

# Adapting a Literary Nation to Film: National Identity, Neoromanticism and the Anxiety of Influence

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**ABSTRACT:** This essay addresses the interrelations of film and literature in the Icelandic context by focusing primarily on two case studies. The first regards an early twentieth-century group of Neoromantic writers, commonly known as the Varangians, whose plays and novels provided the narrative material for the first fiction features set in Iceland. The second addresses the conspicuous lack of adaptations made from either the medieval sagas or the work of Iceland's most celebrated novelist, Halldór Laxness. It is argued that this lack stems from the high regard in which literature, and these works in particular, is held in Iceland—suggestive of a certain anxiety in tackling its literary heritage. Ultimately, the two case studies point towards the strong ties between literature and national identity. As a result Icelandic cinema has swayed aberrantly from an overt reliance on literature to attempts at distancing itself from it. According to the essay, both strategies are characteristic of filmmaking in a nation whose national identity privileges language and literature.

**RÉSUMÉ:** Cet essai s'intéresse aux interrelations du film et de la littérature dans le contexte islandais en se concentrant d'abord sur deux études de cas. La première étude concerne un groupe d'auteurs néoromantiques du début du vingtième siècle, les Varègues, dont les pièces et les romans ont fourni le matériel narratif des premiers longs-métrages islandais. La deuxième s'intéresse au manque évident d'adaptations inspirées de sagas médiévales ou de l'oeuvre du plus célèbre romancier islandais, Halldór Laxness. Il est argumenté que ce manque s'explique par la haute estime dans laquelle sont tenues la littérature et ces oeuvres en particulier en Islande - laissant suggérer une certaine appréhension à confronter son héritage littéraire. Enfin, les deux études de cas démontrent de forts liens entre la littérature et l'identité nationale, ayant ainsi pour résultat un cinéma islandais oscillant entre une dépendance évidente vis-à-vis la littérature et une tentative de s'en distancer. Selon cet essai, ces deux stratégies sont les caractéristiques d'une réalisation cinématographique au sein d'une nation dont l'identité nationale privilégie la langue et la littérature.

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The year before Engels and Marx first met in 1842, another great German scholar of Economics, if less well known today, Friedrich List, published his magnum opus *Das nationale System der politischen Ökonomie* [*The National System of Political Economy*].<sup>1</sup> List claimed that the nation-state was the ideal unit for maximizing economic development. However, for such a development to take place the national population needed to be large and its geographical territory extensive. Accordingly, for him, nationhood became synonymous with large nations. List dismissed the idea of small nations: “A nation restricted in the number of its population and in territory, especially if it has a separate language, can only possess a crippled literature, crippled institutions for promoting art and science” (quoted by Hobsbawm 30-31)<sup>2</sup>. In other words List saw the limitations of a small “national economy” resulting in inferior art and culture.

The early 1840s also saw national revival reach new heights in Iceland, with increasing demands for secession from Denmark—itself a rather small nation in terms of territory and population. The population of Iceland itself hardly amounted to that of a modest-sized European town, or barely 60,000 inhabitants, and although larger in surface than Denmark it was mostly uninhabitable. If Iceland thus had none of the national qualifications outlined by List, it ultimately turned his theory upside down by constructing its very national identity on its *separate language* and a literature that was seen to be anything but crippled. Language and literature were, in fact, all Iceland had of its own, as it was mostly devoid of a national economy and industry, monuments and buildings, and other traditional arts. Ever since, other forms of art and culture have been relegated to a secondary status, and been compelled to draw upon the literary heritage—cinema being no exception.

In this essay I would like first to discuss somewhat broadly the relevance of literature for Icelandic national identity, as a necessary preparation for thinking about film adaptation in the Icelandic context, before moving on to two distinct but related case studies. The former concerns plays and novels written by Icelandic Neoromanticists in Copenhagen and adapted to the screen during the silent era, while the latter addresses the role that the medieval sagas of Icelanders and the novels by Halldór Laxness have played in the history of Icelandic cinema.

## **The ties that bind: Icelandic national identity and literature**

Literature and language are always intertwined. Although I will be discussing a notable exception, Icelandic literature is defined first and foremost by being

written in Icelandic. Domestically, the Icelandic language continues to be held in high regard despite (or perhaps because of) the global influx of English, which in the latter half of the twentieth century has replaced Danish as the central lingual “threat” to Icelandic. Extensive state support is in place for writers, a special committee creates new words from native Icelandic components to ward off foreign imports, regulations still govern the introduction of foreign personal names although these have become more lenient in recent years, and since 1996 the Icelandic language has its own annual celebration on the 16th of November (the birthday of the acclaimed nineteenth-century poet Jónas Hallgrímsson). The underlying anxiety is that without the Icelandic language, the nation itself might wither away under the homogenizing power of globalization.

The Icelandic language would appear to have changed remarkably little since the settlement era, as the earliest surviving manuscripts dating from the mid-twelfth century are relatively close to modern Icelandic. However, it was with the Romanticists and the nationalists of the nineteenth century that the language was first broadly deemed to be a valued cultural resource, quite apart from its use as a tool of communication. Inspired by German Romanticism and national ideology, the Icelandic nationalists felt that there existed a perfect harmony between the nation’s medieval literature and its perceived golden age. This literature is characterized by considerable heterogeneity, including stories of bishops, European knights, and Scandinavian kings, but it was the sagas of the Icelanders that were most celebrated by the Romanticists. Although the surviving manuscripts stem mostly from the early fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, there is much evidence to suggest that the majority of the sagas were composed in the thirteenth century, while relying on even older oral traditions (Ólason 17-20).

Leaving aside questions of literary merit, it is not difficult to understand why the sagas of the Icelanders were singled out. Not only were they stories of Icelanders, as explicitly manifested by the collective name given to them, but they were also open to strong national interpretations. The quintessential example is found in *Njáls saga* [*Njal’s Saga*], the most celebrated of them all, when the hero Gunnar decides against exile in Norway, despite knowing that remaining in Iceland will surely cost him his life. About to escape in his vessel, Gunnar has a change of heart, when looking back over his farmland: “Fögur er hlíðin, svá at mér hefir hon aldri jafnfögr sýnzsk, bleikir akur ok slegin tún, og mun eg ríða heim aprt ok fara hvergi.” [So lovely is the hillside that it has never before seemed to me as lovely as now] (182; 86<sup>3</sup>). The Romanticists interpreted Gunnar’s decision as a patriotic one—a national declaration. Nowhere is this more pronounced than in Hallgrímsson’s poem *Gunnarshólmi* [*Gunnar’s Holm*] in which the hillside becomes Iceland itself: “Sá eg ei fyrr svo fagan jarðargróða’ ... Því Gunnar vildi heldur bíða hel, en horfinn vera fósturjarðarströndum.” [‘Never before has Iceland seemed so fair.’ ... For Gunnar felt it nobler far to die / than flee and leave his native

shores behind him] (136-38). If “Gunnarshólmi” is notably explicit in this regard, it is also typical of the broad role that sagas have played in constructing Icelandic national identity. Gísli Sigurðsson explains:

The sagas civilized the landscape by imparting some meaning to it through their events and place names, many of which refer back to the settlement period, thus establishing a direct link through the land back into the dark past when the heroic ancestors created the nation. The sagas and the role played by the Icelandic landscape were thus of major significance in the development of the romantic sense of national identity among Icelanders.

(43-44)

The area where Gunnar is believed to have turned away from the sea is itself one of these landmarks that bridge the golden age and contemporary Iceland and is today a popular tourist attraction.

If the sagas of the Icelanders continue to be very much debated in terms of authorship and historical accuracy, it would seem beyond question that they share many qualities of novelistic fiction. Extensive in scope of both time and space, the sagas are a prose fiction focusing on character interactions. Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg have argued that no other medieval literature went as far in combining romance and history, which they consider to lead “the way from epic to the novel” (43). In fact, following Benedict Anderson’s well-known thesis on the intrinsic ties between novel and nation (22-36; Moretti 11-73), the sagas might be the most convincing argument for claiming a pre-modern Icelandic nationhood. Icelandic folk tales also began to be celebrated and collected in the nineteenth century. And although not registering the nation formally in the manner of novel and arguably saga, they are literally referred to as “þjóðsögur” [nation-tales], as no distinction is made between nation and folk in Icelandic.

