a non-intact family. There is no indication of when or why her parents divorced and there is no perceived judgement of the preference or desirability of either structure. There is a distinct acceptance of divorce as a fact of life when they finally set off from Reykjavik and Brynhildur says 'They could have got married and divorced while we waited' [*Country Wedding* 10:53:10:59].

The *European Value Study* asks the question whether divorce is never or always justified and the Icelanders' response is concurrent with Brynhildur's matter-of-fact expression. Almost 17% of respondents answered that divorce was always justified with only 4% answering never<sup>69</sup> (Gesis Question 65 J). Another statistic from the *European Value Study* reveals the importance that Icelanders place on their families with 94.2% describing their families as very important<sup>70</sup> (Gesis Question 1B).

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<sup>69</sup> Respondents were requested to answers on the scale of 1-10 with 1 being never and 10 being always. The results were: 1=3.9%, 2=1.9%, 3=4.4%, 4=4.5%, 5=24.1%, 6=10.9%, 7=11.8%, 8=16.3%, 9=5.4%, 10=16.9%. This means that 39.7% scored 1-5 and 61.3% scored 6-10 (Gesis Question 65 J)

<sup>70</sup> Respondents where given four options, very important, quite important, not important and not at all important. In addition to the 94.2% that felt that family was very important

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This emphasis on the family has been evident both in this analysis and the analyses of *Noi the Albino* and *Jar City*. Families with their dynamics, relationships and secrets are at the heart of each film and indeed most of the 25 films of the period. Perhaps the clue lies in the opening verse of *Country Wedding*'s theme song *Suffering* 'We are in love with our emotions and the sadness they bring. We are in love with hunger and hatred and with our suffering' (*Country Wedding* 1:32:04-1:34:56)

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5.3% felt that family was quite important. Only 0.5% felt that family was not important and no one felt that family was not at all important (Gesis Question 1B).

## 7 Conclusions



This thesis had two primary aims. The first aim was to identify specific markers and themes of uncertainty within the theoretical context of five different theorists and create a model of uncertainty themes that could be applied to film analysis. Although the theorists chosen for this purpose are all leading theorists within their field, there are others that have not been included and there is no attempt made to argue that the model of uncertainty themes, presented here, is in any way complete or fixed. The theorists that were chosen are Hofstede and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner from the field of cultural studies and Triandis et al and Schwartz et al from the field of cross-cultural psychology. The model of uncertainty themes is therefore firmly rooted within cultural theory. However, a decision was made to include a fifth theorist, Martin-Jones, whose focus is in the field of film studies. The reason for his inclusion was his specific interest in the concept of time and temporality in films which compliments the ideas about time set forth by Hofstede and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (Martin-Jones, 2006, /Hofstede, 2001, /Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997,).

There is an inherent risk in extracting specific aspects of different theories and models and then amalgamating them into a single model. The primary risk was that the concepts, although they had shared certain aspects, would be interpreted as being identical or correspondent and that without the context in which they were originally placed they would lose, at least, some of their meaning and validity. Even though every care has been taken to avoid this, this risk still remains. The hope is that the commonalities they share and the benefit gained by grouping them together outweighs that risk. The twenty-two aspects appropriated from the five theorists were placed on a two-dimensional axial structure thereby creating the model of uncertainty themes that is illustrated in diagram 1.

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The twenty-two aspects were then grouped together to create the six uncertainty themes; agency, resolution, change, rules, subjective wellbeing and time, that could be used for the analysis of both groups of films and individual film analysis.

The second aim was to test the model to discover how appropriate it was to film analysis. For this purpose, the six uncertainty themes were applied to all 25 Icelandic films released in the years 2003-2008. The aim of the experiment was to establish whether the model of uncertainty themes could accommodate such analysis and if so, whether the findings could contribute to the field of cultural studies. Where possible the findings were compared to available statistical data mostly from the 3<sup>rd</sup> wave of the *European Value Study*. This proved conducive and the statistical data correlated frequently with the findings from the film analysis. This exploration from cultural studies and cross-cultural psychology into film studies and then back to the field of cultural studies was deliberate, creating a dialogue between theory, emic findings and etic data.

