



FESTIVAL REPORT

Reykjavík Film Festival 2020 to Go: Social and cultural distancing at a hybrid festival

By Randy Malamud

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One of my favourite events on the cinematic calendar, the Reykjavík International Film Festival (RIFF), designed a hybrid programme so people could attend remotely this year. Iceland is doing well at managing the pandemic, but with international gatherings obviously problematic, the format was designed to salvage as much as possible of this festival's seventeenth edition. 'We thought, ok, we can't fight this', RIFF spokesperson María Ólafsdóttir said, 'but we're Vikings so we'll just pull up our sleeves and make the best of it', taking the opportunity to stream films to audiences in retirement homes, in distant villages and even at sea, as well as to people reluctant to venture out in public. They dispatched a brightly coloured RIFF bus to host screenings around the island. And films were also shown in the city's theatres, with reduced capacity.

When RIFF reached out to the international film community to invite 'distanced attendance', I was eager to see how it would go. I was not expecting it to be nearly as invigorating as if I were actually on location (in one of the world's best locations), but I wanted to see how close it could come to the ideal.

And in the end it was ok: a much-needed diversion from my Netflix binging. Watching films on my couch from 24 September through 4 October, I feel like I caught a decent piece of the action, but I missed a lot too. While few visitors came from abroad, Icelandic audiences attended the screenings, lectures and parties in good numbers, and seeing the ongoing on Facebook reminded me what I was deprived of – not just at this festival but at others I probably will not be able to attend in the months (and years?) ahead.

While my overall experience was certainly better than nothing, it was not as fully accessible as the organizers had said it would be. I could not view all the films I wanted: my top must-see, Chloé Zhao's big-buzz *Nomadland*, was disappointingly unavailable for critics. The press office sent me links (some of which did not work) to watch a number of other films, though not as many as I usually cram into my ambitious festival screening schedule. I imagine some producers are wary about providing online access, fearing pirating or just not wanting to make their productions widely accessible early on in their release.

Finally, I had to fend for myself, suffering the critic's ultimate outrage: *paying for films!* The RIFF-at-home platform had some titles that the press office could not get me, but even that was complicated. Only Icelandic customers could rent these, so I purchased an Icelandic VPN and finally had access to a chunk of the programme, though still not everything. Jeanette Nordahl's Danish thriller *Wildland*, starring Sidse Babbett Knudsen (the PM from *Borgen*), was another feature I had hoped to see, but could not.

Anyway – I should be thankful for what I *did* see and stop complaining about mild glitches in a heroic attempt to keep vital cultural rituals afloat in these incredibly difficult times. While the programme was a global smorgasbord, I focused on Nordic films to help sustain the presence that I was actually up there.

I enjoyed many of the small gems that comprise good standard festival fare, some of which might (in more normal times) have moved on to other festivals and art cinemas. I wonder what their paths are now? It seems that it will be harder to see them anywhere in real life, though also, perhaps, the pandemic-motivated expansion of video-on-demand streaming might make them more available than they would otherwise have been.

There was actually a session, as part of RIFF's 'Industry Days' programme, about the future of distribution, and of course the explosion of streaming services represents a potential revolution in what we have access to and how we see it, but the industry's oligopolies gave some filmmakers pause. Even the BBC is concerned, one producer said, about preserving their cultural independence

and distinction amid the global marketplace of this evolving medium; if the English are worried, should not we be even more so? (Yes, some agreed, but others sustained a David-vs-Goliath cockiness that the upstart Icelandic film industry has earned over the last decade.)

I liked the contrast between my two favourite Icelandic films, Stefania Thors' *The School of Housewives* and Anna Hildur's *A Song Called Hate*: these well-crafted documentaries stake out the paradoxical continuum of Iceland's culture that I find so intriguing. *Housewives* spends a year with a dozen students and a few faculty in a boarding programme, a delightful community where young women (and the occasional man) learn, or polish up, their basic skills in knitting, embroidery, cooking classic Icelandic food and managing domestic life:



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what used to be called 'Home Ec'. The experience comes across not as retro or sexist, but pragmatic, and fun, and just generally valuable: the students learn lots of traditional ways of keeping their simple, sensible culture alive. I wished (in my vicarious Icelandic fantasy) that I could enrol in this school myself, and I think others in the theatre, had there been any, would have agreed.

The module's end-goal is not actually marriage (I do not recall a single mention of boyfriends or weddings in the offing), but rather a sense of well-adjusted self-sufficiency. It is especially calming, in these chaotic times, to watch these people who were very methodical and intentional about keeping their lives orderly. The documentary, though it predates the pandemic, offers an excellent escapist treat in our own moment.

A Song Called Hate goes onstage and backstage with Iceland's 2019 Eurovision entry Hatari (Icelandic for 'hater'), a leather-and-chain metal band whose *raison d'être*, initially, seems to be shocking audiences with loud, angry screeds. The Eurovision contest is an obvious (even *necessary*) construct to make fun of – cheesy, self-parodic – and Hildur's documentary begins in that mode. But even in this flippant frame, we come to realize, Hatari's entourage broaches some deep, thoughtful calculations based on a theory of art and ethics and dissent that seems unexpected from these garish goth performers. Like *The School of Housewives*, this film too takes us by surprise.

