

**Can the Core of Icelanders be Found in the Wilderness?:**

**The Representation of Iceland and Icelanders in the Film *Heima* by Sigur Rós**

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Music has been used to create national identity in Iceland since the struggle for independence from Denmark around 1900. At that time national songs, such as ‘Draumalandið’ (‘The Dreamland’) by Sigfús Einarsson (1877–1939) and ‘Ég vil elska mitt land’ (‘I Love my Land’) by Bjarni Þorsteinsson (1861–1938), were composed about the beauty and bounty of the country, which followed the traditions of the national Romantic Movement in Europe, and the songs supported the claim for independence. Often they sought to draw out what was special about Iceland and its people. In these early years, musical practices in the country were very elementary. In the period following the independence in 1918, composers like Sveinbjörn Sveinbjörnsson (1847–1927) and Páll Ísólfsson (1893–1974) were preoccupied with making up for lost time by composing in the style of the classical and romantic masters. It was not until after mid-century that contemporary and avant-garde music by composers like Jón Nordal (b. 1926), Jón Þórarinnsson (1917–2012), Þorkell Sigurbjörnsson (1938–2013) and Atli Heimir Sveinsson (1938–2019) was first performed. From then onwards the main emphasis was placed on making music similar to what could be heard in Europe.<sup>1</sup> This active generation of composers had received university educations in music in Europe and the U.S. and had all the tools to compose contemporary music. Further, cultural infrastructure in Iceland had greatly improved with the foundation of public radio, music schools, a symphony orchestra, Hljómsveit Reykjavíkur (‘Reykjavik Orchestra’) that started in 1925 and a music society, Tónlistarfélagið (‘The Music Society’).

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<sup>1</sup> Árni Heimir Ingólfsson, ‘Straujárnið og viskíflaskan: Flúxus og framúrstefna í íslenskri tónsköpun á sjöunda áratugnum,’ *Tímarit Máls og menningar* 1 (2010), 58–83.

For the next few decades, national issues in music did not seem to be a focal point. But at the end of the century new trends emerged, especially in a certain genre of popular music, which seemed to draw on the national songs of the early twentieth century. The musical genre referenced is indie rock, which was the most prominent and internationally popular music in Iceland during the first decade of the twenty-first century, building its success largely on Björk's fame. Björk was arguably the first pop musician from Iceland to synthesise issues of nature and nation in her music along with extra musical material.<sup>23</sup> Björk has stated that with the emergence of punk came a musical declaration of independence, as it was only then that Icelanders dared to be proud of being Icelandic.<sup>4</sup>

The aim of this article is to investigate how Iceland is presented in the film *Heima*, released in 2007 by the Icelandic indie rock band Sigur Rós, and how it relates to the issues of nationalism discussed above.<sup>5</sup> I have previously written about the film in the article “Nostalgic Ideology in the Film *Heima* By The Icelandic ‘Krútt’ Band Sigur Rós” in *Social Alternatives*<sup>6</sup> but there the focus is on nostalgic qualities in the sound, with a detailed analysis of two songs/scenes. Throughout the film, nostalgia is prominent as “the nostalgic features analysed can be found in the many layers of the film; in the cinematic techniques, the locations of the songs, the recording technique, the structure of the songs, timbre and timing, as well as in the lyrics.”<sup>7</sup> In this article the focus will be on representations of Iceland in the film and the structure will be as follows:

Firstly, stereotypes of the North and Iceland in particular are introduced, and concerns regarding nature and nationalism are presented. This section serves as a theoretical introduction to the case study, the film *Heima* by Sigur Rós. Secondly, the band and the film are introduced, and the relationship between nature and music and their conjunction is analysed. This relationship provides a compelling framework for the ideology of the film and the message communicated to the viewers. Thirdly, the stereotypes of Icelandic national identity appearing in the film are examined and put in context with the ideas from the national romantic movement and its modern counterparts. Finally, the attitudes towards nature conservation in the film are investigated. The findings show how the film can

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<sup>2</sup> Nicola Dibben, *Björk* (London: Equinox, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> In Dibben's book *Björk* from 2009 are chapters on both nature and nationalism which suggests the importance of these issues in Björk's artistic practice.

<sup>4</sup> Lára Magnúsdóttir, *Náttúran í eigin rétti: Sjómarskerá á mannamáli* (University of Iceland, 2012). [http://rannsoknasetur.hi.is/sites/rannsoknasetur.hi.is/files/lara\\_m\\_-\\_natturan\\_i\\_eigin\\_retti\\_2012\\_leidrett.pdf](http://rannsoknasetur.hi.is/sites/rannsoknasetur.hi.is/files/lara_m_-_natturan_i_eigin_retti_2012_leidrett.pdf) (accessed 1 November, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Dean DeBlois, Dean (dir.), *Heima: A Film by Sigur Rós* (EMI [DVD], 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Þorbjörg Daphne Hall, “Nostalgic ideology in the film *Heima* by the Icelandic ‘krútt’ band Sigur Rós,” *Social Alternatives* 33 no. 1 (2014), 39–43.

