

SOURCES of Inspiration Lecture Fridrik Thor Fridriksson



Fridrik Thor Fridriksson

In this lecture I will talk about some of the sources that have influenced me in my filmmaking. But first of all I would like to describe the environment I come from.

I was born in 1954 in Reykjavík, Iceland, a country where 270,000 miserable souls now live, which reminds me of the way president Richard Nixon described Iceland when he looked out the airplane at Reykjavík Airport: "What a God-forsaken place!"

I was brought up in the sixties when the Vietnam War was a major force in everybody's lives. Iceland was occupied by the British and American armies during World War II, and a NATO-base has been operated about 50 kilometers from the capital, in Keflavík, ever since. The only television we could watch was from the NATO-base, mainly westerns, science fiction and propaganda war films. Iceland also received help from the Marshall Plan, and as part of that the local government had to build one cinema per major American studio. So you can imagine how the cinemas were full of American films. It is common knowledge that the individual is fundamentally shaped by the influences he receives during the first ten years of his life. During this time, I was feeling more than understanding the language of these American films. I remember staring at the black-and-white screen of the TV-set, not understanding the dialogue but only the story that was told through the images. Whether it is because of this experience or not, as a filmmaker I have always tried to avoid dialogue as much as possible.

In the sixties, there was no real Icelandic filmmaking at all. Once in a while, we could see old and primitive documentaries shot there, but that was basically it. And the situation did not change much when Icelandic State Television started broadcasting in 1966. The main programme of the first broadcast was of Iceland's Nobel Prize winner Halldór Laxness sitting in an uncomfortable chair and reading from one of his books. Much more influential was the Icelandic literary heritage, mainly the old sagas that were written in the 13th century, which we can still read without a dictionary. This wonderful literature is beautifully structured, full of black humour, spell-binding characters and visual story-telling. I think it is proper to point out that without this literature, the Norwegians would now be Swedes, and that without it, the Scandinavian countries would not be able to read or write. It is, of course, a heavy responsibility to have created the Norwegian nation, but is a burden we have to bear.

At the tender age of twelve, I walked into a screening of a Japanese film called *The Seven Samurai* by sheer coincidence. And when I walked out, I realized there was a different kind of filmmaking which we can call quality filmmaking. This experience can be compared to finding out after years of junk-food consumption that there is something called gourmet-food. It struck me that this Kurosawa film had elements from the

Icelandic sagas with other influences from the American westerns of John Ford. Many years later, when I met Ford's editor Robert Parrish, who had directed, for example, John Cassavetes in *Saddle the Wind*, he told me that Ford had been a great fan of the sagas. It's also interesting that the Italian Spaghetti Western used these same elements. Here the analogy with cooking also applies: When people get to know other people's way of cooking, their horizon broadens, and their own cuisine becomes richer.

Quality filmmaking was a rarity in Icelandic cinemas. Therefore, I found it necessary to establish a film society which gave me the opportunity to screen quality films from all over the world, for others, as well as for myself. This was in 1973, when I was still in college. I got this abandoned old cinema, and bought a new projector which I operated myself. The film society was a huge success, showing more than a hundred films each year. We made enough money to buy a camera and an editing table, which made it possible for everyone who wanted to express his ideas on film.

Still, there was no professional filmmaking in the country. In 1978, the government and the city of Reykjavík asked me to establish the Reykjavík Film Festival. The small group of Icelandic filmmakers that then existed put pressure on the minister of culture to create an Icelandic film subsidy system. The festival's budget allowed me to invite only two foreign guests. One was Pandelis Voulgaris from Greece, and the other Wim Wenders from Germany. Wim wrote a letter to every politician in the country in which he encouraged them to establish a film industry. It can therefore be said that he is a kind of godfather of Icelandic filmmaking. But as Dr. Frankenstein found out, it is easier to create than it is to control. In 1979, Frankenstein's monster took its first shaky steps, with three feature film productions receiving state grants.

At this point, I woke up and realized that I had not fulfilled my old dream of going to film school. I had made some experimental films while in college, but now that there was suddenly a real possibility to make professional films, I was not a part of it. I decided to give up the idea of going to film school, where I would waste both time and money, and chose to make my own films in my own way instead. I started by calling a press conference, where I announced my intention to film the most famous Icelandic saga, *The Story of Burnt-Njal*. The press was surprised at how a man could film a big budget period piece without any financial support. My answer to this was to put an announcement on the radio warning tourists and other passers-by to show patience and consideration while my film of this saga was being shot at historical locations around the country. Then I announced that there would be only one

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Renate Gompper/SOURCES 2
at Stora Biografen, one of
Sweden's oldest cinemas.



screening of the film at the largest cinema in Reykjavík, with 1000 seats at triple the normal price. The screening was totally sold-out in the first hour. What I showed the audience in that memorable night was the book being shot from one page to another. The climax of the story is when Njal's farm is burnt down with him and his family inside. At that page in the book, I put fire to it on screen, and the rest of the film was the book going up in flames. I made a lot of money out of this historical drama, but had to leave town for a while after the screening.