Their hit song, 'Hatred Will Prevail', warns what will happen if people cannot coexist peacefully. When it earns an unlikely slot in the competition, held in Tel Aviv because Israeli singer Netta won the previous year, Hatari begins hatching a loose plot to disrupt the rigidly apolitical event with a gesture supporting Palestinian resistance to occupation.

Hildur wove together so many compelling themes: art (and especially 'difficult' art, set in pop culture and/or avant-garde aesthetics), social responsibility, media and social media, fame, the quagmire of Israel and Palestine, Iceland's distance from the rest of the world but also its sense of international connectedness and responsibility. This was a great contrast with the quieter, homey *School of Housewives*. What I find so fascinating about Iceland (and its films) is that it equably contains both those poles: quiet and loud, traditional and radical, soft-spoken stolid subsistence alongside flashy radical iconoclasm.

The ideology of *Housewives* reflects Iceland's firm commitment to smarter (greener) living, frugality and sustainability: an admirable concern with the ecological health of a world that would be so easy to tune in out, in their geographic isolation. And the BDSM band, as freaky as they





first appear, turn out to be pleasant young musicians, much more philosophically and ethically grounded than one might have expected. (Object lesson: do not judge a book by its cover.)

As *Hatari* considers their unlikely journey to represent their country on the world stage, they feel compelled to make a statement for justice in a conflict that does not directly affect them and in an activist trope that is similarly unfamiliar. But they do their homework and figure out a small but effective way to penetrate Eurovision's fervent antipathy to a political consciousness that might distract from their flashy bubble-gum production. A winning final montage shows Icelanders everywhere, including lots of young children, dressing up in homemade versions of *Hatari*'s risqué fashions. As objectionable as the Eurovision bigwigs found their 'stunt', the young singers return home to fans who regard them as exemplars of Icelandic spirit, admirably refusing to sidestep a risky moment of ethical engagement.

Lobster Soup, Rafael Molés and Pepe Andreu's slice-of-Icelandic-life documentary, is not (despite its title) a food movie. The soup is an incidental prop at Grindavík's Bryggjan's café, a hole-in-the-wall gathering place in a small coastal town a half-hour south of the capital, where a group of old men meets daily to talk about the weather, and elves, and volcanic eruptions, and (over)tourism, and the past and future of their community. They also talk about their new grandchildren, and fermenting skate, and the paucity of lobsters, which suggests that actual lobster soup, like everything else in *Lobster Soup*, may be not long for this world.

The film's artfully understated sense of character strikes me as quintessentially Icelandic – it reminds me of the rugged and determined people who populate the novels of Nobel Laureate Halldór Laxness, the country's most famous writer. There are lots of 'back in the day' stories about fishing and fishing nets (the café is carved out from a corner of a net factory). There is an ecologi-

cal angle, as Molés and Andreu examine the rhythms of fishing in an age of overconsumption and unsustainable harvesting: as in many Icelandic movies, environmental consciousness does not hit you over the head, but it is insistently there. The country's booming future threatens to overwhelm its simpler past; Bryggjan's is not far from the international airport and a touristy upscale spa, so its real estate has acquired a cash value that displaces its community value.

If you do not know much about the political and cultural currents of Iceland's neighbour, Kenneth Sorento's *The Fight for Greenland* lays it all out in fascinating detail. The documentary's wistful eloquence, mixed with pathos, creates a mood similar to *Lobster Soup*. Colonial issues that have been mostly settled elsewhere still roil Greenland. There is a fair amount of hostility towards the Danes: 'to get an education, we have to learn their language', one Greenlander complains. 'To them, we're just drunkards.' Greenland's children were often sent away to school



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in Denmark to strip them of their culture. 'We need to stop thinking like them', an activist argues. 'We need to think for ourselves.'

They feel that Danes stereotype them, regarding them as incapable of self-governance. The documentary highlights independence activists, but also, on the other side, politicians who fear that an immediate and decisive break from the Kingdom of Denmark is financially unfeasible. Indigenous communities in the north urgently want to develop their own native leadership; the capital city of Nuuk, home to a third of the island's 56,000 people, leans more closely towards Danish culture.

A young rapper feels confident that 'Greenland is waking up to the fact that we can stand on our own feet. We can take care of ourselves. We need to support each

other rather than put each other down.' Activists for independence argue that being on Denmark's payroll diminishes their self-worth as a nation. They believe that in the long run, they can leverage their fisheries and their natural resources better under their own control than as a Danish subsidiary.