All 25 films were viewed with regards to the six uncertainty themes with three films chosen for further analysis. The themes varied in their significance between the films. In some films, attitude to change was more prominent than attitude to rules. However, what was consistent was the flexible approach to both. In other films the focus was more on structural elements like the theme of time and temporality or agency, which although structurally significant, was more indicative of how personal rather than collective the stories were that were being told. Here the similarity lay in the singular linearity of all three. The theme of subjective wellbeing was the only theme that proved to be particularly difficult to apply.

The absence of issues such as money and physical health, key indicators of subjective wellbeing was noticeable. This could suggest a perception of financial and physical wellbeing that concurs with statistical data meaning that such issues are not warranted attention because they are not objects of worry. The inclusion of mental illnesses, another key indicator, suggests a perceived acceptance of mental health issues and a culture that is comfortable with uncertainty. However, the high level of subjective wellbeing was contradicted by the attention awarded to the narrative theme of mortality, which would normally be indicative of cultures less comfortable with uncertainty. The complexity of this theme does not deter from its usefulness as a tool for film analysis, but in order to do so successfully it would be necessary to break this theme into separate components and award it more space than was available within the remit of this thesis. The difficulty does not lie in a lack of applicability but indeed in the plethora of examples coupled with the challenge of how subjective and discretionary many of them are.

The examination of the whole corpus of the Icelandic films studied here, revealed that the majority of the films displayed a tendency towards a single protagonist and the films' resolutions were mostly personal rather collective. However, the personal resolution often reflected social issues which could relate to the arguments made by Eyjólfsdóttir and Smith that Icelandic society strongly shows characteristics of both individualism and collectivism (Eyjólfsdóttir & Smith, 1997, p66). A distinct majority of films took place in the present, an indication of sequential approach to time that concurs with the short-term orientation of time that Eyjólfsdóttir and Smith attribute to Icelandic society (Eyjólfsdóttir & Smith, 1997, p69). Flexibility towards both rules and changes was more prevalent than not in

most of the films and thus corresponded with results from the *European Value Study*. These findings suggest that there is a link between what is depicted and expounded in films and what is happening in the environment in which they are created.

An additional intention was to identify recurrent narrative themes and filmic trends that might either add to the six uncertainty themes, challenge them or both. An unexpected discovery was how central uncertainty was to the narrative themes of mortality and paternity, prevalent in so many of the films. Hofstede argues that norms related to uncertainty refer fundamentally to society's way of coping with death, the ultimate source of anxiety 'The duality of life and death is nature's number one law, and many fundamental values derive from the role death occupies in a society'<sup>71</sup> (Hofstede, 2001, p161). Bellis et al and Gilding argue that the issue of misattributed paternity or paternal discrepancy is a source of much anxiety and frequently unrealistically amplified proportions, driven partly by the perceived lack of absolute certainty about paternity<sup>72</sup>, can one ever be sure? (Bellis et al, 2005, / Gilding, 2005,).

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<sup>71</sup> Hofstede is here quoting Magli 'Il quadro definitorio istituzionale di alcune "nuove" scienze dell'uomo: Antropologia Culturale. In Varchetti, G. (Ed.) Scienze dell'uomo, cultura d'impresa e formazione pp31-33. Milan: Industrie Pirelli

<sup>72</sup> It is only in the last few decades that technology has developed that can proof beyond doubt paternal relations. Gilding points out that paternity testing laboratories benefit from paternity related uncertainty and argues that they have a role in the exaggerated perception of misattributed paternity (Gilding, 2005, pp7-9)

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The applicability of the model of uncertainty themes to film analysis and subsequent findings suggest that film analysis could potentially have a role within the field of cultural studies. In order to establish the model of uncertainty themes and test its application, it was considered necessary to confine the thesis to a single culture and a short period of time. The next step could be to extend the remit to cross-cultural examinations and research whether the model of uncertainty themes lends itself to cross-cultural analysis and whether findings across cultures are consistent with available statistical data. This thesis was in part a response to a call for finding ways to '...incorporate emic as well as etic elements of culture into ... research methods and theories' (Triandis & Suh, 2002, p152). In turn, this thesis is now an invitation for such further study.