<sup>7</sup> Hall, “Nostalgic ideology in the film *Heima*,” 39.

be seen to contribute to nation building based on an “othering” process constructed on stereotypes and nationalism, which originates from both urban and foreign viewpoint.

### **Stereotypes of the North and Iceland**

Stereotypes of national identity are, as historian Sumarliði Ísleifsson points out, an “important part of the world of ideas and transnational communications in which we live.”<sup>8</sup> They are a way to organize and understand the world and have been around for a long time. Ísleifsson considers these stereotypes as influential in daily life even though they are “imagination.”<sup>9</sup> He regards the creation of national identity as a dialectic relationship; as we create an image of ourselves we create an image of the “other.” As a rule of thumb, our image is positive whereas the image of the “other” is more often negative since we assume that our culture is the norm.

Common concepts that influence the national identity stereotype process are center-periphery and North-South, and the image of Icelanders has long been tied up in the image of the North.<sup>10</sup> Historically, it was generally believed that the farther a place was from the European civilization, the more barbaric were its inhabitants.<sup>11</sup> According to Ísleifsson, the idea of the North has never been a stable one and in ancient times people of the North were regarded as sacred people; “they lived in balance with nature, unmarred by the corruption and evils of the world.”<sup>12</sup> The North could also be a place of plenitude and riches, which could be exploited by the Southerners.<sup>13</sup> The image of the North has arguably been influenced by the attitude toward nature through the ages. During the sixteenth century nature was regarded as immoral, wild and cruel. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the romantic idea took over, and nature became regarded as meaningful and inspirational to man.<sup>14</sup> The Romantic Movement redefined the North as sublime, pure, free and “real.” Instead of fearing the harsh landscape of the North, writers revelled in its beauty, admiring the waterfalls, the glaciers, the expansive plains and dark forests and rough mountains, and even the darkness and the gloom.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Sumarliði Ísleifsson, “Introduction: Imaginations of National Identity and the North,” in *Iceland and Images of the North*, ed. Sumarliði Ísleifsson in collaboration of Daniel Charties, (Québec: Presse de l’Université du Québec, 2011), 3–22, here 5.

<sup>9</sup> Ísleifsson, “Introduction,” 6.

<sup>10</sup> Ísleifsson, “Introduction,” 6.

<sup>11</sup> Sumarliði Ísleifsson, “Iceland on the Edge: Medieval and Early Modern National Images of Iceland and Greenland in Iceland,” in *Iceland and Images of the North*, ed. Sumarliði Ísleifsson in collaboration of Daniel Charties (Québec: Presse de l’Université du Québec, 2011), 41–66, here 61.

<sup>12</sup> Ísleifsson, “Introduction,” 10.

<sup>13</sup> Ísleifsson, “Introduction,” 9.

<sup>14</sup> Unnur Birna Karlsdóttir, *Náttúrusýn og nýting fallvatna: Um viðhorf til náttúru og vatnsaflsvirkjana á Íslandi 1900–2008* (Reykjavík: Hugvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands, 2010), 15–17.

<sup>15</sup> Ísleifsson, “Introduction,” 15.

The romantic view of nature and the emphasis on showing the pictorial impression of landscape appeared in literature and in landscape paintings. The pictorial countryside, the pastoral, appeared as peaceful shelter for city people but the wilderness, the untouched nature, had a different beauty, more magnificent and sublime. The Romantic Movement praised the wilderness as representing “the authentic and true nature” as humans had not put its mark on it; the wilderness was untouched by culture.<sup>16</sup> The idea of the wilderness is problematic, as Daniel Grimley states: “Landscape in the Western tradition is not natural, something created by nature without human intervention, but series of environments, characters (moods or feelings), views or perspectives that are artificially constructed and perceived.”<sup>17</sup>

### Nature and Nationalism

The attitude of Icelanders towards nature was moulded by nationalism from the emergence of the romantic ideology in the nineteenth century.<sup>18</sup> Historian Guðmundur Hálfðánarson finds it normal that “nature plays a large role in nationalism in Iceland as the home of the nation, the ‘motherland,’ is a key term in the whole identity of all modern nations.”<sup>19</sup> Historian Sigríður Matthíasdóttir agrees and explains that “historically . . . nationalists never doubted that the Icelandic nationality had its roots in the rural areas where the ‘green life tree’ had originally been planted.”<sup>20</sup> Nature had a role in cultivating the nationalism in Icelanders at the turn of the nineteenth century as exemplified by the fact that a photographer applied to the Icelandic parliament for funding to take landscape photos in order to stimulate patriotism.<sup>21</sup>

However, not everyone subscribed to the glorified attitude towards nature, and around 1900 there was a clear division between the national romantics and the utilitarians who wanted to use the country and saw the nature’s bounty as a way to improve the living conditions in Iceland.<sup>22</sup> Politicians often positioned themselves half way between the two ideas, and in 1919 a politician stated: the land is not only beautiful but also rich of natural resources, thus referring to fishing grounds, arable land and hydroelectric power.<sup>23</sup> One hundred years later a similar attitude towards nature can still be found, and the Icelandic nation and nature are often linked together in political speeches, as evident with Ingibjörg

<sup>16</sup> Karlsdóttir, *Náttúrusýn og nýting fallvatna*, 17.