Life is hard: infrastructure is rudimentary, and people suffer from generations of colonial diminution. Alcoholism, suicide and physical and sexual abuse are rampant social problems that have been mostly suppressed in the past. And yet, despite the pervasive social problems *The Fight for Greenland* foregrounds, it cannot help but be an extraordinarily compelling film – a strikingly pretty film – in one of the world's most stunning places. I think Sorento

features the majestic grandeur of the world's largest island as a sort of metaphysically balancing force against the history of Greenland's exploitation. Despite hardships, Greenland is (literally) grounded in an incomparably sublime landscape.

That film and *Aalto*, about the masterful Finnish architect, were tied for my own personal RIFF award: 'making me feel like I was there' – vicariously spending an hour-and-a-half out in the far north, or anywhere but where I really was, going stir-crazy in Atlanta. Virpi Suutari's homage to Alvar Aalto spotlights his buildings, obviously, but also ties in his Artek craft workshop (Artek: art plus technology) that provided the furnishings and fittings that so perfectly complemented modern architecture, both his own and

many other people's. And Suutari is deeply interested in the architect's own personality, his character, which seemed to me like one more detail, one more accoutrement, comprising the sleek, comforting aura of his wonderful homes and offices.

Aalto's two wives, Aino (who died in 1949) and Elissa, were both architects, both very much holding up their end as part of a power couple, both excellent colleagues who kept Alvar grounded. (He met both as employees in his studio, and they even looked alike.) Modern architecture is profoundly male-dominated, and if Aalto's studio was not completely egalitarian, still he took important steps towards greater opportunities for women. Aino was the brains of the operation at Artek, whose most striking merchandise – the Paimio chair (with Artek's trademark bent-wood construction), the sleek 'Stool 60', the funky organic Aalto vase – reflected her design sense. The factory's modest products were simple yet eloquent and also relatively cheap (at the time, though they are not today).

Suutari luxuriates in the sleek warmth of Aalto's idiosyncratic lines and curves, the precariously balanced compositions, the flow of living and working space, the sumptuous harmony between the building, its furnishings, and the world outside. One of his early masterpieces, the 1933 Paimio Sanatorium in southwestern Finland, was designed to make the building part of a patient's healing process. Aalto had himself been hospitalized while working on the project and realized that a patient's prone perspective made vertically oriented architecture dysfunctional, so he created instead a horizontal perspective.

Aalto's career melded European influences with a Scandinavian mood. He drew inspiration from

continental traditions and architecture, believing that Finnish culture was not especially open to invention or improvement: it was stuck in its own aesthetic, and he worked to create a wider palette. His style evokes Walter Gropius, though, when asked about Bauhaus' impact, he simply said he had never been there. (But might he have seen pictures?) Le Corbusier, Eero Saarinen and Frank Lloyd Wright, too, seem like fellow travellers, and László Moholy-Nagy, a close friend, influenced Aalto's sense of form and light. But while his architecture certainly has elements in common with the modern canon, it is finally original; Artek, especially, solidified his unique brand.

Charter is a solid Swedish film, replete with Bergmanesque angst-ridden bleakness and tense silences. It is about a family in crisis, with individual problems that get all the more exacerbated as the parents' separation plays out. I was eager to see this second feature by Amanda Kernell because I was bowled over by her debut, *Sami Blood*, a few years ago – a moving depiction of the plight of Scandinavia's mostly unseen northern minority. *Charter*, too, is set partly in Lapland, but did not play up Sami culture very strongly. It is not quite what I had hoped Kernell would do in her second film, but I will call that my problem, not hers.

My only non-Nordic screening was *Miss Marx*, which lived up to its strong but ambivalent festival circuit buzz. Romola Garai is captivating as Eleanor Marx, the youngest of Karl's daughters, who spent (and eventually sacrificed) her life curating her father's legacy – collecting his papers, lecturing, touring America, keeping closely in touch with the working class.

Director Susanna Nicchiarelli's quirky punk soundtrack provides just the right jolt for what would otherwise be a conventional period tableau, recalling Sofia

Coppola's score for *Marie Antoinette* and Alena Smith's for her television series *Dickinson*. There must be an interesting critical study to be written about women filmmakers using snazzy anachronistic scores in biopics about famous historical women to create modern reimaginings of the past. John Gordon Sinclair plays an engaging Friedrich Engels, livelier than the sidekick background role that Marx's colleague often plays. But beyond her lead characters, Nicchiarelli flounders: drawn out at greater length than the narrative sustains, *Miss Marx* does not rise to the level that Garai's performance sets. If I had been in a cinema with other spectators, I felt certain, the crowd would have gotten antsy towards the end.

After the festival, I checked in with RIFF's founding director, Hrönn Marinósdóttir, who told me (by e-mail): '[w]e had a good edition, better than we estimated actually. People need entertainment and culture and therefore really appreciated our efforts.' Did she think future editions will see more cyber-programming? 'I think to some extent this is the future but it will not replace the real festival where people have interaction with each other. We are satisfied but hope next year we can have more guests and more cinema screenings.' Reykjavík is usually thrilled to welcome cinephiles from all corners of the globe. 'We missed that', Hrönn said, 'but we understand it is inevitable'.

Contributor's details

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