## Glossary of terms used in Diagram 1

*Agency: Plural/Situation:* A plural of situation based agency means that the narrative is framed within a situation or is fragmented using multiple storylines or chronologies making it a time-image. Here time or situation is the fundamental structure and characters are internal to the temporal sphere. This means that the protagonist's body or presence does not propel the narrative. (Martin-Jones, 2006, p21).

Uncertainty theme: Agency

*Agency: Single/Protagonist:* An individualist agency is based on a single protagonist propelling the narrative making it a movement- or action-image. These are '... commonly characterised by movement from an initial situation, through action to a changed situation ... the time of the narrative condenses around the ... protagonist, the rules of continuity editing ensuring that the narrative focuses on their physical movement through space'. (Martin-Jones, 2006, p21).

Uncertainty theme: Agency

*Crystalline time:* This is the temporal expression of the time-image. Time is often jumbled, reversed, fragmented or multiple and the temporality is external to the characters. It can be described as '...labyrinthine without a centre, whose pathways expand outwards infinitely...[and] become actual in the present along a series of infinitely bifurcating pathways.' (Martin-Jones, 2006, p23).

Uncertainty theme: Time

*Conservatism:* Is used to describe a resistance to change and the pre-eminence of conformity and tradition. This is characterised by '...restraint

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of actions, inclinations, and impulses likely to upset or harm others and violate social expectations or norms' and applies as much to the self and family as to national security and social order (Schwartz, Boehnke & Sagiv, 2000, p316-17).

Uncertainty theme: Change

*External locus of control*<sup>73</sup>: Is related to the construct of collectivism<sup>74</sup>. This means that a greater emphasis the group and the interest of the group over that of the individual. Here the focus is more on context and there is less concern with self-enhancement. Where the locus of control is external, the social environment is considered stable and the individual must adjust and adapt to the environment. What is extracted here is only a single aspect of a much larger and a highly complex construct (Triandis, 2001, p920-921).

Uncertainty theme: Agency

*Inner-directedness*: A perception of the world internal to the individual where she or he can control their environment '...by imposing [their] will upon it, as in the ancient biblical injunction "multiply and subdue the earth'. Here there is a distinct sense of control one's own destiny, an active taming of nature and an emphasis on individual action. 'This kind of

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<sup>73</sup> The term *external locus of control* is borrowed from Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, who in turn borrowed it from J.B. Rotter, and is here interpreted in the context of Triandis' writings. (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner 1997 p141-2)

<sup>74</sup> Collectivism is a cultural dimension identified by a number of cultural theorists and by no means specific to Triandis' theories.

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culture tends to identify with mechanisms; that is, the organisation is conceived if as a machine that obeys the will of its operators' (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997, p141-2).

Uncertainty theme: Agency

*Internal Locus of control*<sup>75</sup>: Is related to the construct of individualism<sup>76</sup>. This means that a greater emphasis on internal processes and self-enhancement. Where the locus of control is internal, the self is perceived as '... stable and the social environment is changeable' meaning that the individual has the power or control to affect his or her environment for the purpose of self-interest. What is extracted here is only a single aspect of a much larger and a highly complex construct (Triandis, 2001, p920-921).

Uncertainty theme: Agency

*Loose cultures*: These tend to be more in '...relatively heterogeneous societies (where several normative systems coexist)'. The emphasis is on tolerance in relation to deviation from societal norms and less inter-dependence between people. The construct of 'looseness' is related to individualism and supports a flexible approach to societal norms and codes of conduct. Looseness is more dominant in cultures where

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<sup>75</sup> The term *internal locus of control* is borrowed from Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, who in turn borrowed it from J.B. Rotter, and is here interpreted in the context of Triandis' writings (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner 1997 p141-2).

