

Icelandic Animation

by Giannalberto Bendazzi

There is animation in Iceland. This northern island of 103,000 sq. km., the second largest in Europe after Great Britain, 798 km. from Scotland, 970 from Norway, 287 from Greenland, is famous for its volcanoes and geysers as well as its great sagas and skaldic poetry. Up until now, though, it was considered a wasteland as far as frame-by-frame films are concerned; this is mainly the fault of specialists, especially of this particular historian.

Among the filmmakers and producers who have been submitting projects over the last few years to Cartoon (the European Community's program for supporting animation production) there have also been Icelanders. It was then that the discovery was made.



The Deacon of Dark River by Jón Axel Egilsson
Courtesy of Giannalberto Bendazzi

Beginnings

Animation started in Iceland in 1974, about the time when filmmaking in general started there, provoking a certain echo in the specialized press. Icelanders are proportionately the most avid moviegoers in the world; and an average of two live-action features have been made every year. In 1978, the Icelandic Film Fund was established to support production, thus making professional filmmaking a reality there.

The first animated fiction film, which was made in that fateful year, 1974, was *The Pioneer*, a five-minute black-and-white short by Jon Axel Egilsson. Born in Reykjavik (Iceland's capital) on October 4, 1944, Egilsson studied acting, was a news cameraman and worked on several documentary and fictional films as a cameraman and editor. Later in his career, he also taught animation and filmmaking at the College of Arts and Crafts in Reykjavik.

In describing *The Pioneer*, he noted that, "The people and sets are made with cubes. No narration, just music. It is the story of a young man, a cube, who on his way to the Promised Land in a sailing ship meets a young woman. Her father is not happy with that. The ship sinks, he is thrown overboard and thinks he is the only survivor. He builds a

house and plants trees. One fine day, he meets the girl, who is out walking her dog. She tells him how she survived, and that there are other people from the ship, and that they built a town in the next valley. They get married, but on their wedding night ... (a chapter is missing, 100 feet of film were overexposed in processing). I made the thing entirely on my own. It was premiered in 1974, the year we celebrated the 1100th anniversary of settlement in Iceland."

The second fictional animated short, *The Hammer of Thor*, was made by Sigurdur "Siggi" Örn Brynjólfsson. It was based on a 12th century Icelandic saga, it was the first cartoon film made in Iceland and the first in color.

Siggi Brynjólfsson was born in Reykjavik on September 19, 1947 and was a professional graphic designer, illustrator and cartoonist. His interest in animation, which began in childhood, was strengthened at art school when he bought a "how to" book by John Halas. In 1970, he was working in an advertising studio as a graphic designer, when a client asked if they could make an animated commercial for a life insurance company. Siggi jumped at the chance, saying, "Of course! Yes!" He then studied his old book all night and the next morning starting making the film, which was 30 seconds long, and shot in 16mm black and white.

After that, he made several more animated commercials, lasting from a few seconds to a minute in length. The director himself recalls that, "One or two commercials had been made before mine, [using] cutouts and animation with objects." As such, we still do not know who actually instigated frame-by-frame filmmaking in this country--a task we will gladly leave to younger researchers.



Stífur by Jón Axel Egilsson, Green Door Animation/Cartoon
Courtesy of Giannalberto Bendazzi

The third and last professional Icelandic director is a woman, Inga Lisa Middleton, who was born in London on December 9, 1964. She studied and worked in both Iceland and Great Britain, getting degrees in Photography from West Surrey College of Art and Design in Farnham, England, and in Visual Communication from the Royal College of Art in London. Her first short, *Mummy, Daddy, Bobby and Debby* (1989, cel animation and pixillation) was bought by Britain's Channel 4 and was a parody of the modern nuclear family as seen through advertising.

Besides these three, there are really no full-time animators from Iceland. One reason is that there are only 260,000 Icelanders. Another is that the country lacks both the technical infrastructure and the personnel (e.g., cameramen, inbetweeners and inkers); in fact, it is common to go abroad to complete films made locally. The third and most important reason is that there is no home market for animation in Iceland.

To complete our survey, I would like to summarize the rest of the careers of Egilsson, Brynjólfsson and Middleton.