<sup>17</sup> Daniel Grimley, *Grieg: Music, Landscape and Norwegian Identity* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006), 56.

<sup>18</sup> Karlsdóttir, *Náttúrusýn og nýting fallvatna*, 28.

<sup>19</sup> Guðmundur Hálfðánarson, *Íslenska þjóðríkið—uppruni og endimörk* (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska bókmenntafélag og ReykjavíkurAkademían, 2007), 192.

<sup>20</sup> Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, *Hinn sanni Íslendingur—Þjóðerni, kyngjerfi og val á Íslandi 1900–1930* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2004), 143.

<sup>21</sup> Karlsdóttir, *Náttúrusýn og nýting fallvatna*, 29.

<sup>22</sup> Hálfðánarson, *Íslenska þjóðríkið*, 194–195.

<sup>23</sup> Karlsdóttir, *Náttúrusýn og nýting fallvatna*, 29.

Sólrún Gísladóttir, former Minister for Foreign Affairs: “Many natural resources, open space and wilderness nourish the Icelandic national identity, create our uniqueness and mould us into what we are—but they are also our livelihood.”<sup>24</sup>

Unnur Birna Karlsdóttir states that from 1900, Icelandic nature has been glorified both for its beauty and resources, but this has caused tension during the last hundred years.<sup>25</sup> However, the attitude towards nature is not stable. A large part of the population has moved from rural to urban settings, which has influenced the relationship between man and nature. The society has distanced nature and largest part of the nation lives, as Hálfðánarson argued, “in man made surroundings and is mostly unaffected by whims of nature.”<sup>26</sup> Consequently, a new kind of nationalism has emerged.

As the urbanites have become alienated and disconnected from what was felt to be “true nature,” this has resulted in the personification of nature in both social and political sense. An example of the political context can be found in the present attempt to modernize and update the Icelandic constitution; a constitutional council suggested that the Icelandic nature should have human rights.<sup>27</sup> Historian Lára Magnúsdóttir has pointed out that with rights come obligations, which nature cannot fulfil.<sup>28</sup> Nature has been placed on a pedestal from where it is untouchable. Hálfðánarson explains this with nationalistic reasoning: The clean, wild and untamed wilderness in Iceland, with its special character, “is contrasted with the ‘foreign’ influences of the city. When the Icelander leaves the city and experiences nature, he/she renews its Icelandic identity.”<sup>29</sup>

The writer and politician Guðmundur Andri Thorsson has remarked on this behaviour and regards it as symptomatic of the years after the financial collapse in 2008; the few strange old people who have lived in rural Iceland without communication with the rest of the nation have become role models.<sup>30</sup> This inward-looking state is a reaction to the failed attempt to be part of the international landscape of finance and power. However, this longing has not been reflected in changed patterns of habitation as more people have actually moved to the capital city in Iceland than from it over the last few years.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the dream of going back to nature is more of an ideology than an actual act. It is nostalgia for a more simple life, similar to the nineteenth century ideals of a “pastoral” country life.

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<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Karlsdóttir, *Náttúrusýn og nýting fallvatna*, 30.

<sup>25</sup> Karlsdóttir, *Náttúrusýn og nýting fallvatna*, 30.

<sup>26</sup> Hálfðánarson, *Íslenska þjóðríkið*, 212.

<sup>27</sup> Magnúsdóttir, *Náttúran í eigin rétti*, 3.

<sup>28</sup> Magnúsdóttir, *Náttúran í eigin rétti*, 23–24.

<sup>29</sup> Hálfðánarson, *Íslenska þjóðríkið*, 211.

<sup>30</sup> Guðmundur Andri Thorsson: *Gíslar á Uppsölum*, in: *Vísir* (2012). <http://www.visir.is/gislar-a-upsolum/article/2012712319917> (accessed 1 November, 2019).

<sup>31</sup> Hagstofa Íslands, *Talnaefni: Mannfjöldi*, 2013,

<http://www.hagstofa.is/?PageID=2593&src=/temp/Dialog/varval.asp?ma=MAN01202%26ti=B%FAferlaflut>

Hálfðánarson further explains that environmentalists have adopted the methods used in the fight for independence in Iceland around the turn of the twentieth century. Consequently, the fight for independence and nature conservation have both become intertwined with love for the country and national romantic utilitarianism has become the guiding light.<sup>32</sup> Now environmentalists protest against power plants and heavy industry with the reasoning that the image of the country will become spoiled and thus damaging the growing tourist industry; in the long term it is therefore more profitable to keep the country unspoiled.<sup>33</sup> Karlsdóttir has also identified new attitudes to nature conservation among certain Icelanders who feel that it does not fit the national image to harness power in the wilderness. Instead they want to promote the image of a leading nation that conserves its wilderness and beautiful, unspoiled nature. Thus the wilderness has received a symbolic status in Icelandic national identity. It is believed that the wilderness makes Icelanders and Iceland special, and ruining the wilderness means that Icelanders will not be able to distinguish themselves from other Western nations.<sup>34</sup>