On the other hand, the novel itself arrived quite late on the Icelandic literary scene—or not until national revival was in full bloom, thereby offering further support for the strong ties between nation and novel. The first Icelandic novel *Piltur og stúlka* [*A Boy and a Girl*] by Jón Thoroddsen was published in 1850, the year before the pivotal national assembly in which the Icelandic delegates under the leadership of independence hero Jón Sigurðsson refused to adopt the Danish constitution. However, the novel form first rose to prominence with Halldór Laxness, whose first novel was published the year after the establishing of a sovereign state in 1918. Following the publication of his major novels in the 1930s and 40s, the novel became the national art form par excellence. Perhaps the only cultural event of the 20th century of greater significance than Laxness’s Nobel Prize award in 1955 was the return of the original manuscripts of the medieval

sagas from Denmark beginning in 1971. In fact, it is imperative to address Laxness's oeuvre in the context of Iceland's literary heritage:

Laxness helped make the novel a significant genre in Iceland. Through his [novels of the 1930s] he changed the shape of literary history, creating a new artistic mirror of national importance ... Laxness was of course making his own entrance into literary history by first elevating the genre of the novel, and then bringing about a kind of settlement of saga and novel ... He became the champion of a national epic identity, which was defined by history but rejuvenated through his modern, realist narrative.

(Eysteinnsson and Þorvaldsson 265-66)

This is evinced not only in his own fiction—for example, the old manuscripts are at the centre of *Íslandsklukkan* [*Iceland's Bell*] and the saga heritage is being rewritten in *Gerpla* [*The Happy Warriors*]<sup>3</sup>—but also various extra-textual activities like his controversial publications of the sagas in modern spelling in the 1940s.

Halldór Guðmundsson opens his recent biography of Laxness by claiming that he “was Europe's last national poet” (2008 1). However hyperbolic this claim might be thought, the extensive national readership of Laxness may very well be somewhat exceptional. Even after his death in 1998 he continues to be debated extensively, with the debates far transcending literary circles as politicians chime in as well.<sup>4</sup> One suspects that the debates over Laxness's life and work are this heated because they are ultimately about Icelandic national identity itself. All in all, Laxness may be the paramount example of the explicit ties between nation and novel. A case in point, Hallgrímur Helgason chose the title *Höfundur Íslands* [*The Author of Iceland*] for his novel addressing the life of Laxness. In analyzing Helgason's literary struggle with Laxness in this work and elsewhere Alda Björk Valdimarsdóttir reverts to Harold Bloom's theory of anxiety of influence (147-52) which describes how writers respond to and grapple with the artistic reputation of their predecessors. As we will see, the notion of an anxiety of influence is equally apt in describing the relationship between Icelandic filmmakers and the national literary heritage.

One of the numerous merits of Pascale Casanova's essential work *La République mondiale des lettres* [*The World Republic of Letters*] is her explication of an “international literary space”<sup>5</sup>. It strives to explain how national literatures are evaluated through international competition. As with most other things, there is great inequality to be found between large and small nations. Casanova defines small countries by their marginalized languages and their lack of literary tradition (as compared to English or French)<sup>6</sup>. As regards the first criterion Iceland may be small, but its long and voluminous literary tradition grants it some weight in the international literary space: “In the world republic of letters, the richest spaces are also the oldest, which is to say the ones that were the first to enter

into literary competition and whose national classics came also to be regarded as universal classics” (82-83).<sup>7</sup> The active promotion of the literary heritage abroad, organized or not, attempts to further centre Icelandic literature (and by implication the nation) in the international literary space: “In proclaiming the antiquity of their literary foundation and stressing the continuity of their national history, nations seek to establish themselves as legitimate contestants in international competition” (2004 240).<sup>8</sup> Thus, as with many other things, national pride is generated by foreign appreciation.

Casanova’s model applies equally well to the intrinsic ties between national revival (or the modern construction of nationhood) in Iceland and the rise of Romanticism in the nineteenth century along with that of the novel in the twentieth. As she says: “In the case of ‘small’ countries, the emergence of a new literature is indissociable from the appearance of a new nation” (104).<sup>9</sup> The Icelandic Romanticists instigated a “nascent literary space” by turning what were “merely” stories, oral or written, into literature through a process Casanova defines as *littérisation*: “Ancient legends and traditional narratives, unearthed and ennobled, gradually came to inspire countless poems, novels, stories, and plays” (2004 226).<sup>10</sup> As already mentioned, this process culminated in the novels of Laxness, whose international pedigree further enforced his national pedigree and cultural capital. It is noteworthy that the novels by Laxness (save for his late modernist period) have arguably more in common with the nineteenth-century novel than early twentieth-century European modernism. Again, Casanova’s historical model provides an explanation by claiming that it is only after a national tradition has established itself that formal revolts can take place: “Whereas national writers, fomenters of the first literary revolts, rely on the literary models of national tradition, international writers draw upon this transnational repertoire of literary techniques in order to escape being imprisoned in national tradition” (2004 327).<sup>11</sup> As the novel had only just about established itself as *the* national medium in Iceland at mid-twentieth century, the arrival of modernism was accordingly delayed. If the 1960s saw a formal revolt take place in Icelandic prose, including Laxness’s own novel *Kristnihald undir jökli* [*Under the Glacier*], Icelandic national cinema took little notice of it when established in the early 1980s (following the founding of the Icelandic Film Fund in 1978) and reverted to the older tradition. However, the precedent was set long before, when explicitly national stories began gracing the silver screen in the early twentieth century—but with a notable twist.

## The Neoromantic Varangians: Harrowing nature in theatre, novel and film

Although the Romanticists had instigated an Icelandic literary space, a country of less than 100,000 inhabitants, most of whom were poor farmers, offered little in terms of writing careers. In fact, Hallgrímsson and most of his fellow Romanticists were students in Copenhagen who composed poetry in their free time. Thus, when in the first decades of the twentieth century a new generation of aspiring writers desired to devote themselves fully to literature it was only logical that they should try their luck in Copenhagen—since Iceland was at the time a colony of Denmark, they were Danish citizens after all. Falling within that brief return to Romanticism in the early twentieth century imaginatively titled Neoromanticism, they have been grouped together in Icelandic literary history as the Varangians, evoking the travels of Vikings during the golden age.<sup>12</sup>

Most prominent of the Neoromantic Varangians were Jóhann Sigurjónsson, Guðmundur Kamban and Gunnar Gunnarsson. Their work could be defined as transnational, with one nation being displayed/narrated for the audience/readership of another, as it dealt almost solely with Iceland but was written in Danish.<sup>13</sup> Consequently the national status of the Neoromanticists was and remains shrouded in uncertainty, and the writers in question have been somewhat marginalized in Icelandic literary history as they wrote primarily in Danish, and mostly erased from Danish literary history as they were Icelandic. In this they were primary examples of what Casanova has named the tragedy of translated men:

As “translated men,” they are caught in a dramatic structural contradiction that forces them to choose between translation into a literary language that cuts them off from their compatriots, but that gives them literary existence, and retreat into a small language that condemns them to invisibility or else to a purely national literary existence.<sup>14</sup>  
(2004 257)

Considering their transnational status, albeit a qualified one, it is perhaps a little surprising that their work should be the first “Icelandic” literature to be adapted to the global medium of cinema.

Jóhann Sigurjónsson came to prominence earliest when his play *Bjærg-Ejvind og hans hustru* [*The Outlaw and his Wife*] became a major hit when staged in Copenhagen in 1912.<sup>15</sup> It was based on the life of the eighteenth-century Icelandic outlaw Mountain-Eyvindur whose legend had achieved mythical status. In the play Eyvindur, disguised under the name Kári, works as a labourer at a rich farm owned and run by the widow Halla, and the two soon become romantically

involved. However, Halla is also being pursued by the county magistrate Björn who exposes Kári's real identity when she refuses Björn's marriage proposal. Halla and Eyvindur escape to the mountains where despite considerable hardship they live happily for years along with their daughter Tóta and fellow outlaw Arnes. Eventually, though, their hide-out is discovered by Björn and his posse. Again Halla and Eyvindur escape, but not without a sacrifice. At the play's climax Halla throws Tóta, now three years old, down a waterfall rather than have her captured by Björn. The final scene depicts Halla and Eyvindur as having grown distant from one another and suffering from hunger in old age as a blizzard rages outside their shelter.