Stífur by Jón Axel Egilsson, Green Door Animation/Cartoon
Courtesy of Giannalberto Bendazzi

Jon Axel Egilsson

In 1983, Jon Axel Egilsson made *Hands* (5 minutes, color, clay animation). "The people's heads are hands," the director wrote, "and the rest of the bodies are snail-like. A man, a right hand, gets his morning paper and a cup of coffee, kisses his wife (a left hand) and goes to work. He gets a smashing idea: all workers should join to make a giant. But the newly-made giant finds a piece of one of the workers in his eye and turns on them. They join again to fight against the monster and change him into a cow, which they can milk. I made this thing entirely on my own, too!"

Six years later, in 1989, he made *Jurti* (5 minutes, color, cel animation), this time with some backing from the Icelandic Film Fund, with the help of painter Margret Jonsdottir ("at the time, a student of mine at the College of Arts and Crafts"), and music composed by the renowned Hjörtur Howser. "The story is about seasons. First we see a plant growing, then autumn, and next year the birth of Jurti ("Planty"), a little red plant devil. He plays in the branches, but he has to fight a bee. He gets stung, but he survives."

After having supplied Swedish Television with 22 minutes of animated graphics for *Living With Violent Earth*, a six episode series explaining volcanic activities, Egilsson decided to go on and make a longer and more demanding film. This was *The Deacon of Dark River* (26 minutes, color, cel animation, 1994). The synopsis states that, "In Hörgardalur Valley, in the northern part of Iceland, was the parish of Dark River. It is said that in bygone days a young deacon served the community here and that he took to meet secretly a young servant girl at the rectory of Baegisa in the next valley. ... On Christmastide 1730 the deacon rode off to Baegisa to invite Gudrun to the season's festivities at Dark River, and he promised to come and fetch her on Christmas Eve. However, on his way back, fate dealt him an unexpected blow. Yet, so great was his love for Gudrun that nothing could stop him from keeping his promise."

The film was animated, shot and edited in Latvia, with a huge crew of more than 100 people, while the film itself was processed in Russia and Denmark. The music, based on

old Icelandic tunes and melodies, was composed by Hjörtur Howser (again) and Hilmar Örn Hilmarsson. When it was finished, it was aired on both Icelandic and Swedish television.

Jon Axel Egilsson is now working on *Stufur* (Stump), a projected feature film. "The idea," he says, "is from two old Icelandic fairy tales mixed in one, plus a story line of my own. It's full of action, comedy and good examples of how to behave and what to learn. I have various letters of intent, but when I try to get financing abroad for a pilot, everything always ends in a Catch 22 situation. They say, 'I'm interested in financing your film--but first I have to see a pilot.' And I'm asking for money for the pilot!"



Sigurdur Örn Brynjolfsson with puppets from *Christmas On His Way To Earth* (1994)
Courtesy of Giannalberto Bendazzi

Siggi Brynjolfsson

Örn "Siggi" Brynjolfsson, after *The Hammer of Thor*, started his international career creating, under the aegis of the Swedish Film Institute (Lisabeth Gabrielsson, producer), *It Takes All Kinds* (cel animation, 1987), a miniseries of three one-minute films based on his own cartoons. The Institute, with the collaboration of the Icelandic Film Fund and the Nordic Film and TV Fund, produced his next short, *Our Christmas Tree* (8 minutes, cel animation, 1991). Inking, painting and filming were done in Kecskemet, Hungary.

In *Audun and the Polar Bear* (11 minutes, 1993), which was made in Vilnius, Lithuania, Siggi, for the first time, did not animate and concentrated instead on directing--the animation itself was done by the young and talented Algimantas Tautjanskas. The film tells a story taken from an old saga: Audun is a poor Icelandic Viking who wants to pay his respects to King Sveinn of Denmark in a grand way. He thus sails to Greenland, where he spends all he's got to buy a polar bear to bring as a gift to the Danish monarch. We then follow Audun's adventures in Norway, Denmark, Rome and then again in his homeland, a much richer man than when he left.