### Sigur Rós

The band Sigur Rós was formed in 1994 and released its first album, *Von* (i.e. “Hope”), in 1997. Their second album, *Ágætis byrjun* (“A Good Beginning”), which was released in 1999 was successful internationally and the band promoted it on tour with Radiohead as their supporting act. They have released seven studio albums, have written music for films and a Merce Cunningham dance piece, and collaborated in several projects, including a traditional Icelandic *rímur* (“rhyme”) project with the singer Steindór Andersen. At the turn of the last century their music was heard in the Cameron Crowe film *Vanilla Sky* and TV programs such as *24*, *CSI* and *Queer as Folk*. Since then their music has been in several TV programs and films, including the *Simpsons* in 2013 where the band wrote most of the music for an episode and was featured in the plot. The music can be categorised as an ambient post-rock and Jónsi, the singer, uses a cello bow to play the guitar which has become one of the trademarks of the band. Another trademark is Jónsi’s falsetto singing, which in the early days coincided with a made up language that journalists coined “Hopelandic” (play on the words Icelandic and Hope, which was the first album of the band).<sup>35</sup> In 2007 their film *Heima* was released, which is the case study of this paper.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Hálfðánarson, *Íslenska þjóðríkið*, 213–214.

<sup>33</sup> Hálfðánarson, *Íslenska þjóðríkið*, 215.

<sup>34</sup> Karlsdóttir, *Náttúrusrýn og nýting fallvatna*, 234–235.

<sup>35</sup> For further information on the ambience of the band see Tony Mitchell, “Sigur Rós’s Heima: An Icelandic Psychogeography,” *Transforming Cultures eJournal* 4, no. 1 (2009), 172–196, <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/TfC/article/view/1072/1111> (accessed 1 November, 2019) and

Sigur Rós can be seen as a leading band of the Icelandic indie scene, which is the country's most prominent scene internationally. The members of the scene and people who follow its ideology have been called “krúttkynslóðin” (“the cutesy generation”). The term was first coined by Icelandic journalists and caused a heated debate in media. However, it now seems to have gained recognition as exemplified by the title of the final chapter in an Icelandic popular music history book from 2012 by Gunnar L. Hjálmarsson, a leading Icelandic popular music writer.<sup>37</sup>

### The Film

The film presents the tour of Sigur Rós in Iceland during the summer of 2006. The title of the film, *Heima* (“at home”), implies that the emphasis is on showing the band “at home” through the tour in Iceland and present the band's notion of their homeland.<sup>38</sup> At the very beginning of the film, before the first song starts, band members reflect on the tour, which the viewer is about to experience. They claim they felt like they were on trial when playing for the Icelandic people, were nervous playing for friends and family, but also found it interesting to play for their countrymen “because they are so judgemental.”<sup>39</sup> They explain that bands commonly toured the country and played in small towns, but this was no longer the case and their tour can perhaps be considered a revival of this tradition. It is clear that the band members see the tour and the free concerts which they offered as a way to repay the support they have experienced from the Icelandic nation: “I guess that is sort of one idea, to give back in a way.”<sup>40</sup> The film offers a clear perspective of what the band considers as “home” and how they see Icelanders.

*Heima* is a mixture of a concert film and a documentary of the band. The film is in English indicating that it is intended for the international market. The film documents the free concerts given in sixteen places around Iceland. The viewer experiences the atmosphere at the concerts as both the band and the audiences are depicted, and it seems that the surroundings of the place are carefully examined.

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on the effects of the falsetto singing in Sigur Rós's music see Edward D. Miller, “The Nonsensical Truth of the Falsetto Voice: Listening to Sigur Rós,” *Popular Musicology Online* 2 (2003). <http://www.popular-musicology-online.com/issues/02/miller.html> (accessed 1 November, 2019).

<sup>36</sup> “eighteen seconds before sunrise.” 2013. Sigur Rós Official Website. <http://www.sigur-ros.co.uk/news/> (accessed 1 November, 2019).

<sup>37</sup> Gunnar L. Hjálmarsson, *Stuð vors lands: Saga dægurónlistar á Íslandi* (Reykjavík: Sögur, 2012). Further information on the term *krútt* can be found here: Þorbjörg Daphne Hall, “‘Even Cute Babies Will Bite When Provoked’: Icelandic Popular Music and the Rise of the Krútt” in *Sounds Icelandic: Essays on Icelandic Music in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries*, eds. Nicola Dibben, Tony Mitchell, Þorbjörg Daphne Hall, and Árni Heimir Ingólfsson (London: Equinox, 2019), 114–134.

<sup>38</sup> In the article, quotations are given from these interviews and the band members are referenced.