In addition to setting and characters, local specificities are presented in referencing the sagas, the location of Eyvindur's hideout in *Hveravellir*, and the national cuisine in the form of shark and the spirit *brennivín*—which also remains a quintessential national signifier in more recent films like *Stuttur Frakki* [*Behind Schedule*] (1993, Gísli Snær Erlingsson) and *Á köldum klaka* [*Cold Fever*] (1995, Friðrik Þór Friðriksson). A strong correlation is made between Iceland's extraordinary nature and the play's larger-than-life characters. Eyvindur himself proclaims: "Jeg er Bjærgenes Konge. Ilden paa min Arne gaar aldrig ud, hverken Dag eller Nat. Hele Landet er mit, saa langt jeg kan øjne. Det er mine Jøkler, som danner Elvene; naar jeg bliver vred, vokser de—Stenene skærer Tænder under Strømmen..." [I am king of the hills! The fire on my hearth never dies, day or night. The country is mine, as far as my eyes can reach. Mine are the glaciers that make the streams! When I get angry, they swell, and the stones gnash their teeth against the current...] (1911 69-70; 1916 36). This exotic primitivism was to become typical of the representation of Iceland in the works of the Varangians.

Following its success in Copenhagen *Bjærg-Ejvind og hans hustru* was widely translated and staged around Europe. In Sweden it was directed by Victor Sjöström, who also played the role of Eyvindur. Sigurjónsson himself encouraged Sjöström, who had already directed a number of films, to adapt the play. The resulting film was released in 1917 and was to become pivotal for the international breakthrough of Swedish cinema at large and the career of Sjöström in particular, which would take him to Hollywood a few years later. Sigurjónsson on the other hand was to die prematurely in 1919.

Presenting dialogue through intertitles in often unchanged form, Sjöström's film adaptation is remarkably faithful in every regard. As a consequence certain portions of the film are quite theatrical, but the film comes into its own during the mountain scenes. It is ultimately the representation of nature that sets the film apart from the play. Certainly, the play goes to great lengths in presenting harrowing natural settings, e.g. the rather detailed scene at the beginning of the third part involves a deep river canyon, a waterfall, a glacier and walls of lava. Clearly, it is a scene that is not easily staged realistically in a theatre, while cinema can capture nature without any props or special effects. Filmed in the Lapland of



northern Sweden, as Iceland was not a feasible option due to WWI, *Berg-Ejvind och hans hustru* [*The Outlaw and his Wife*](1917) captures the robust and harrowing natural settings of Sigurjónsson's play in a manner not possible on stage. Sigurjónsson himself acknowledged this: "[The] heaven above [Eyvindur and Halla.] The stars. The night. The morning with its gentle light and the day with its long shadows. Sjöström has penetrated deeply into the heart of the poem before translating it to the screen, so as if to give it back to me, enriched and saturated with beauty ... I have no hesitation in declaring what Victor Sjöström has succeeded in doing here as metteur-en-scène and director, as being a work of genius" (as quoted by Forslund 68). In a review of *Bjærg-Ejvind og hans hustru* the influential French critic Louis Delluc also picked up on the particular ability of cinema to capture nature: "And the public is swept away with emotion. For the public is awestruck by the barren landscapes, the mountains, the rustic costumes, both the austere ugliness and the acute lyricism of such closely observed feelings, the truthfulness of the long scenes which focus exclusively on the couple, the violent struggles, the high tragic end of the two aged lovers who escape life through a final embrace in a desert-like snowscape" (188). The few changes Sjöström made involved first and foremost staging scenes that had only been presented through dialogue in the play. Most important of these is the scene in which Eyvindur can be seen hanging off a high and steep cliff on a rope, while Arnes (Nils Arehn) infatuated by Halla (Edith Erastoff) flirts with the idea of cutting the rope. In the play Arnes does confess to Halla about the incident, but it is never staged. The film scene created on the basis of the dialogue is striking evidence of cinema's particular ability to capture nature.

I also draw attention to this scene because a very similar scene forms the climax of Guðmundur Kamban's play and film *Hadda Padda*. Working as a playwright and a stage director in Copenhagen, Kamban had his first and perhaps greatest success when *Hadda Padda* was staged in 1914. Although set in contemporary Iceland, *Hadda Padda* was clearly somewhat influenced by *Bjærg-Ejvind og hans hustru* in that it relies on a similar romantic correlation between Iceland's barren nature and the emotional extremes of its characters. Kamban was soon to turn to more cosmopolitan and modern themes, setting many of his plays in New York, but he reverted to *Hadda Padda* (1924) when directing his first film ten years later. The title character (Clara Pontoppidan) is devoted to her parents and fiancé Ingólfur (Svend Methling) while her younger sister Krístrún (Alice Frederiksen) mischievously replaces one boyfriend with another. *Hadda Padda*'s character changes quickly after Ingólfur breaks off their engagement having been seduced by Krístrún. At the play's climax *Hadda Padda* tries to take Ingólfur with her when she throws herself down a sheer cliff.

Apart from the role of Kamban himself, both film and play were first and foremost Danish productions. In fact, the film's indoor scenes bear a much greater resemblance to Danish interiors than Icelandic ones, as they were shot in a studio

in Copenhagen. However, in line with the work's romanticization of Icelandic nature, the outdoor scenes were shot in Iceland. Stage descriptions had created various challenges for theatrical productions, as in the case of *Bjærg-Ejvind og hans hustru* earlier, and almost resulted in the play not being staged at all. Most notable in this regard is the fourth and last part where the final encounter between Ingólfur and Hadda Padda is set in a deep ravine, with a waterfall in the background and a receding mist.<sup>16</sup> If the framing and other camerawork of the filmed scene remains theatrical, the film images fully capture the harrowing natural setting. Ingólfur and supporting character Steindór (Paul Rohde) help Hadda Padda rappel down a ravine with a rope tied around her waist as she claims to have dropped a jewel off the edge. Her devious and desperate plan is to pull Ingólfur, who has the other end of the rope wrapped around himself, down with her and thus unite both in death as they had been previously in life. Being pulled towards the edge Ingólfur and Steindór finally realize her intentions. The latter calls out to Ingólfur: "Du maa slippe Rebet. Det er det eneste Raad. Det er bedre, hun styrter ned alene, end at hun trækker os begge med sig. Du maa slippe. Ellers slipper jeg." [You must let go of the rope. That's all you can do. It is better that she falls alone, than that she drag both of us with her. You must let go. Or I'll let go.] (1914 121; 1917 79). Ingólfur will not hear of it but when he is about to succeed in pulling Hadda Padda back to safety she cuts the rope with a knife and falls to her death.

The similarities between this scene and the one in *Bjærg-Ejvind og hans hustru* are striking: the harrowing natural setting, the central character hanging on a rope off a sheer cliff, the question of letting go of the rope, and close-ups in both films of the knife cutting at the rope. In this as much else, the first two major Icelandic successes on the Danish stage appealed to the audience by extensive paralleling of Icelandic nature and the high emotional intensity of their central characters, and when filmed revealed the medium's unique capability in capturing extreme natural settings. Nature has ever since remained the defining character of much Icelandic cinema.

In the long run the most successful of the Icelandic writers in Copenhagen was novelist Gunnar Gunnarsson. In 1912 he not only helped Sigurjónsson translate *Bjærg-Ejvind og hans hustru* to Icelandic but also published his first novel *Ormarr Ørlygsson*. It was to become the first volume in *Af Borgslægtens historie* [*The Story of the Borg Family*], but it was the third volume *Gæst den enøjede* [*Guest the One-Eyed*] that turned out to be his breakthrough, and *The Story of the Borg Family* was eventually translated into thirteen languages.<sup>17</sup> It is characterized by the same romantic presentation of Iceland as *Bjærg-Ejvind og hans hustru* and *Hadda Padda*. However, it often makes explicit what is only implicit in the plays. For example, the very opening of *Ormarr Ørlygsson* lists over ten place names in describing its setting. Cultural specificities are described in detail and the ethnic origins of the Borg family are traced to Norwegians and Celts. Repeatedly it reverts to characters'

love for both land and nature. *Af Borgslægtens historie* is a family saga reflecting the state of the nation through three generations, including the ties to Denmark and emigration to North America. In this it fully supports the case made for the extremely strong ties between novel and nation, although its national status is complicated by being written in Danish.

