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## Filming in the Land of Fire and Ice: Iceland as the Next Hotspot for Independent Filmmaking

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Each year, film school graduates face the difficult challenge of finding employment in the professional world. Though the dominant Hollywood model of production offers some opportunities for those entering the workforce, such opportunities are becoming increasingly limited. However, numerous less established production centers exist worldwide, providing viable alternatives and other sources of funding, which, if explored, can offer both work and artistic freedom to new and independent filmmakers.

Iceland is one such location. Recent film legislation, which refunds up to twelve percent of production costs incurred within Iceland, and the reorganization of the Icelandic Film Fund, the body governing the allotment of grant money to filmmakers, have made the country more appealing to those seeking opportunities to make films inexpensively. This new legislation, a cooperative effort of the Ministries of Industry and Culture, encourages people to make their films in Iceland.

After receiving funding, I traveled to Iceland and met with several policymakers and producers of both feature films and commercials to discuss the effects this legislation has had and the potentials the Icelandic industry holds for new and independent filmmakers. These topics also fostered discussions about the history of the Icelandic film industry as well as the unique cultural and geographical features the nation has that lend itself to filmmaking.

While my initial hope had been to uncover a little known but thriving industry, I learned that Iceland, while an alternative to the Hollywood model, has limits to its growth potential. The existing industry is doing very well and certainly has room to grow, however, there are not enough resources to sustain a large influx of people. Magnus Ragnarsson, General Manager at Iceland's Pegasus Pictures, informed me that with a population of only 280,000 people, Iceland's "capacity is very limited." This inevitability notwithstanding, he presented an optimistic attitude toward new filmmakers, saying "if the project's worth it, then it will get off the ground,"<sup>1</sup> which is not necessarily true in larger production centers with many people vying for few positions.

Additionally, it may be too early to tell the precise effects the new legislation will have on the country's capability to increase the number of international filmmakers working there. Ari Kristinsson, Chairman of the Association of Icelandic Producers, says that the domestic industry is still in a transition phase from the old system of funding allotment, and that the positive results might not be seen for some time.<sup>2</sup> Still, investigating the Icelandic industry posed numerous interesting questions regarding the relationship between industry and culture. Anna Maria Karlsdottir of the Icelandic Film Corporation, a production company owned by one of Iceland's

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<sup>1</sup> Magnus Ragnarsson. Personal interview. 10 July 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Ari Kristinsson. Personal interview. 2 July 2003.

most well-known directors, Fridrik Thor Fridrikson, points out that filmmakers in Iceland face a challenge of producing something that is uniquely Icelandic (warranting utilization of equipment, facilities, and locations there) but that is simultaneously universal, in order to appeal to international audiences, as domestic audiences alone do not render a film financially viable.<sup>3</sup>

These observations, along with my additional findings, suggest that Iceland may be a feasible production center for a limited number of new and independent filmmakers. However, aside from this specific realization brought about by my research, the discovery of an alternative production center is valuable as it demonstrates the possibility of uncovering similar small industries around the world that would provide other opportunities.

My original intention was to complete an article to submit for publication that primarily detailed ways in which Icelandic laws could be financially beneficial to new and independent filmmakers. I have drafted the article as well as compiled a list of potential publications to which I might submit the finished product. After working through the revision process with my faculty mentor, I will be prepared to submit it. However, beyond the original scope of my project, focusing on legislative changes, I discovered an even more compelling cultural dimension of the subject. After learning of the history of the relatively young Icelandic film industry (formed around 1979), I became very interested in the development of national cinematic traditions. While the films of certain countries with established aesthetic and thematic trends may be characterized as representative of that country, Iceland has yet to codify a canonical style. There is still an immense amount of freedom of artistic expression. Still, it may be possible to trace out developing patterns in both the form and content of Icelandic films. It is thus very valuable to consider the way this country's unique cinematic traditions will eventually solidify, melding medium and culture together. I hope to include this additional aspect in my finished article. This dimension that I have begun to explore has been particularly useful, as it is a similar interplay between culture and anthropology that I wish to examine in more detail in my pursuits in graduate school.

Aside from the knowledge gained from my research, completing my project has provided me with numerous invaluable experiences. I was able to exercise and improve upon my interview skills, and have successfully implemented the research methods I developed during this project in other endeavors. Furthermore, I am compiling the video footage I was able to capture while in Iceland, both in the urban center of Reykjavik and in several more rural locations, in order to assemble a short expository documentary to record my experiences traveling there. My experiences taught me a great deal about interdisciplinary cooperation, the way in which art and commerce interact, and perhaps most importantly, that research is an ever-evolving exploratory journey that always leads down further paths of discovery.

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<sup>3</sup> Anna Maria Karlsdottir. Personal Interview. 10 July 2003.