<sup>39</sup> Georg Holm, minute 02:45

<sup>40</sup> Georg Holm, minute 11:19

However, the film does not give the viewer an insight into the production side of the tour. Whilst the band and crew (81 members according to the credit list) are on the road or preparing and finishing up shows, the viewer is shown Icelandic landscape, which does not necessarily correlate with the route of the tour. The editing makes the viewers experience a sense that they are following the band from one place to the next, which is in fact an illusion. It follows the direct cinema tradition,<sup>41</sup> it has no narrator and the film maker is absent. Some interviews with band members of Sigur Rós and Amiina<sup>42</sup> do though take place, lending the film a clearer structure and depth. The interviews function as a commentary or reflections of the tour as they were taken after the tour had finished. Perhaps *Heima* works more as a concert film, or even as an extended music video, rather than a documentary. The rare interviews (less than 2000 words are said in the entire film which is 97 minutes long) primarily serve to express the band's view of Iceland and how it was to play "at home." However, the authorship of a film is often unclear. In the case of *Heima*, the band members themselves are listed as executive producers. In addition, two directors, other producers, both from the band and from EMI, contributed and arguably had some input into the creation of the film. However, as the full title of the film *Heima: A film by Sigur Rós* suggests, the band members are presented as the authors and one can therefore assume that the voice of the film and the ideology presented is that of Sigur Rós.

One of the producers explained that "the purpose of the journey is to play for 'country and nation' and shoot a documentary about the band, Icelandic nature and nation."<sup>43</sup> The film director Dean DeBlois<sup>44</sup> is credited for the directing although the production notes explain that he was not involved in the project until after the main filming had taken place, but the musicians were interviewed through his initiative.<sup>45</sup> Initially, it was decided to have an all-Icelandic film crew to avoid "clichéd lures of volcanoes, geysers and the Blue Lagoon." After running into problems with the 120 hours of footage, DeBlois was contacted and asked to make it into a film.<sup>46</sup> The story of *Heima* is simple; it conveys the tour of the band around the country:

Last year, in the endless magic hour of the Icelandic summer, Sigur Rós played a series of concerts around their homeland. Combining both the biggest and smallest shows of their career, the entire tour

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<sup>41</sup> Bill Nicholas, "Rödd Heimildamynda," in *Afngar í kvikmyndafraedum*, ed. Guðni Elísson (Reykjavík: Forlagið, 2003), 191–206, here 195–196.

<sup>42</sup> Amiina was on tour with Sigur Rós and is originally their backing band, an all girls string quartet, which now has a flourishing career, in its own right.

<sup>43</sup> Morgunblaðið: *Sjö tónleikar víða um land* (2006).

<https://www.mbl.is/greinasafn/grein/1093765/> (accessed 1 November, 2019).

<sup>44</sup> Dean DeBlois's work includes *Lilo and Stitch* and he has worked largely for Disney.

<sup>45</sup> <http://heima.co.uk> (accessed 1 August, 2019)

<sup>46</sup> John Best, *Heima*, 2007. <http://heima.co.uk/> (accessed 1 November, 2019).



was filmed, and now provides a unique insight into one of the world's shyest and least understood bands captured live in their natural habitat.<sup>47</sup>

Here, another perspective on the content of the film is offered. It is not only showing Iceland and Icelanders, but also giving the viewer a “unique insight into one of the world's shyest and least understood bands captured live in their natural habitat.”<sup>48</sup> This discourse implies that the band needs to be in its “natural” surroundings to be understood, just as a wildlife documentary is not shot in a zoo, but in the wild to contextualise and understand animal behaviour and being.

The natural habitat of the band presented in the film is the stereotypical rural, uninhabited and untouched Icelandic landscape and nature, which was discussed above. This follows the romantic idea that the identity of Icelanders rests in the rural part of the country, especially in the wilderness. The idea of Iceland that is created and the Icelanders depicted arguably reflect the “othering” process of stereotypes. I have chosen the first scene in the film for my analysis in this article, as it sets the atmosphere for the rest of the film. It is a good example of how the relationship between music and nature/landscape is established at various layers of the film. Preservation of culture and nature is the focus of the last section of the article, and several examples from the film are chosen to illustrate the othering process of the nation and country.

### **Links Between Music and Nature**

The nature images in *Heima* resist simple analysis as they are complex and the landscape which appears in the film can never be “natural.” Landscape is always, according to Grimley, a human perspective. Thus, the construction of nature and landscape in *Heima* is bound up in a certain ideology. It is clear that the film is meant to present an Icelandic reality, and viewers do experience aspects of an Icelandic summer and nature, thus reflecting what “home” is to the band. The importance of the country was highlighted in the statement that the aim of the tour was to play for “*country* and nation.” This implies that the country is capable of listening and suggests a relationship between the music and nature. This analysis is based on the first scene (and song, ‘Glósóli’) but many of the issues there characterize the whole film.

In the first song, ‘Glósóli,’ various technical tricks have been applied to make both landscape and nature seem more exotic and abstruse, perhaps purposefully making Iceland special. The first trick, which becomes apparent, is that rivers and waterfalls are shown to flow upwards thus mystifying nature. This is done in a subtle way and initially it is unclear what exactly is out of place. One has the

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<sup>47</sup> Best, *Heima*.