At the center of the novel are the rich and powerful farmer Örlygur and his two sons Ormar and Ketill. Ormar, who is ten years older than Ketill, is described as lofty and dreamy but also melancholic and heavy-hearted. The emotional range of the character is romantically seen as stemming from Icelandic nature:

Det tunge Drømmersind, der glødede i hans mørke Øjnes ofte fraværende og fanatiske Blik, røbede det frodige og barokke Fantasiliv, som den islandske Naturs ensomme, mægtige—paa engang frodige og barsk-golde—Vælde, har fremelsket som et Hovedtræk i sine Børns Karakter.  
(1912 42)

[The wistful, dreamy thoughts that burned in his dark, passionate eyes, betrayed that rich and abundant imagination peculiar to the sons of Iceland, fostered by the great solitude and desolate yet fertile grandeur of the land itself.]  
(1922 32-33)

The oppositional elements of Ormar's character are also found in his equal devotion to both father and farm, and conversely his desire to travel and see the world outside Iceland. Although not concurring with his son's dreamy and artistic bent, Örlygur arranges for him to go to Copenhagen to study his treasured violin. However, on his debut ten years later, and all set to conquer the music world with his natural talent, Ormar unexpectedly throws away all tradition and regresses to "primeval nakedness": "Og pludselig kom der over ham en uimodstaelig Lyst til med et Sæt at give dem Liv. ... [at] ruske i dem og ryste dem til deres inderste Sjæl, slænge, sem Vulkanen slænger sin glødende Ildmasse." [Then suddenly there came over him an irresistible desire to jerk [the audience] back to life. ... To tear at their sense, to render their innermost souls, to fling at them, like a fiery volcanic eruption] (1912 92-93; 1922 62).<sup>18</sup> Having thus forfeited his career by breaking all the rules—however brilliantly—Ormar returns to Iceland.

His second stay in Copenhagen is more successful as he becomes a respected and extremely wealthy businessman. The second return to Iceland is, however, anything but pleasant as his brother Ketill, now a pastor, is also returning with his new Danish wife Alma despite having earlier seduced their foster sister Rúna. To save the reputation of the family Ormar marries the pregnant Rúna and settles at the Borg farm. Having himself had eyes on Borg, Ketill uses the authority of his pastoral position to turn the congregation against Ormar and Örlygur. However, in what was to be Ketill's moment of triumph, the exposure of Ormar and Rúna's

supposedly illicit child ultimately reveals his own wrongdoings. The events leave his father dead and his wife mad, and Ketill disappears and is believed to have committed suicide. The third volume opens many years later with an encounter between Örlygur, the son of Ketill and Rúna, and a highly respected ascetic wanderer, the one-eyed Gestur of its title, who turns out to be Ketill who has returned to Borg before his death. A changed man, he is redeemed through his faith in God and forgiven by all. Ketill/Gestur can now be linked to the land like Ormar earlier: “Alt dette ...bragte den samtidig i saa stærk en Harmoni med det vilde og forrevne Landskab, at den ligesom hørte dér og ingen andre Steder hjemme.” [He had a peculiarly close relationship with the ghostly and desolate land of the wilderness. It was as if he belonged there and nowhere else] (1913b 4; 1944 261).<sup>19</sup>

The explicit ties made between Ormar and Gestur’s perceived Icelandicness and their harsh natural surroundings were already evident in Hadda Padda and Eyvindur/Kári. However, the implicit opposition between modernized and civil Denmark and the archaic and primitive Iceland of the plays is first explicitly asserted in the novel. Ormar’s dreams of going abroad are equally dreams of encountering modernity, which are contrasted with Iceland’s pre-modern working methods and traditional culture:

Den store Verden raabte paa ham, og alt hans Blod higede mod den. Han vidste at der ude, hvor han nu kom til, fandtes forunderlige Maskiner, der udrettede Menneskearbejde. ... Han længtes efter at komme til at tænde et Lys blot ved at dreje paa en Knap. Og tale med at Menneske langt borte gennem en Traad, som han forestillede sig hul indvendig. ... Han skulde bo i en By, hvor Gaderne var som dybe Spalter mellem kæmpemæssige Klipper—rigtige befolkede Klipper, ikke med Jætter og Elverfolk, men med Mennesker af Kød og Blod.  
(1912 64)

The great world called to him, and every fibre in him answered to the call. He knew that there, where he was going, were wonderful machines contrived to do the work of men. ... Think—to fill a room with light by the mere turning of a switch! And talk with people through a wire—which he imagined as hollow ... He would live in a city with streets like deep chasms between unscalable cliffs—cave-hollowed cliffs peopled with human beings, instead of giants and goblins.  
(1922 44)

In fact, Ormar’s economic success is a modern shipping empire that also literally imports modernity to Iceland from Europe. However, the concluding image of the Icelander is not Ormar the cosmopolitan businessman, who has in fact given up his business to become a farmer at Borg, but Gestur the one-eyed who roams the Icelandic wilderness having reached the heights of asceticism (the ultimate

opposition to modern life) in order to pay for his uncivilized and unrestrained crimes.

Many Icelanders were concerned about the image of the country presented in foreign films, and its real or perceived backwardness was particularly resented. As Helga Kress points out, some Icelanders found the Neoromantic image of Iceland presented in Denmark questionable as well (166). It was an image after all intended to appeal to a Danish audience and readership rather than an Icelandic one. If such was the general drift of the work generated by Icelandic authors writing in Denmark in the early twentieth century, the second volume of Gunnarsson's novel *Den danske frue på Hof* [*The Danish Lady at Hof*] went to unparalleled lengths in this regard. Although narrated in the third-person it often presents Alma's subjective perspective of Iceland:

Alt dette var so fremmed, at nu, da hun betragtede det med Ro og Eftertanke, virkede det overvældende, virkelighedsfjernt og utroligt paa én Gang. Hun sad og kom til at fryse indvendig. Hun mindedes et flygtigt Indtryk fra Borg, før om Dagen. Hun havde staaet et Øjeblik og set udover Bygden, Fjeldene og Havet; og det havde slaaet hende, at kun Havet havde en grøn Farve. Alle Enge, og Tunene omkring Gaardene, saa' gule og falmede ud. Det Efteraarsgrønne, hun var vant til fra Markerne hjemme i Danmark, saa's ingen Steder.  
(1913a 10)

[It was all so strange to her that now, looking at it calmly, it seemed unreal, incredible. Alma turned cold at heart as she looked. She remembered her first survey of the landscape earlier in the day, from Borg; she had found nothing green in it all save the sea. All the meadows and pastures round the house seemed withered and grey; the autumn green of the field in Denmark was nowhere to be seen.]  
(1922 112)

Similar introductory descriptions of the country also take place through dialogue:

-: Det glæder mig, at du ikke føler dig frastødt af Landet.  
-: Frastødt? — Jeg føler mig bjergtagen. Min Vilje har pludselig forladt mig og er bleven til en Skæbne udenfor mig — og udenfor min Sjæls og min Forstands Rækkevidde. Og jeg føler en vis grublandet Lykke ved, at det er store og fjerne Magter, som styrer mit Liv.  
-: Bare du ikke bliver overtroisk. Det er nu Folks Fejl her i Landet, at de tror paa Gengangere, Fylgjer, Varsler, Skæbne og al Slags Djævelskab.  
(1913a 27)

[Ketill:]: Well, I'm glad you do not find the country altogether forbidding, Many people do, you know.