<sup>76</sup> Individualism is a cultural dimension identified by a number of cultural theorists and by no means specific to Triandis' theories.

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population density, meaning opportunity for surveillance, is low and there is a sense of an open frontier (Triandis, 2001, p911).

Uncertainty theme: Rules

*Openness to change:* Is used to describe the prioritisation of independent action and thought and a willingness to pursue new experiences. This is characterised by self-direction and stimulation, emphasising novelty and challenges. Key values include personal choice, creativity, freedom and curiosity. This means a disposition to accept the uncertainty of outcomes even though the direct personal impact is unknown (Schwartz, Boehnke & Sagiv, 2000, p316-17 & p337).

Uncertainty theme: Change

*Organic time:* This is the temporal expression of the movement- or action-image. Here temporality is visually and narratively connected to a protagonist who is central to the narrative. The movement- or action-image always has '... a causal, linear progression and the protagonist's ability to act evidences an unbroken sensory-motor continuum. The passing of time is rendered subordinate to a character's movement through space' (Martin-Jones, 2006, p21).

Uncertainty theme: Time

*Outer-directedness:* A perception of the world internal to the individual where she or he '... is part of nature and must go along with its laws, directions and forces.' Here there is a distinct sense of the importance of living in harmony with nature and others and an emphasis on collaborative action. This kind of culture tends to view organisations '... as itself a product of nature, owing its development to the nutrients in its

## Questions of Uncertainty

environment and to a favourable ecological balance' (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997, p141-2).

Uncertainty theme: Agency

*Resistance to change:* This is when stability is of paramount importance and changes such as changing jobs are perceived as undesirable and uncertain. There is a drive to develop techniques and strategies to cope with unpredictable external changes such as in nature and to establish as much predictability as possible. These measures, technologies and behaviours may or may not have an actual effect but are valued and adhered to as they provide a sense of security (Hofstede, 2001, p146-149).

Uncertainty theme: Change

*Rules are negotiable:* Rules in this context mean both written rules like law, and unwritten rules like behavioural norms. Rules are perceived as guidelines, necessary to ensure a common code of conduct, ethics and expectations. In this context, rules can be negotiated if personal judgement perceives the context to demand it. The more comfortable cultures are with uncertainty the less the need is for rules (Hofstede, 2001, pp146-160).

Uncertainty theme: Rules

*Self-Enhancement:* Is when the priority is given to self-interest as opposed to group-interest. Here the priority is to attain social status and prestige. The idea of self-image is important particularly the external perception that is the public image. Values such as ambition, success, accomplishments and consequence are praised and emphasis is placed on authority and social power which is achieved through '...personal success through demonstrating competence according to social standards' (Schwartz, Boehnke & Sagiv, 2000, p316-17).

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Uncertainty theme: Resolution

*Self-Transcendence*: Is when the priority is given to the interest of others and the preservation and improvement of welfare of both those within one's personal sphere and those separate from it. Here the emphasis is on understanding, acceptance, tolerance and protection of others. This can include all people and nature and relates to a sense of social justice and unity with nature. Values such as equality, helpfulness, honesty, loyalty and forgiveness are praised (Schwartz, Boehnke & Sagiv, 2000, p316-17).

Uncertainty theme: Resolution

*Sequential time*: This refers to time perceived as a series of passing events experienced as a line with a clear beginning, middle and end, where '...everything has its time and place ... [and] any change or turbulence will make the sequential person more uncertain'. Cultural emphasis on orderly queues is an expression of a sequential perception of time and in general relationships are perceived to instrumental' (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997, p120-123).

Uncertainty theme: Time

*Strict adherence to rules*: Rules in this context mean both written rules like law, and unwritten rules like behavioural norms. Rules are perceived as a measure to control uncertainty and ensure predictability and should not be broken. In this context rules will be obeyed even if they are perceived to be wrong. Here rules are given an authority that overrides personal judgement. The stronger the '...tendency to avoid uncertainty, the greater [the] need for rules' (Hofstede, 2001, pp146-160).