<sup>48</sup> Best, *Heima*.

feeling that something strange is going on; there is certainly some distortion in the landscape and nature is not behaving “naturally.” This effect is underlined in the music, where sound bites are seemingly played backwards, creating a similar distortion in the audio part as in the visual. These are similar, delicate effects, which serve to connect the audio and the visuals together; music and nature.

Secondly, clouds and fog are shown to move very fast, again emphasising the mystical nature of the country. This movement is linked to the band and the music by cutting between this material and the stage where the band is playing behind a screen. Silhouettes of the band appear through a see-through screen, which is almost like gauze. On the screen landscape pictures are projected in a grey-scale colour palette. It is unclear what the viewer is actually being shown because of extreme close ups. Further, nature images are projected on the screen and these intermingle with silhouettes, shadow images of the band produced by lights. Therefore, it becomes unclear whether the viewer is observing the concert spectacle or Icelandic nature. As the images seemingly morph from one into the other, continuity is created between the two and the band becomes part of nature and nature part of the band.

Thirdly, the colour of the nature images appear in the same colour “palette” as the shadow pictures on the screen during the concert. They emphasise the grey-scale tones, and the nature in the film also appears in a similar colour palette. This representation nature feels different to my personal experience of unmediated Icelandic landscape. This colour palette has the connotation of being old, like the camera setting “sepia” and resembles some of the filters that the smart phone application Instagram now offers. Arguably, the old and archaic representation of the country can imply a time before human intervention or corruption of the land by civilisation, which correlates with the ideology of the band and *krítt* more generally.

Another example of how music and nature are connected together is the use of the “Mickey-Mousing” technique.<sup>49</sup> In ‘Glósóli’ the viewer is shown a small, clear stream floating down small rapids. This is accompanied by a glockenspiel in the music, a simple and clear sound, which fits perfectly with the small stream of water. The small stream grows into a big and powerful river, and, similarly, the music develops and becomes more complex and powerful. The camera movement and cuts play a similar role: the song begins slowly, the camera is mostly still, and the shot is long. Subsequently, the shots become shorter and the cuts mirror the development of the song. The sound continuity conceals the cuts and the different perspectives. The viewer therefore experiences that the development in nature is happening at the same time that the concert takes place.

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<sup>49</sup> This is when the music heard in a film is in complete synchronisation with the action happening on the screen. The term comes from Walt Disney films, where music often mimicked what was happening on the screen. See Roger Hickman, *Reel Music: Exploring 100 Years of Film Music* (New York: W.W.Norton & Company, 2006), 42.

By the end of the first song and the first scene of the film, the music has in various ways been sutured into the images of making the band and the music seem a part of the natural surroundings and nature of Iceland. There seems to be a living relationship between the music and nature and they are mutually affected by each other. The viewers are drawn into this constructed world, which seems to be realistic yet at the same time mystical and abstruse. These effects take hold at the beginning and do not let go throughout the film. The world presented holds similar characteristics as the stereotypical description of Iceland and the North reviewed at the beginning of the paper. Iceland has now become strange, dark, gloomy and sublime. Musicologist Nicola Dibben explains that the vastness of nature is conveyed through the cinematography of the film:

Minimal cutting and a large number of static camera shots, the majority of which are directed at the landscape, rather than performance; people and objects pass across the camera's field of view rather than being tracked by it. As a consequence, the subject position implied by the camera is passive rather than active, and the static camera shots suggest a landscape that exceeds human perception.<sup>50</sup>

She notes that the music of Sigur Rós embodies “geographical space,” which is moulded through “suspension of time and place.” The songs are longer than usual rock songs and are constructed on repeated melodic and harmonic material with improvisation adding an active layer onto the static core.<sup>51</sup> Tony Mitchell seems to concur with Nicola Dibben, but is even more specific: “Sigur Rós’s music could be said to embody, express or evoke sonically . . . the remote isolation of their Icelandic location.”<sup>52</sup> The band members experience being in Iceland in terms of space: “Usually when we travel we are playing in these crowded big cities. So it is really nice to come back here to all the space in Iceland just to relax a little bit” (Jón Þór Birgisson, minute 27:40). The space and vastness of Iceland offers a breathing room which arguably becomes a factor in both personal and musical life of the band. Sveinsson also comments on this space: “Space is what we have here, in our personal life and in the land as well” (Kjartan Sveinsson, minute 14:24). The idea of space is a key to forming the national identity of Icelanders as discussed above.

The depiction of Iceland given in *Heima* corresponds with the national romantic movement that was described in the introduction. The country is beautiful, even “magnificent and sublime” and the filming accentuates its mystification. In the film the viewer mostly sees band members and their

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<sup>50</sup> Nicola Dibben, “Nature and Nation: National Identity and Environmentalism in Icelandic Popular Music Video and Music Documentary,” *Ethnomusicology Forum* 18, no.1 (2009), 131–151, here 138.

<sup>51</sup> Dibben, “Nature and Nation,” 138–139.