Hreidar The Stupid by Sigurdur Örn Brynjolfsson (1996)
Courtesy of Giannalberto Bendazzi

This film was a turning point in Brynjolfsson's career. First, he learned that it was too difficult to live in one country and make a film in another. This was demonstrated by the "polar bear's shit accident." As Siggi recalled, "I was back home in Iceland. One Saturday afternoon, I got a phone call from the studio in Vilnius, Lithuania. They had been trying all day to phone (at that time, all communication was very difficult) as they had a problem. As the designer of the film, I had chosen all the colors, and marked them on the layouts. One of the main characters in the film is this polar bear, and in one scene he leaves a pile of shit on the grass. What is the color of polar bear shit? I had forgotten to mark it on the layout! I kept silent for a second and then shouted, 'How the hell should I know. Don't you have a zoo in Vilnius? Go there and check!' But seriously, this was a small problem I could have solved in 20 seconds on the spot; but what about *serious* problems?" Thus, at the end of 1993, he moved to Tallinn, Estonia, where he established a small production company, Siggi Animastudio.

His second discovery was puppet animation, which is very popular in all the Baltic countries. "I found it very interesting," Brynjolfsson says, "and very different from drawn animation. Think of the three-dimensional possibilities and you can improvise during shooting."

In 1994, he finished *Christmas on His Way to Earth*, a 24 x 6-8 minute series that told a Yuletide tale that began running daily on December 1 for 24 days on RUN-TV, Icelandic national television. It was almost a record: in 9 months, Brynjolfsson and his crew filmed and edited 2-1/2 hours of puppet animation.

His next project, *Hreidar the Stupid*, was his most ambitious. Twenty minutes of inventive puppet animation, it was finished in January 1996. The story, taken from an Icelandic saga, tells of the adventures in Norway of Hreidar, a "big, ugly and slowwitted" Iclander. Hreidar wants to meet King Magnus, whom he impresses with his enormous strength and candid behavior; then he has a fight with a soldier of another king, Harald, and kills him. Trying to win Harald's heart, Hreidar discovers he can be a great smith, makes a golden money box and offers it to the king. He does not succeed with him, but King Magnus still likes him, gives him money and sends him back to his island.

We must eventually mention that, during his last year as teacher at the Icelandic Institute of Arts and Crafts (1993), Brynjolfsson had his students make some one-minute graduation films.

Commenting on his career, Siggi states that, "I came into the field of animation as a graphic designer, cartoonist, painter and illustrator. So, all the visual things were easy for me. When I was making my short films, they were somehow, to me, only my cartoons or drawings moving with sound. It took 15 years to learn to become a film director. Now, with my last two films, I can [finally] call myself a director."

Inga Lisa Middleton

The Gods Are Fed Up by Inga Lisa Middleton (1991)
Courtesy of Giannalberto Bendazzi

Inga Lisa Middleton is a Jack-of-all-trades of the performing visual arts. After her first animated film, she made documentaries and live-action shorts, as well as doing more animation; she worked as a still photographer and script continuity girl on feature films; was assistant director on TV plays; director of the music video for the musical *Hair*; and an art director in advertising.



As far as animation is concerned, in 1991, she was the author of *The Gods Are Fed Up* (cel animation and pixillation), a short which dealt with environmental problems seen from a mythological point of view, and above all of *A Fairy Tale of Our Time* (1992, 10 minutes). This original film "in the form of a fairy tale describes where the Princess calls upon her hero to slay the modern day dragon. The film is unusual in the way it portrays ecological issues in a highly artistic way. An unconventional technique has been used, where photographs of actors and backgrounds have been cut out and stuck down onto cels, which then have been filmed under the rostrum camera. Finally, another separate color layer was filmed and the two films married together into one, for a more atmospheric and textured effect." *A Fairy Tale of Our Time* has no dialogue, only sound effects and the music of the outstanding (and above-mentioned) Icelandic composer Hilmar Örn Hilmarsson. It was screened at over 40 festivals and won 3 awards.

Among Middleton's works in progress, two are animated: the documentary live-action/animated *The Violinmaker*, about the Icelandic violinmaker Hans Johansson; and *A Butterfly's Dream*, (10 x 5 minute series), a collection of fictitious fables based Taoist philosophy.



A Fairytale of Our Time by Inga Lisa Middleton (1992)
Courtesy of Giannalberto Bendazzi

*Giannalberto Bendazzi is a Milan-based film historian and critic whose history of animation, *Cartoons: One Hundred Years of Cinema Animation*, is published in the US by Indiana University Press and in the UK by John Libbey. His other books on animation include *Topoline e poi* (1978), *Due volte l'oceano* (1983) and *Il movimento creato* (1993, with Guido Michelone).*