- [Alma:]: Forbidding! I feel as if I were under a spell. No will of my own, just a thing in the hands of Fate. And I love the feeling that there are great and distant powers that have taken my life into their hands.
- [Ketill:]: You had better be careful, or you will be growing superstitious—it is a common failing among the people here. They believe in all kinds of spirits, portents, omens, fate, and all that sort of thing.
- (1922 121)

Thus a Danish readership is invited to experience and get to know Iceland through the character of Alma and share her bewilderment, fear and fascination. In this *Den danske frue på Hof* remarkably foreshadows the central transnational strategy of contemporary Icelandic cinema—the bewildered foreigner visiting the country (again *Stuttur Frakki* and *Á köldum klaka* could be taken as examples). This is quite an exceptional strategy for Icelandic literature as, even though many novels will make use of foreign characters, the novels themselves are not available to foreign readers given that they are written in Icelandic.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand many recent Icelandic films have followed the example of the novel *Af Borgslægtens historie* by reverting to a foreign language in inviting a foreign readership/audience to visit Iceland.<sup>21</sup>

Along with its commercial success this narrative technique made *Af Borgslægtens historie* feasible for adaptation. Filmed in the summer of 1919, it was a Nordisk Film production with primarily Danish cast and crew, including director Gunnar Sommerfeldt who also played Ketill/Gestur. However, authenticity was secured by shooting both interior and exterior scenes in Iceland, having Gunnarsson join the crew in an advisory capacity, and casting the Icelander Guðmundur Thorsteinsson as the spirited Ormar. The filmmakers went to great lengths in faithfully following the extensive and episodic scope of the novel, resulting in the epic length of three and a half hours (at least as it was screened in two parts in Iceland).<sup>22</sup> Nature settings take centre place as before in both *Berg-Ejvind och hans hustru* and *Hadda Padda*, and the film cinematically intertwines these and Ormar's character along the lines of the novel. Most effective in this regard are shots of Ormar playing the violin in a medium close-up superimposed over various shots of mountains, rivers and waterfalls. As if not fully trusting the visuals, intertitles assert: "I sit Spil fremtryllede han sit skønne Lands paa een Gang frodige og barske Vælde..." [With the violin's tones he called forth the beauty and the awesomeness of his land.]<sup>23</sup> Ormar might very well be the first of Icelandic cinema's many children of nature.

This period of Icelandic literature came to an end almost as quickly as it had begun, and although Gunnarsson and Kamban continued to work and write in Danish they soon parted with their Neoromantic roots. There seem to be at least two reasons for this turnaround. Jón Yngvi Jóhannsson has argued that Danish-Icelandic literature, as he refers to the works of the Varangians, functioned

as a counter-identity for the Danish audience/readership (40-41).<sup>24</sup> Although there is no question that the Icelandic writers had themselves enforced the notion of Icelandic primitivism, they resented being relegated in the long run to the status of regional artists or even cultural ethnographers. The establishing of a sovereign Icelandic state in 1918, although under the Danish king, caused various political complications and made their works somewhat nationally and even politically suspect (*ibid.*). Following a strict nation-state demarcation, Danish-Icelandic literature was nothing but Danish, but after 1918 a broader horizon introduced other destinations than Copenhagen. If you wanted to make it in the big world why not go to Hollywood?—that is what Halldór Laxness did.

## Anxiety of influence: Laxness and sagas

If contemporary Icelandic literature must linger in the shadow of Halldór Laxness and the sagas, cinema must do so twice over as in Iceland the medium itself is perceived to be secondary to literature in terms of cultural prestige. It is fitting that it was during the sovereign year of 1918 that Laxness, only sixteen years old, wrote his first novel, *Barn náttúrunnar* [*Child of Nature*]. As suggested by its title it was influenced by Neoromanticism, and although generally considered a minor work in the Laxness oeuvre, it would seem to have been influential enough to lend its name to possibly the best-known film of Icelandic cinema outside Iceland—*Barn náttúrunnar* [*Children of Nature*] (1992, Friðrik Þór Friðriksson). But if Laxness also followed in the footsteps of the Varangians by trying his luck in Copenhagen, where he wrote a few Neoromantic short stories (including *Den Tusindaarige Islænding* [*The Thousand Year Old Icelander*]) for newspapers, he seems to have had little interest in establishing himself as a writer in Danish.<sup>25</sup> He soon traveled to other European countries and towards the end of 1927 he arrived in Los Angeles ready to make his way in the movies.

During his short stay Laxness wrote two film treatments, *Kári Káran* or [*Judged by a Dog*] and *Salka Valka* or [*A Woman in Pants*].<sup>26</sup> Despite hiring an agent, changing his name to Hall d'Or, and getting in touch with talent connected to Iceland, including western star Bill Cody and director Sjöström (now Seastrom), Laxness's hopes of getting the treatments filmed came to naught. In a letter written in June 1928 Laxness asserts that MGM had agreed to film *Salka Valka* that same summer in Iceland (Halldór Guðmundsson 2008 144). However, nothing came of MGM's tentative plans and Laxness soon left Hollywood disillusioned. His encounter with the American social-realist novel was to have a more lasting impact upon him than Hollywood, and when Laxness finally returned to California in 1959 he was there to visit Upton Sinclair among other old acquaintances (Halldór Guðmundsson 2008 391).

If Neoromanticism had run its course in literature and theatre, its melodramatic extremes were ideally suited to Hollywood, and the film treatment of *Salka Valka* bears witness to this. Laxness's "topography" could well be used as a definition of Icelandic Neoromanticism: "An atmosphere of hard struggle for life, and misery. Uncultivated passions. The characters are rude, naïve and primitive. Nature is phenomenally barren and wild; the sea is usually restless and the psychology of the characters is closely tied together with this wild nature" (2004 11). The orphan girl Salka Valka grows up among boys and must make a living like a man in adulthood, while refusing the advances made by the upper-class Angantyr and the vulgar brute Arnaldur. The latter saves her from an organized gang-rape attempt by fighting the culprits, but ends up having an erotically charged fight with Salka Valka himself. Nonetheless, she refuses Angantyr's marriage proposal and is seen "kissing [Arnaldur's whip!] with all the voluptuousness and pathos of the primitive" (2004 18). In general, the treatment follows the Neoromantic portrayal of Icelanders as primitives (and "primitive" is truly the key word of the treatment repeated over and over again) resulting from the harsh natural conditions. Laxness, in fact, partly earned a living in Hollywood by giving atmospheric lectures on Iceland, in which among other things he praised the literary merit of Jóhann Sigurjónsson, Guðmundur Kamban and Gunnar Gunnarsson (Halldór Guðmundsson 2008 141).<sup>27</sup> The character of Salka Valka as a strong independent woman inherently tied to nature—not to mention her name—owed a lot to both Halla and Hadda Padda. Such "girls of nature" have also become a cornerstone of Icelandic cinema and were for example recently reincarnated in the characters played by Margrét Vilhjálmsdóttir in both *Mávahlátur* [*The Seagull's Laughter*] (2001, Ágúst Guðmundsson) and *Fálkar* [*Falcons*] (2002, Friðrik Þór Friðriksson).

Despite working on an English translation of *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* [*The Great Weaver of Kashmir*], his breakthrough novel in Iceland, while in Hollywood, and harbouring hopes of success in the US as elsewhere, Laxness does not seem to have been interested in becoming a writer in English any more than in Danish. It is illuminating to compare the film treatment of *Salka Valka* and the novel eventually written in 1931-1932; the difference between the two is suggestive of the different relations of the two media to nation. Although the film was to be set in Iceland, it offered only a superficial glimpse of the country, relying on an excessively stereotypical vision of Iceland (which could be replaced by any forlorn place in the world). But then it was a script written for Hollywood with Greta Garbo in mind. The novel on the other hand is written in Icelandic and gives an extensive and detailed commentary on the nation. Devoid of its Neoromantic roots in the film treatment, the fishing village of the novel has become something of a microcosm of Icelandic society in the political turmoil of the early twentieth century—and the "primitive" whip has been put aside. The US publication of the



novel hit the nail on the head by extending the title to *Salka Valka: A Novel of Iceland* (1936).