<sup>52</sup> Mitchell, *Sigur Rós’s Heima*, 188.

concert guests and when the scenes move from the concerts to nature images, people are nowhere to be found. Vehicles are rare and human constructions of any kind are few outside of urban areas. The expression of nature seems to take on the same “urban” outlook as Karlsdóttir and Hálfðánarson discussed. Nature appears to be far away and unobtainable; wilderness seems to epitomise Iceland.

### **Nostalgia and the “The Good Old Days”**

There are more aspects than nature that evoke Icelandicness in the film. The *krítt* can be seen as a subcultural group, but subculture is formed around certain ideological and economic factors.<sup>53</sup> Here, as Sigur Rós is a *krítt* band, I develop the nostalgic aspect of the *krítt* further by examining aspects of the film, which are particularly nostalgic. The *krítt* are known for nostalgic and childish values and appearance, a certain “back to basics” attitude, and opposition to consumerism and modern greed. They value the behaviour and customs that thrived before Iceland was urbanized, and this seems to have spread to a certain part of the society as nostalgia was particularly apparent after the economic collapse. It influences people’s choice of food, clothes, and furniture, and affects people’s attitude towards medicine and the environment. No comprehensive study has yet been undertaken to explore the cause and effect of this phenomenon on Icelandic society and modern ways of living. Through my research, nostalgia appeared as an apt way to analyse some of the internal dialogues about place making and representation of Icelandicness. I will give examples of how the nostalgic ideology finds its way into *Heima*, but the film is a good example of how this ideology appeared within society after the economic collapse. A particular type of nostalgia is evoked, which has its roots in core ideas about Icelandicness. It emphasises the subsistence farming of the past when people lived in turf houses and every day was a struggle. This way of living is not desirable in contemporary society. For example, there is a long shot of an old and completely destroyed tractor in a remote valley.<sup>54</sup> A clear focus on neglected farm houses and a grassed over cemetery introduces great nostalgia and a longing for former times, when most people lived on small farms and relied on primitive methods of cultivating the land. The tractor is seemingly at peace with its surroundings, it has become part of nature and is thus “natural.” Perhaps this can be seen as a glimpse into the band’s nature protection ideology: an environmentally friendly way of using nature without harming it with large-scale equipment.

Preservation is a key term for the ideology offered by the film. It stages a number of old cultural events possibly with the aim of repairing the national image. The supposed continuity from past to

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<sup>53</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1979).

<sup>54</sup> For further examples of nostalgia in *Heima*, aspects of nostalgic sound and musical analysis see Hall, “Nostalgic ideology in the film *Heima*.”

present and the tradition and rules, which that entails, is a key to the creation a nation.<sup>55</sup> A nation is an “imagined political community,”<sup>56</sup> and the nation building process is carried out by powerful groups within society instead of including everyone. Consequently, the imagination process and the resulting “nation” only reflect that particular group of society, and those outside the realm of power lose their voice. The nation thus becomes imagined just as the landscape. It can be argued that the nation, which is presented in *Heima*, is created through the strong cultural power and ideology of Sigur Rós. In so doing they have moved out of their sub-cultural group into the mainstream and managed to influence society at large.

There are many examples of this in *Heima*, such as fashion, which is one of the markers that the British media theorist and sociologist Dick Hebdige indicates in his study on the meaning of style within the context of subcultures.<sup>57</sup> The traditional woolly sweater is featured frequently in the film and is worn by both band and audience. Sigur Rós was one of the first bands to appear in the traditional sweater in promotional material in media, in concerts, and just out and about. Subsequently, high fashion labels emerged selling traditional woolly sweaters, *lopapeysa*, and modelling their brands on similar values as the band. Farmers Market, founded in 2005, is one example, and Bergþóra Guðnadóttir, the owner and designer, describes her label in the following way: “We place ourselves at a junction. A place where heritage meets modernity, the national meets the international, and the countryside meets the city. We find this an exciting area to explore.”<sup>58</sup> The woolly sweater not only was rebranded into a high-fashion item, but many people started knitting their own sweaters during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Even a former First Lady in Iceland stated in an interview that the sweater was timeless and would never fall out of fashion.<sup>59</sup>

Being “at home” clearly entails Icelandic nature and the traditional woolly sweater. Home consists of things with a clear string to history and heritage, in the attempt to distinguish home in Iceland from home elsewhere. As the authors of the film are musicians, music is discussed and performed in order to give an insight into the music life of the country. Kjartan Sveinsson states: “Every small little village in Iceland there is a choir, you know . . . It is very interesting for us because we are kind of learning about things as well, exploring them, like the *rímur*, the old chanting style” (Sveinsson, minute 62:21). This statement is cut into a scene of a group of old people, wearing

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<sup>55</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire; 1875–1914* (London: Abacus, 1995), 146.

<sup>56</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 6.

<sup>57</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*.

<sup>58</sup> Farmers Market, *About*, <https://www.farmersmarket.is/pages/about-us> (accessed 1 November, 2019).