The day after, just before I left town, I met Ari Kristinsson by coincidence on the street. He has been my cinematographer ever since. We decided to realize an old documentary project of mine, which was a portrait of an old blacksmith living in the most isolated part of Iceland. This film, called *The Blacksmith*, can be considered a sketch of my 1991 feature film, *Children of Nature*. The old man was an inventor, living in a very close relationship with nature and with creatures that are not from this world. After this film, there was no way back.

My next film was a documentary about the rock scene in Reykjavík, featuring Björk when she was 14 years old. A few years later, I did the same with the country-and-western scene in Northern Iceland. A middle-aged projectionist in the small cinema of a village of 300 people had decided to become a country-and-western singer after having screened one too many cowboy films. These films were made for the cinema and ignored by television, and I lost a lot of money on both of them.

I considered making documentary films as useful rehearsals for making feature films: In documentaries you have to be able to catch an atmosphere on film. And if you can't catch an atmosphere, you will not be able to create it when making a feature. I thought that by now I had enough of rehearsals; it was time to tell my own stories.

Coming from a small society, I wanted to tell a true story because in such an environment, they are stronger and more meaningful. One night in 1977, two drunken sailors were thrown out of the police station in Reykjavík, where they wanted to spend the night. Offended by this lack of hospitality on the part of the police, they broke into a sporting goods store, and started a shoot-out with the police. I was inspired by the surrealistic aspects of this event. I interviewed the people involved and found out that the reality was much more absurd than my cowriter, Einar Kárason, and I had imagined. For example, I was told by a passer-by at the scene that when a bullet broke the windshield of his car, the only thing he could think of to say to them was: "You must be pretty cool to do this!" An office worker in the vicinity heard the gun shots, and noticed an old lady delivering newspapers. He decided: I must protect this woman from these crazy gunmen. So he jumped on her and threw her into a deserted coal cellar. The old woman, of course, thought he was a violent rapist and struggled as hard as she could, breaking her arm in the process. Such real incidents were, of course, too fantastic to include in the film. The main problem in writing the script was to control the surreal elements in the real story. Moreover, when you start to research a true story, you discover that people want to change the truth.

This applied both to the criminals and to the police. Nobody wanted this film to be made. In making it, I was greatly inspired by threats and anonymous phone calls. When you get such reactions, you know you are doing something important.

I made the two main characters into whale hunters because the year the film was shot, 1986, Iceland was whaling for the last time. So during the first twenty minutes of the film, I wanted the audience to believe they were watching a documentary about whaling in order to enable them to believe the events that followed. Using whaling as a background for the story caused me a lot of problems because it was a very sensitive political issue; I found myself persecuted by people who had adopted whales as pets. Poor me, since my favorite pet was the cow, and in order to feed starving nations with the same amount of meat as from one whale, you have to kill eighty cows. The film was called *White Whales*, because the white whale is an outsider in the whale society and everyone who is an outsider in any society will be persecuted. Therefore, the film deals partly with the lot of the outsider and the attention he has to try to get in order to be accepted. After the event that the film is based on, the authorities established a special armed police squad. So you can imagine how many drunken terrorists' lives this film has saved. I might add that Icelandic terrorists are armed with candlesticks and broomsticks.

After *White Whales* I made two films for television, but was unable to find the money to make my next feature, *Children of Nature*, for two years. I got the idea for the film back in 1976: The idea for a story about old people running away from an old people's home. I asked my childhood friend, Einar Már Gudmundsson, to help me develop it. I had collected a lot of tales from old people I had met in my lifetime; for example I took care of two blind guys for six years just to get the right feeling for the way they talk and move, because a blind man is a walking cinema. It is very hard for me to explain this film because I have said so many times that it is not to be understood but rather felt. I wanted to create the feeling that you had been to your grandmother's funeral. Supernatural things are very natural for me because I believe that the adventure takes place in reality. I can only try to explain the reasons for some of the scenes.

The first part of the film takes place where my father used to be a farmer and in the same house where I used to spend my summers for five years – the location I would also use for my next film, *Movie Days*. All the scenes in this first part are related to my own memories from that time; for example, how the old farmer kills his dog, drinks the water, brings the sheep to the slaughterhouse. The scenes at the old people's home are all based on what old people or people who worked in old people's homes told me. The getaway scene and the scenes from the police station are all based on real events; for example a jeep, which had disappeared just like in the film, reappeared on the streets of Reykjavík a week after the premiere, and people thought that I had arranged this as a cheap advertising stunt.