Considering the novel's origin in a film treatment, it is perhaps appropriate that *Salka Valka* was the first of Laxness's works to be adapted to film (1954). It was also the first project instigated by the company Edda-film, which had been established with the specific purpose of bringing the national literary heritage to the screen, but the production was ultimately a Swedish one—directed by Arne Mattson, shot by Sven Nykvist, with the adult Salka Valka played by Gunnel Broström.<sup>28</sup> The film contrasts grotesque interior scenes shot in a studio in Sweden and characterized by menacing lighting with breathtaking panoramas of Icelandic nature perfectly captured on location by Nykvist. This is no mere visual contrast as Icelandic nature is presented as having notably redeeming qualities as compared to the misery of life in the village. The reunion and climax of the film depicts Salka Valka and Arnaldur (no longer the brute of the film treatment) alone in spectacular natural surroundings with an elevated music score. In this *Salka Valka* perfectly foreshadowed the role of nature in much of Icelandic cinema to come.

However, the first domestically produced film adaptation of a Laxness novel did not materialize until 1984 when Þorsteinn Jónsson's *Atómstöðin* [*Atomic Station*] premiered. In the quarter of a century that has since passed only two more adaptations of Laxness's work have seen the light of day, *Kristnihald undir jökli* [*Under the Glacier*] (1989) and *Ungfrúin góða og húsið* [*Honour of the House*] (1999)—both directed by Laxness's daughter Guðný Halldórsdóttir. Thus even today Laxness's most celebrated novels, *Sjálfstætt fólk* [*Independent People*], *Heimsljós* [*World Light*], and *Íslandsklukkan* have still not been filmed and Arne Mattson's version of *Salka Valka* remains its only adaptation. The reasons are no doubt varied. Due to their extensive scope the novels are not easily adapted to film without substantial changes.<sup>29</sup> Also, as period pieces they would call for high budgets, making them an economical challenge for a small national cinema. In many ways the novels are better suited to television serials similar to those produced by the British Broadcasting Corporation presenting the works of Charles Dickens or Jane Austen. However, the financial resources of Icelandic television are even more meagre than those of its film industry. Thus the only two elaborate Laxness adaptations made for television were extensive European co-productions directed by Rolf Hädrich—*Brekkukotsannáll* [*The Fish Can Sing*] (1972) and *Paradísarheimt* [*Paradise Reclaimed*] (1980). Perhaps due to his geographical distance Hädrich approached his source rather more freely than his Icelandic colleagues—adding a self-reflexive frame story to *Brekkukotsannáll* while still remaining faithful to the original text.

Unlike the novella *Ungfrúin góða og húsið*, the novels *Atómstöðin* and *Kristnihald undir jökli* are important works of Laxness's oeuvre, but they are hardly at the centre of the canon. They are also more manageable for film adaptation since their scope is more restrained temporally and spatially than the epic span of *Sjálfstætt fólk*, *Heimsljós* and *Íslandsklukkan*. However, the extreme reverence in

which Laxness's key works are held has had an equally inhibiting effect. This reverence would seem to have discouraged filmmakers from taking creative liberties with the original novels that could have helped overcome financial obstacles. Perhaps the novels' explicit and apparently unseverable ties to Icelandic history and society also make them difficult material for the transnational production practices typical of today's European cinema. On the other hand, the considerable international renown of Laxness would surely be of help in foreign marketing and Laxness would certainly be likely to attract the local audience to theatres.

Some of the difficulties and limitations of a small national cinema are crystallized in the long-delayed production of *Sjálfstætt fólk* as this most treasured work of modern Icelandic literature waits to be filmed—in English. According to the project's producer Snorri Þórisson, it is the desire to give the novel a respectful adaptation that calls for an English language production as it allows for a much higher budget (2004). Þórisson believes that a film adaptation of *Sjálfstætt fólk* would have a considerable global potential as it has for long been the best-selling Icelandic novel in translation. Furthermore, he points out that even though its central character may be “specifically Icelandic, people around the world can relate to him.” In fact, as scripted by Ruth Prawer Jhabvala (whose credits include *A Room with a View* [1985] and *Howards End* [1992]), the proposed film is very much along the lines of the English heritage school, famous for its many faithful adaptations. However, *Sjálfstætt fólk* still awaits filming.

A common misconception regarding Icelandic film history is the supposedly great role of the sagas in Icelandic cinema.<sup>30</sup> But if the works of Laxness have been notably underexplored by Icelandic filmmakers, the sagas have been spectacularly ignored. The fact remains that only a single saga has been adapted to the screen, *Gísla saga Súrssonar* [*Gisli Sursson's Saga*] in Ágúst Guðmundsson's *Útlaginn* [*The Outlaw*] (1981), and although important to the canon holds little of the extreme reverence shown *Njáls saga* and *Egils saga*. *Útlaginn* was a remarkably faithful adaptation of the original source and also its historical setting. In fact, the film's narrative is almost unfathomable without a prior knowledge of the Saga, making the film incomprehensible to most foreign viewers. However, at this early point the foreign market was of little concern to Icelandic filmmakers, and *Útlaginn's* domestic box-office success and subsequent place alongside the original *Gísla saga Súrssonar* on the national elementary school curriculum should have provided plenty of impetus for further saga adaptations. However, subsequently it was only director Hrafn Gunnlaugsson who was to approach the Viking heritage, but although originating from an aborted adaptation of *Gerpla*, Laxness's satirical take on the saga heritage, his *Hrafninn flýgur* [*When the Raven Flies*] (1984) was neither a literary adaptation nor a historical reenactment. It simply handled some of the heritage's themes and tropes, and quite cavalierly at that. In fact, Gunnlaugsson opted for a generic approach that bore a greater

resemblance to the works of directors Akira Kurosawa and Sergio Leone than the reverent approach of *Útlaginn* (Sørenssen). It is difficult to determine whether these choices indicate an unusual fearlessness on the part of the director or are simply strategies intended to sidestep the weight of the saga literature—its anxiety of influence. Regardless, the difference in approach no doubt also helps to account for the greater international success of *Hrafninn flýgur*, and the subsequent Scandinavian production partnership of its two follow-ups *Í skugga hrafnins* [*In the Shadow of the Raven*] (1988) and *Hvítu víkingurinn* [*The White Viking*] (1991). Indeed, Gunnlaugsson's Scandinavian (albeit primarily Swedish) success and financial support in depicting Iceland's "primitive" past is more than a little reminiscent of the Varangians of the early twentieth century.

Apart from *Útlaginn* and Gunnlaugsson's Viking trilogy the literary heritage has been all but evaded. The sagas do call for extensive budgets in the manner of the longer novels by Laxness, but if *Gísla saga Súrssonar* could be filmed with the meagre financial sources of the early 1980s (although with a more manageable scope than much of the saga canon), budget restraints are hardly the primary obstacle. Furthermore, from a narrative point of view, the sagas are in many ways splendid material for adaptation. Their highly objective third-person narration, in which feelings and emotions are revealed through action and dialogue, is quite comparable to conventional film narration. Additionally, they are characterized by dramatic situations, exciting plots, colourful characters, and set in spectacular natural surroundings—the hallmark of Icelandic cinema. The only credible explanation for the lack of interest in the saga heritage on the part of Icelandic filmmakers is the extreme reverence in which the sagas are held and anxiety regarding the reception of filmed adaptations. A notable exception is Friðrik Þór Friðriksson's experimental short *Brennu-Njáls saga* (1981)—another common title for *Njáls saga* that could be literally rendered in English as *Burnt Njáls saga*. Friðriksson's short consists literally of a copy of the book being burned. Although thus a critique of the national celebration of the literary heritage, the film also crystallizes the underlying anxiety toward it. Having apparently overcome his anxiety, or at the very least his aversion to adapting the literary heritage, Friðriksson had planned to direct the most expensive Icelandic film to date. The film in question, the Viking epic *Óvinafagnaður* [*A Gathering of Foes*], was to be based on a contemporary novel in which author Einar Kárason had rewritten the medieval *Sturlunga Saga*, but as in the case of Þórisson's *Sjálfstætt fólk*, the project could not be financed and has been shelved.