<sup>59</sup> Morgunblaðið, *Lopapeysur aldrei úr tísku* (2012), <http://www.mbl.is/frettir/sjonvarp/20538/> (accessed 1 November, 2019).

traditional costumes and singing traditional *rímur* at Þingvellir. Hence, the viewer probably assumes that the performers represent the “choirs in every little small village” and are, thus, part of the musical identity of Icelanders. This could not be further from the truth as the group belongs to a chanting society in Iceland founded in 1929 to preserve the tradition of *rímur* chanting.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, the dress code or the traditional costumes were also reinvented in modern times, although based on historical sources.

Þorrablót (a feast of Þorri) is another example of “the good old days” staged in the film. Þorrablót is a relatively recent invention (from the 1970s) of an annual gathering of communities/families who come together in January or February to eat traditional food (food which was eaten in Iceland during the previous ages) accompanied by traditional spirit, brennivín (e. burning wine). In the film, while people eat and drink, footage of Sigur Rós performing a modern version of an old *rímur* with Andersen, is cross-cut into the scene. The soundtrack therefore creates continuity between the two spaces. In recent years the “traditional” feast has become increasingly popular, although some of those attending do not eat the food. The feast has been rebranded and modernized to please the masses. Now one can even purchase Þorri feast food in Ikea, both to eat in and to take away. Thus, the tradition has been modernized and appropriated for contemporary society.

The film seems to advocate for the preservation of nature as well as for the preservation of traditional culture and values. Nature is facing danger, and the band takes part in a protest against a hydroelectric power plant during the film. They play a concert for the protesters, and in those scenes the viewers are offered images of beautiful landscape and the awesome constructions of the plant. The song they play is very melancholic and can be seen as a kind of lamentation for the place. The Icelandic flag flutters in the sky giving the moment a nationalistic tone. Icelandic musicians have taken an active part in these issues, of which Björk’s ‘Náttúra’ (i.e. “nature”) project is perhaps the best known.<sup>61</sup> At the protest camp in Kárahnjúkar the band had to change their performance habits:

They brought out this small PA and they were going to get electricity from some generators, but then we thought, we are actually here to protest the building of a dam to produce electricity, so we thought it is a good idea to do it completely acoustically.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Kvæðamannafélagið Iðunn, *Um félagið* (2013), <https://gamla.rimur.is/> (accessed 2 December, 2019). Kvæðamannafélagið Iðunn used to be the only *rímur* society in Iceland until the late 1990s. Currently, there are eight societies around the country; most were founded after 2000.

<sup>61</sup> See Dibben, *Björk*, Dibben, “Nature and Nation” and Tore Størvold, “Music and the Kárahnjúkar hydropower plant: style, aesthetics, and environmental politics in Iceland,” *Popular Music and Society* 42, no. 4 (2018), 395–418 for further discussion.

<sup>62</sup> Holm, minute 56:59.

The band usually plays with amplification and electric instruments, so at the concert at Kárahnjúkar their different performance practice fit better with the setting and the ideology presented. In addition to the general practice of using amplification and electric instruments, transporting a crew of 81 people around Iceland is energy costly. Perhaps the acoustic performance highlights the problems of the larger approach of the film: focusing on the beautiful Icelandic nature, but at the same time ignoring human intervention. This can be seen to reflect a common attitude: people are happy to have opinions and support a good cause but are not ready to give up any of their lifestyle qualities.

### **Conclusion**

The film *Heima* powerfully presents a world unspoiled by modernization and globalization through the connections and continuities between its musical and visual elements. The film thus presents an image of Iceland based on an imagined time before urbanization. By focusing on the wilderness, the film downplays human intervention. The exoticism of Iceland, which has been created through centuries of stereotyping and play with images, is enhanced by technical tricks. The view of nature, emphasizing the wilderness, is a contemporary, urban outlook rather than an experienced one. This reflects the authorship of the film; band members, directors and producers are arguably all urbanites and cosmopolitan members of society. The film does not present the band's everyday reality, but a certain image of the society and country deemed fitting for the band. This is a nostalgic way to represent the country from which the band profits.

The idea that the wilderness is the core of Icelandic national identity, as presented in the film, has been used to argue for environmental conservation, but the film can be seen as an example of the problematic nature of the environmental debate. It can be argued that for many, the underlying reason for preserving nature is both economic and utilitarian: the country should be kept unspoiled, making it appealing to foreigners who have a certain image of the country in mind. The film plays on these expectations by only showing a narrow view of the country, which is a proven marketing strategy for Iceland. It seems to be more profitable to showcase all the strange and eccentric habits rather than admitting that Iceland is part of the modern world. In the film, traditional *rímur* chanting is presented as an everyday practice and many customs considered strange (and even gruesome and barbaric) by foreigners are on display. Contemporary Iceland, where most of the inhabitants live in urban settings and enjoy the luxuries of modern technology, does not seem to be a strong selling point, particularly in times when tourism plays an ever-increasing economic role in the society. The film "others" the nation and the country in order to make it more appealing to the urban or even international gaze. This results

in one-sided nation-building that is limited to only a select few who accept this image as their own identity.