Concerning the last part of the film, I researched why people had moved away from an isolated area in the west fjords of Iceland, and discovered that this was because NATO had

started to build a military base on top of a nearby mountain. The flash-back scenes are from a real documentary, and I was very happy to connect them to my main actress because she was from this area and remembered the faces of the people in the documentary. Into this melting pot, I threw a lot of personal memories of small but emotionally-charged events from my life; for example, the reason why the old man climbs the mountain barefoot was not my favorite explanation at film festivals, namely that he didn't have any socks on, but is my memory of my father just before he died, when he travelled to his old farm and walked barefoot on the lava, probably to get closer to the place he loved before he left this earth. *Children of Nature* is a film full of quotations and homages to filmmakers who have influenced me. Some are small and hardly noticeable, but the homages to Wenders, Angelopoulos, Kieslowski, Tarkowski and Kurosawa are obvious. This is my way of saying: "Thank you for the inspiration."

Woody Allen made a film called *Radio Days* in 1987, and I wanted to answer him with a film called *Movie Days* even though it's my *Amarcord*. The film is completely autobiographical; even the actors wear clothes from my family, and were cast for being look-alikes. *Movie Days* is a film about different ways of storytelling, but of course, very personal and true. Usually filmmakers make films like *Movie Days* at a very old age when they have forgotten what was important in their childhood and have the freedom to make it all up. I was not old enough to have that freedom. *Movie Days* was my way of saying: "Thank you for the memories."

A lot of critics were not impressed with this film, but István Szabó saw it by accident on Swedish television when he was a guest at the Gothenburg Film Festival in 1996, which is the year Lars von Trier announced at the festival that he had left his wife. Szabó was very sick and had gone to his hotel room, where he took five aspirins. Then he flicked the TV remote control, and stumbled upon *Movie Days* on one of the channels. The next day, he felt better and lectured on the future of European films, saying that we had nothing to worry about because he had just seen a beautiful film. Then I said: "The moral of the story, Mr Szabó, is that you need five aspirins to go through a European film and like it."

Through the years, I continued to be involved with running the Reykjavík Film Festival, and at the 1989 festival, we had as a guest Jim Stark, the producer of Jim Jarmusch's *Mystery Train*. Jim Stark asked me if I was interested in working with the Japanese actor from that film, Masatoshi Nagase, and have him play a Japanese traveller in Iceland. I went to Japan, met Nagase and did some research which didn't really lead to a story I was happy with. It wasn't until, back in Iceland, a reporter friend of mine told me about some Japanese people he had met in the middle of nowhere. They were going to a spot in the highlands to perform a religious ceremony, according

to a Japanese Buddhist custom, for their relatives who had drowned there seven years earlier. This was the kind of story I had been looking for, so Jim and I wrote it into a screenplay. We used all kinds of clichés that are floating around about Iceland and Icelanders and about Japan and the Japanese in order to tell a story about the universality of everything and especially about the spiritual relationship between these two island nations. *Cold Fever*, as the film is called, is proof that being drunk at festivals and exchanging stories and ideas, can one day become a film.

Devil's Island is based on a best-selling novel of the same name by the cowriter of *White Whales*, Einar Kárason. In 1982, we made a gentleman's agreement that if he helped me with the screenplay for the earlier film, I would film the novel he was writing during that time. The story is based on the family of the main actor from *White Whales*. This family lived in deserted army barracks like 50,000 other Icelandic people have done at one time or another. The story takes place in the fifties, at the beginning of youth culture as we know it today, heavily influenced by American rock'n roll, films and fashion. I got a lot of ideas for this film by listening to fifties rock'n roll, that at that time could be heard only on the American radio at the NATO-base. All these characters had really existed, and I knew many of them. It took eight years to adapt the story into a screenplay, which is very different from the book it is based on. For example, the young boy singing operas came to me in a dream; the night before I was going to rehearse a child actor for a role, I dreamt I saw a small demon outside the barracks. So in the morning, when I met the boy, I asked him what he could do, if he could move his nose in a circle or turn it upside down. He said: "No, but I can sing operas." This created for me a demonic atmosphere: I decided to follow my dream, and the boy's character was changed accordingly.

As you have heard, inspiration comes from many different directions. I believe that if you are honest to yourself and put your own feelings in your work, that will also affect the feelings of your audience. It is very painful to re-write a script again and again. It's like eating your own shit again and again. The most important thing for me is that after I have had the film in my mind for some time, I can see it there from scene to scene. But if you can't get it out of there for a long time, it becomes painful. I remember when Werner Herzog came to Iceland, before there was any professional filmmaking there. He was asked if he thought any important films would ever come from Iceland. Herzog had just come from Lima, where he had made *Fitzcarraldo*, and he answered: "No I don't think so. But there is so much pain on the streets of Lima, that I believe important films will come from there." Then I said: "Excuse me, Mr Herzog, we Icelanders have the pain in the brain."

Thank you. And the reason why I make films is to get rid of this pain.

Workshop venue:
Ronnums Herrgård in Vargön