In fact, the history of Icelandic saga adaptations is one of broken promises and unrealized projects. In 1923 the plans of Danish director Carl Theodore Dreyer to make two saga adaptations, with Guðmundur Kamban as an advisor, came to naught.<sup>31</sup> But it is the continued deferral of filming *Njáls saga*, the most treasured of all the sagas, that could be said to constitute a running thread throughout the sporadic production history of Icelandic cinema. Already in 1919, a group of

entrepreneurs had plans of filming the Saga that never materialized. It probably came closest to being adapted to the screen during the mid 1960s when Guðlaugur Rósinkranz finished a script of the Saga intended for an Edda-film production. In the event, the company failed to secure both foreign co-producers and financial support from the state. Burdened by fidelity, the surviving script displays few attempts at confining the Saga's epic scope, and would no doubt have resulted in a heavy-handed film.<sup>32</sup>

If Edda-film never succeeded in adapting *Njáls saga* into a feature, it did produce a documentary short about the Saga and participated in the making of a transnational Viking film. *Fögur er hliðin* [*Iceland: Island of Sagas*] (1954, Rune Lindström) depicted some of *Njáls saga*'s important locations in addition to staging certain key events. In 2003 another such film was directed by Björn Br. Björnsson for television, mixing educational material with similar staging. At the time of writing, Baltasar Kormákur, director of adaptations *101 Reykjavík* (2000) and *Mýrin* [*Jar City*] (2006), both of which achieved a degree of international exhibition and festival success, has ambitious plans of his own for filming *Njáls saga*, and, as with Friðriksson's *Óvinafagnaður*, this adaptation is supposed to become the most expensive film to be made in Iceland. It remains to be seen whether Kormákur will be more successful than his many predecessors in bringing his ambitious saga project to the screen, but it would seem that *Njáls saga* is already making way for some kind of Viking genre-bender inspired by Saga events or themes (Jakob).

Something else altogether, Gabriel Axel's *Den røde kappe* [*The Red Mantle*] (1967) was a project that Edda-film agreed to participate in, since it was being shot in Iceland, though Edda finally had little say in it. Abstract and formalistic, the end result proved to be something close to the exact opposite of what Edda-film had had in mind with the adaptation of *Njáls saga*. *Den røde kappe* was also poorly received on its initial release in Iceland, and continues to be an object of ridicule. Even Birgir Thor Møller describes it in his recent survey of Icelandic film history as "pretentious [and] inadvertently comic" (310). Quite the contrary, *Den røde kappe* is among the most aesthetically innovative feature films shot in Iceland and its creative handling of Icelandic landscape remains unparalleled.<sup>33</sup> Considering local expectations regarding the saga heritage and the Viking era, it is easy to understand the resistance with which the film was received among Icelandic spectators. Importantly, rather than an adaptation of the Icelandic literary heritage, it was based on the seventh book of Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum* [*The History of the Danes*], and displayed no interest in realistically depicting the Viking world, which, like the Icelandic landscape, functioned primarily as a backdrop to a remarkable exercise in form. The polished look, scant dialogue, beautiful and clean-shaven Vikings, and vivid homoeroticism broke with all traditional representations of the heritage. The local objections to the innovative and otherworldly Viking world presented in *Den røde kappe* is indicative

of a narrow horizon of expectation and helps explain the creative difficulty faced by filmmakers interested in tackling the heritage—or, perhaps more to the point, the lack of such filmmakers.

Icelandic cinema is however not a cinema without adaptations—far from it. In fact, many of its most successful films at the local box office and some notable international breakthroughs have been adaptations. Interestingly, two adaptations of Indriði Sigurðsson's novels, *79 afstöðinni* [*The Girl Gogo*] (1962, Erik Balling) and *Land og synir* [*Land and Sons*] (1980, Ágúst Guðmundsson), bridge the era of Nordic co-productions and the establishing of an explicitly national cinema in the early 1980s. Its first years were also distinguished by faithful and reverent adaptations, including Þorsteinn Jónsson's *Punktur punktur komma strik* [*Dot Dot Comma Dash*] (1981) and *Atómstöðin*. Although the most canonical works of Icelandic literature were left untouched, these adaptations shared much with what Andrew Higson has defined in the context of English cinema as the heritage film: “a genre of films which reinvents and reproduces, and in some case simply invents, a national heritage for the screen ... One central representational strategy of the heritage film is reproduction of literary texts, artifacts, and landscapes which already have a privileged status within the accepted definition of the national heritage” (26-27). The emphasis on heritage is not surprising considering the emergence of Icelandic cinema as a national institution intended to counter amongst other things the pervasive local influence of Hollywood filmmaking. The overt reliance on literature may also stem from the lack of indigenous film tradition and a vying for recognition and acceptance by a strategic alignment with the national form *par excellence*.

Remarkably, adaptations suddenly all but evaporated from the scene. Out of the thirty feature films made in Iceland during the ten years from 1985 to 1994 only one play and one novel—*Kristnihald undir jökli*—were adapted to the silver screen. This dramatic shift is not easily explained but one suspects that having gained acceptance filmmakers (and a new generation of these entered the field) felt the need to distance themselves from literature as evinced amongst other things in the refusal of Friðriksson—the period's most important and successful director—to make “myndskreyta bókmenntaarfinn” [illustrations complementing the heritage] (Davíðsdóttir). When adaptations finally returned to the fore in the late 1990s little would seem to have changed in the meantime as heritage characterized such adaptations as *Ungfrúin góða og húsið*, *Dansinn* [*The Dance*] (1998, Ágúst Guðmundsson) and *Myrkráhöfðinginn* [*Witchcraft*] (1999, Hrafn Gunnlaugsson). However, the pendulum soon swayed to popular contemporary novels resulting in some box-office success, most notably in Friðriksson's *Djöflaeyjan* [*Devils Island*] (1996) and *Englar alheimsins* [*Angels of the Universe*] (2000). And while these adaptations failed to replicate the international success of Friðriksson's earlier work, director Kormákur showed that success could be had abroad with adaptations of Icelandic literature, particularly *101 Reykjavík* and *Mýrin*. The latter

also exemplifies another new turn in the history of Icelandic film adaptations—the turn to crime fiction—and a further distancing from the heritage (Norðfjörð forthcoming). Thus adaptation remains an important component of Icelandic cinema—as most anywhere else—the pertinent question is what sort of adaptation.

The space I have devoted in this essay to films never produced certainly makes for a somewhat unorthodox adaptation study. But in the case of Iceland—no matter how paradoxical it may seem—these are arguably the most important adaptations. The fact that the canonical sagas and novels by Laxness have still to be filmed is more revealing of the interrelations between Icelandic cinema and literature than the adaptations that were actually made. There is no one reason that accounts for their failure to be adapted. Certainly, meagre financial resources and a limited film tradition are relevant factors. However, during the last thirty years of continuous film production in Iceland, there would seem to have been notable anxiety about tackling the literary canon, or conversely, a resistance, if an intermittent one, to “relegate” cinema to the role of making literary adaptations. Both are symptomatic of a cinema belonging to a nation whose identity is so explicitly interwoven with its language and literary heritage.

#### NOTES

1. This essay draws considerably upon my dissertation on Icelandic cinema that also offers a fuller account of theories regarding nation, nationalism and globalization; the scholarly debate on nation in the Icelandic context; theories of adaptation; and other periods of Icelandic film history (2005). I thank my editor John Tucker, along with Guðni Elísson and the two anonymous readers for reading over the essay in manuscript form and offering many helpful suggestions for improvement.
2. List 175-76.
3. I refer to the saga titles as translated in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*. For a helpful overview of the sagas in English see Robert Kellogg’s introduction in the first volume (xxviii-lv). For a more detailed discussion of “Gunnarshólmi” see Helgason (2006-2007 38-42).
4. The debates over Laxness reached new heights with the publication of Hannes Hólmsteinn Gissurarson’s biography of the novelist. The uproar stemmed originally from Gissurarson’s right-wing affiliations, the right having been long troubled by Laxness’s leftist politics, but with the publication of its first volume (out of three) it focused instead on what appeared to be an extensive intellectual theft, which ultimately resulted in Gissurarson’s conviction in 2008.
5. I can only touch here upon some of the ways her book can help to rethink the history of Icelandic literature. A more nuanced and extensive analysis warrants a separate work.
6. In a related context Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have theorized a “minor literature” through their analysis of Kafka (148-51). Building on his discussion of small national

literature, Deleuze and Guattari argue that a minor literature finds itself in a struggle against a dominant literature/language. Interesting as it is, I find Deleuze and Guattari's notion of a "minor literature" [une littérature mineure] somewhat problematic. As a definition "une littérature mineure n'est pas celle d'une langue mineure, plutôt celle qu'une minorité fait dans une langue majeure" [a minor literature doesn't come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language] (1975 29; 1986 16). Thus, while it works perfectly in describing Joyce and Beckett, raised as examples as well, it would appear as if works written in small languages remained outside the category of minor—any?—literature, as by definition a minor literature needs to be positioned within a major language. As such, the concept of "minor literature" would seem to continue to enforce the hegemonic position of the major languages.