Uncertainty theme: Rules

## Questions of Uncertainty

*Subjective wellbeing* (more or less): This term refers to a group of measures that are intended to capture the perceived sense of wellbeing. These measures include satisfaction or dissatisfaction with socio-economic factors such as housing, education, occupation and healthcare. Within the remit of healthcare is a specific focus on mental health and stress in particular. Subjective wellbeing measures need to be viewed in the context of GNP/capita as poverty is a significant factor. In wealthier cultures where measures of subjective wellbeing score highly there is a perceived acceptance of uncertainty whereas wealthier cultures that score low are more uncomfortable with uncertainty (Hofstede, 2001, p157-159).

Uncertainty theme: Subjective wellbeing.

*Synchronic time*: This refers to time being perceived as '...cyclical and repetitive, compressing past, present and future by what these have in common: seasons and rhythms'. The synchronic perception of time is symptomatic of communitarian thinking where goals can be achieved in a variety of ways depending on how situations develop. There is more a cultural emphasis on relationships and harmony rather than punctuality or schedules (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997, p120-132).

Uncertainty theme: Time

*Tight cultures*: These tend to be relatively isolated societies where there are clear and fixed ideas about what behaviours are acceptable. The construct of 'tightness' is related to collectivism and refers to the level of surveillance implicit in a society '... where societal norms and codes of construct are not negotiable and where sanctions are provided for even minor deviations from norms'. Tightness is more dominant in cultures where the population density, meaning opportunity for surveillance, is high and often applies to island societies (Triandis, 2001, p911).

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Uncertainty theme: Rules

*Tolerance to change:* This is when changes and ambiguity are not perceived as threat and where '... familiar and unfamiliar risks are accepted, such as changing jobs and starting activities for which there are no rules'. In these cultures there is often a lower sense of urgency and a willingness to see situations unfold rather than a desire to contain or restrain situations.

There is an openness to change and innovation is applauded (Hofstede, 2001, p146-149).

Uncertainty theme: Change



### Recent Changes in Iceland

This summary is intended as an indicator of the level of change Icelanders have experienced recently, and clearly cannot cover all the significant changes taking place in Iceland.

There have been a number of socio-economic and political changes in the years from 2003–2008. Some of these will be highlighted here to provide further contextual information. The year 2003 was highly significant for Icelandic economy, as this was the year in which the privatisation of the banking system was completed. In the five years since ‘... the banks increased their assets from being worth slightly more than 100% of GDP to being worth close to 1,000% of GDP’ (Andersen 2008). This acceleration was largely the result of aggressive investments by Icelandic investors and banks, especially in the UK (Editorial/Ibison 2008). However, international reports warned that the debt-fuelled strategies for this growth had left the economy vulnerable to an aggressive economic crisis (Editorial/Ibison 2008).

By the summer of 2008 when the world's credit markets dried up, the Icelandic banks were left unable to refinance their loans and those predictions became reality. On September 29<sup>th</sup> 2008 the Icelandic government took a 75% stake in the country's third-largest bank, marking the collapse of the Icelandic economy. This prompted the intervention of the International Monetary Fund, which is now involved in an economic rescue operation. A few months later the Icelandic government itself collapsed, and a left-wing government was temporarily installed (BBC 2009/ITN 2009). With the country in the grip of a severe economic and

political crisis, elections were called two years early on April 25<sup>th</sup> 2009 (Andersen, C., 2008, Internet/ Anderson, R., 2009, Internet).

This latest and undoubtedly most severe crisis comes in the wake of a number of other substantial and consequential changes in Iceland's politics, economy and culture. A direct change in the nation's defence strategy and operations occurred in 2006, when the US Joint Forces announced the closure of the US operated NATO base in Iceland. The US Joint Forces had had a presence in Iceland since 1941. Following the foundation of NATO in 1949, the US Joint Forces maintained a NATO base on the Reykjanes peninsula, providing the only military presence in the country's history. The decision to close the NATO base took immediate effect, and within the year all staff and military personnel had been removed. Iceland's defences are now secured through a defence agreement with the USA and Iceland's continued presence in NATO and other defence alliances. The US Joint Forces were one of the biggest employers in the region, and the effect of the departure cannot be underestimated either in financial or cultural terms.