7. Dans la République mondiale des Lettres, les Espace les plus dotés sont aussi les plus anciens, c'est-à-dire ceux qui sont entrés les premiers dans la concurrence littéraire et dont les "classiques" nationaux sont aussi des "classiques universels" (1999 119-20).
8. "Proclamer l'ancienneté de leur fondation littéraire, sous la forme, propre aux ensembles nationaux, de la "continuité" nationale, est, dans les espaces littéraire émergents, une des stratégies spécifiques pour s'imposer comme protagonistes légitimes our pour entrer dans le jeu en prétendant à la possession de grandes ressources littéraire" (1999 329)

A striking example of this phenomenon is found in the foreword to *The Complete Sagas of the Icelanders* (1997) in English written by president Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson: "[The sagas] created a rich heritage which was treasured by the small island nation in the far north. The vision which they fostered has this century brought Iceland independence within the community of nations. The sagas are a unique literary phenomenon and invite comparison with the masterpieces of classical Greece and Rome. Their authors were firmly rooted in the Nordic and Germanic heritage, but also sought material from contemporary European culture. They charted the fate of individuals, heroic deeds and tragedies. In the sagas we find classical human wisdom and breadth of mind which are relevant to all people at all times" (vii). Grímsson's text reflects the conventional strategy of establishing a national literature globally by emphasizing its universal value and through comparison with canonical classics. Note also how he follows the paradigm of bridging past and present through the sagas, having them ultimately validate the independence of Iceland. However, the fact that Icelandic literature is not referenced once in Casanova's extensive study suggests that longstanding attempts of establishing the heritage at the centre of the international literary space have not been fully successful. Perhaps, this may be partly explained by Casanova's French background, as Icelandic literature has been more prominent in the Anglophone and the Germanic world.

9. "Dans le cas des 'petites' littéraire, l'émergence d'une nouvelle littérature est indissociable de l'apparition d'une nouvelle 'nation'" (1999 149).
10. "Peu à peu ces récits traditionnels, exhumés et ennoblis, serviront de matrices à d'innombrables poèmes, romans, récits, pièces de theater..." 1999 309.
11. "Comme les écrivains nationaux, fomenteurs des premières révoltes littéraires, s'appuient sur des modèles littéraires de la tradition nationale, à l'inverse les écrivains

internationaux puissent pour trouver une issue à l'enfermement national, dans cette sorte de répertoire transnational des solutions littéraires" (1999 443).

However, Casanova may distinguish too strongly between a national tradition of the novel and the tradition of international modernism. Modernist fiction remains in many respects national, and thus the difference is arguably one of degree rather than kind. Furthermore, the explicit national focus of Laxness's fiction have not hindered it from being widely translated while the Icelandic modernists have found little international success.

12. For an extensive overview in English of Icelandic Neoromanticism, of which the Varangians constituted only one part albeit an important one see Elísson (327-56).
13. However, it was transnational in a most qualified sense as it manifested a regional relationship involving primarily two nations (and in fact only one nation-state). To some extent their work is typical of (post-)colonial literature addressed to the colonizers, but in general I would hesitate to describe either (post-)colonial or diasporic literature as transnational because despite often involving two nations such literature generally deals quite specifically with a single nation-state or a particular national relationship. As regards Iceland it should be kept in mind that Icelanders were never subjected to imperial racism or brutality. There is no comparing the Danish treatment of Icelanders and its non-European colonies.
14. "Écrivains "traduits", ils sont pris dans une contradiction structurale dramatique qui les oblige à choisir entre la traduction dans une langue littéraire qui les coupe de leur public national mais leur donne une existence littéraire, et le retrait dans une "petite" langue qui les condamne à l'invisibilité ou une existence littéraire tout entière réduite à la vie littéraire nationale" (1999 351).
15. Note that instead of the published title *Eyvind of the Hills* of the English translation I refer to the title by which the film is known in English, which is closer to the literal meaning of the original Danish title. Furthermore, character names are given as they appear in the Icelandic version so as to be consistent with other names. The same goes for *Hadda Padda* and *Af Borgslægtens historie*.
16. The Royal Theatre in Copenhagen originally accepted the play on artistic merit only and without any obligation to stage it as it considered the problems of staging the fourth act insurmountable (K. viii).
17. I will be referring to the completed novel as *The Story of the Borg Family* although the English translation I am quoting uses the title of the third volume. Gunnarsson also wrote a fourth volume, but in later publications had the novel conclude with the third volume—like the film.
18. Ormar's stay in Copenhagen is also an allegorical rendering of the position of Gunnarsson and the other Varangians—so very tied to Iceland but having to practice their craft in Denmark.
19. I have translated here from the Icelandic translation as the connection established between land and character is more explicit in it than in the published English version where the description is as follows: "His whole appearance ... presented an almost unreal effect, harmonizing to a striking degree with the surroundings. He seemed to be in his element in this waste tract" (1922 190).



20. Perhaps this has changed in recent years, particularly in the booming field of crime fiction, as many novels seem to be written with an eventual translation and foreign readership in mind.
21. On the transnational turn of contemporary Icelandic cinema see Möller and Norðfjörð (2007).
22. On the film's production and reception history see Bernharðsson (818-21).
23. Nordisk Film Special Collection, Danish Film Institute, Title-protocol, IX,15. p. 245.
24. Jóhannsson also offers an extensive survey of the reception of the Neoromantic literature in Denmark.
25. On Laxness's time in Copenhagen see Halldór Guðmundsson 2008 42-55.
26. As these are usually referred to as film scripts, it is worth emphasizing that they were both treatments and that Laxness never wrote a full script during his lifetime.
27. Although the writers are not named in the English translation Guðmundsson specifies these three as recipients of Laxness's praise in the original text 2004 237.
28. For a close textual comparison of the adaptation see McMahon.
29. Arguably the same should apply to stage adaptations and, according to this writer, borne out by the recent 2010 staging of *Íslandsklukkan* at the National Theater in which a creative *mise-en-scène* was hampered by an episodic narrative attempting to tie together many of the novel's key "scenes". But if cinematic adaptations of Laxness's novels are in short supply, theatrical adaptations have abounded, many of them highly popular, a fact that should have encouraged filmmakers to adapt his work.
30. Astrid Söderbergh Widding claims, for example, "What is most typical of Iceland, at least seen through the foreign eyes, are films inspired by the medieval Icelandic sagas" (100).
31. Apparently, Dreyer had secured funding from Denmark, Sweden and Norway but needed the Icelandic state to insure a quarter of the budget in case the films would lose money, and the project seems to have faltered when no such support was forthcoming (Ásgeir Guðmundsson 48-49).
32. On Rósinkranz' script and Edda-film's aspiration of adapting Njáls saga see Helgason 2001 149-61. Helgason also discusses film scripts based on the sagas written in the 1940s by Henrik Thorlacius 2001 156-58. However, there is little indication that these were ever meant to be filmed and were published as independent works. As such they seem to have functioned as fantasies of what the sagas would look like if filmed.
33. This much seems clear to me although I have only been able to see the film on a full frame (originally shot in Ultrascope/Cinemascope) VHS copy of a limited quality. Although aesthetically more akin to such Hollywood fare as *The Vikings* (1958, Richard Fleischer), *The Viking Sagas* (1995, Michael Chapman) is similar to *Den røde kappe* in relying on Icelandic locations (while also adding a mostly Icelandic cast) for its rendering of a Viking world that met with little approval among Icelandic audiences.

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