Although not a threat to Iceland's independence or the safety of its people, the decision to investigate the feasibility of a major Hydroelectric Power station in Kárahnjúkar in the Eastern Highlands caused uproar both nationally and internationally, and was perceived as a direct threat to the island's wildlife and nature. Environmentalists both from home and

abroad protested at what they saw as a destruction of Europe's second largest wilderness, and a threat to Europe's largest glacier<sup>77</sup>. The decision to grant the project a construction permit in 2003 was supported by arguments of imperative economic need, and reassurances of minimal effects on wildlife and its natural habitat. Undoubtedly this decision has had a widespread impact, although this is difficult to assess. Söderbergh Widding has noted the importance of nature in Icelandic filmmaking, stating that 'Mysticism and symbolism related to nature are ... the theme of a remarkably large group of films made in Iceland (Söderbergh Widding 1998 p100).

The political structure in Iceland is in line with its Nordic neighbours, with coalition governments and multi-party parliament that have, since its independence in 1945, governed Iceland. Of the 65 years of the country's independence, the right wing Independence Party has been party to or led its government for more than 50 years, and until January 2009 the party had been continuously in government since 1991. The coalition government made up of the Independence Party and the Social Democratic Alliance<sup>78</sup> was eventually forced to resign after months of protests following the collapse of the Icelandic economy in September

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<sup>77</sup> Protests included successfully persuading the European Investment Bank not to finance the project. Information available at <http://www.bankwatch.org/project.shtml?w=162059&s=153974> [Last accessed August 28<sup>th</sup> 2008].

<sup>78</sup> This government was formed after the last elections in May 2007 (Government Offices of Iceland, 2009, Internet)

2008 (Furlong 2008/BBC News 2009). The fact that the temporarily installed working government, until the election on April 25<sup>th</sup> 2009, was made up of the Social Democratic Alliance (a minority party in the previous government) and the Left-Green Movement marks a watershed in Icelandic politics<sup>79</sup>. What was also noteworthy is that for the first time in Iceland's political history the government was made up of five women and five men, with a woman serving as Prime Minister<sup>80</sup>.

The temporarily installed coalition government was successful in the election on April 25<sup>th</sup>, receiving 51.5% of the votes and increasing the number of members of parliament from 26 to 34. This secured a 54% majority of seats, described by the Guardian as putting paid to years of 'Viking Capitalism' [Bergmann, 2009, Internet]. The Independence Party, historically the country's most successful and popular political party, received only 23.7% of the votes or 12.9% less than at the election in 2007 (MBL 2009 Internet). The party's leader Bjarni Benediktsson admitted that the party had lost the trust of the voters [BBC, 2009, Internet]. The Social Democratic Alliance and the Left-Green Movement are still working on the charter for the first elected left-wing government in the history of Iceland [Innlent, 2009, Internet]. This involves resolving one of the biggest

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<sup>79</sup> This was a temporarily installed government (not elected) with a brief to govern Iceland until the next elections, that is until April 25<sup>th</sup> 2009. This government did not hold the majority of the seats in parliament (Anderson 2009 Internet).

<sup>80</sup> For a detailed view of the government and other government affairs please visit <http://www.government.is/government>

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issues in Icelandic politics now, signifying yet another major change, whether or not to join the European Union. This is an issue that the two parties do not agree on, and could seriously jeopardise the fledgling government [Bergmann, 2009, Internet]. Whether this historic political shift is a reaction to the financial crisis, or indicative of a more profound ideological and cultural shift, only time will tell.

However, the varied nature of changes in so many of the society's domains made it feasible to investigate how Icelanders handles uncertainty.



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By THORA BLONDAL

April 2009

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Thora Blondal  
April 2009