

Nick Davis
Film Discussion Group
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Woman at War (dir. Benedikt Erlingsson, 2018)

Cast

Halla, and also Ása: Halldóra Geirharðsdóttir: Icelandic comedy *The Seagull's Laughter* (01)
Sveinbjörn (cousin): Jóhann Sigurðarson: The moving Icelandic drama *Volcano* (11)
Baldvin (accomplice): Jörundur Ragnarsson: Mostly TV; wonderful Icelandic drama *Rams* (15)
Juan Camillo (tourist): Juan Camillo Roman Estrada: Location manager and on-set photographer!

Off Camera

Writer/Director: Benedikt Erlingsson: Mostly an actor, who's now made two hit movies
Co-Screenwriter: Ólafur Egilsson: Highly regarded playwright with several forays into film
Cinematographer: Bergsteinn Björgúlfsson: Tense, exciting shipwreck adventure *The Deep* (12)
Film Editor: David Alexander Corno: Works across scripted films and documentaries
Composer: Davíð Þor Jónsson: Also the on-screen pianist and accordion player

The “eth” in Icelandic (capital Ð, smaller ð) sounds like the soft “th” in “the” or “there.”
The “thorn” in Icelandic (capital Þ, smaller þ) sounds the hard “th” in “thin” or “Thor.”

A word about Icelandic cinema...

Iceland has produced films of many styles for many decades, though its presence on the world-cinema stage really spiked in the early 1990s. Since that time, and especially since 2000, several Icelandic films and directors have risen to international prominence, and some have secured high-profile jobs in Hollywood. Iceland has also become a popular filming location for non-Icelandic productions, ranging from *Game of Thrones* on TV to *Interstellar* in theaters.

The sort of wry, eccentric, but pointed comedy that *Woman at War* represents is emblematic of one much-loved strain of Icelandic film (and of Nordic or Scandinavian film more broadly), but Iceland also produces thrillers, romances, farces, crime stories, meditative dramas, and more.

Other films by Benedikt Erlingsson ...

[*Of Horses and Men*](#) (2013) – This 90-minute feature is composed of six shorter vignettes, all of them centering Icelanders' varied but persistent relationships to horses. You could *almost* call this an equine *Wild Tales* (remember that Argentinean movie so many of you loved during our first year?), with the same tonal range from hilarious comedy to darker twists of fate, albeit reflecting a different national temperament. I learned about this director when I saw *Of Horses and Men* at the Chicago International Film Festival in 2013, two years before its small commercial release in 2015. You can [rent the film](#) on all the same sites where you saw *Woman at War*. The first two installments are probably my favorites. (Later in the movie, you'll also spot “Juan Camillo,” the Spanish tourist, playing a different version of himself!)

Other Icelandic films that you can stream ...

New feature! You can click the link to see all the places where these movies are available to see.

[Volcano](#) (2011, dir. Rúnar Rúnarsson) – An aging man who has just lost his wife attempts to reconnect belatedly with the grown children who have always found him difficult and aloof. This movie was very popular with CIFF audiences when it played here in 2011.

[The Deep](#) (2012, dir. Baltasar Kormákur) – This dramatization of a real-life 1984 episode where the sole survivor of a North Atlantic shipwreck managed to fight off harsh elements and freezing temperatures was a semifinalist for an Oscar nod as Best Foreign Film. The director has become a go-to filmmaker for harsh adventure stories, including *Everest* with Jason Clarke and Jake Gyllenhaal and last year's *Adrift*, also about stranded sailors, with Shailene Woodley and Sam Claflin. Kormákur is also developing an ambitious film-studio complex in Iceland as a means of attracting more international shooting as well as developing Icelandic film talent.

[Rams](#) (2015, dir. Grímur Hakonarson) – Like an absorbing novel, this film starts with a seemingly simple event: two brothers, estranged for decades, compete for a local livestock-raising prize, and the loser reacts with envy. That conflict starts to escalate, even when the whole valley is struck with a worrisome disease (*not coronavirus!!*), and all the farmers must stick together to save all of their livelihoods. Repeatedly named as a favorite by people I met while I was there.

[Heartstone](#) (2016, dir. Guðmundur Arnar Guðmundsson) – A memorably tender and tactful story of a pre-teen character starting to understand himself as gay, and how that journey plays out in an isolated area of a liberal country where, like everywhere, not everyone is ready for news like this. This warm movie also won a prize at the Chicago International Film Festival.

Facts about *Woman at War* you may appreciate...

One of Erlingsson's inspirations in developing the project was how easily environmental activists become enemies of the state; he was especially moved by the example of multiple women in Latin American countries whose eco-activism has even gotten them killed. And while Halla's adulation of Nelson Mandela is so strenuous as to become a kind of joke—with pictures of him in almost every room in her house, plus that mask—Erlingsson makes clear that Mandela's model of nonviolent but economically potent activism was a real motivator. ([Seventh Row](#))

Though Erlingsson considered working with actresses who were actually twin sisters, he could not resist the pull to work again with Halldóra Geirharðsdóttir, a very significant star in Iceland. Beyond having collaborated on previous films and plays, they had been childhood friends and even ran a catering business together. She won Iceland's Oscar, the Edda, for this performance.

In the scenes with both twin sisters, Geirharðsdóttir did not want to act in isolation or against a green screen or mute stand-in. She asked Erlingsson to cast real actors as whichever sister was offscreen in a given shot, so there could be real emotional give-and-take between her and these invisible sparring partners. ([Moveable Feast](#))

Erlingsson has described early experiences with eco-activism, including by chaining himself to whaling vessels as a teenager so they wouldn't hunt. Geirharðsdóttir has used her celebrity in Iceland to work with UNICEF, so she related to Halla's activist orientation. ([Moveable Feast](#))

Unusually, the score for *Woman at War* had to be written prior to filming, because Erlingsson wanted the musicians to play live in the scenes where they appear as a kind of Greek chorus for Halla (even though she can't always see them). The actress also wanted to coordinate her movements to the music's rhythm and sound so this tricky comic conceit would work out.

Erlingsson told [Seventh Row](#) that his next movie will be a three-part story, partially set in 2077, in a world where the threat of climate change has been solved. The other storylines are set in 377 A.D. and in 1977. Meanwhile, Jodie Foster has bought the rights to remake *Woman at War*.

Broad conversation topics about *Woman at War*...

Principled Living: Halla makes very clear to the audience and to all the other characters that she believes in what she's doing. She also, pointedly, knocks out power *only* to the aluminum factory, not to the overall power grid, telling herself that few people are suffering for her actions beyond the giant corporation. Still, her twin sister disputes her mindset (even before she learns what Halla's been up to), and I imagine your own reactions may vary. What did you make of Halla's goals and methods, and did your responses change over the film? Did you take a side when the sisters quarrel in the locker room about what counts as "making a difference"? What role does inner transformation play in effecting change on a world scale?

Women and Motherhood: Halla's status as a specifically female activist is right there in the title, and not at all rare in Iceland, where feminist politics are closer to a broad mainstream than in the U.S., and women hold many prominent leadership roles, including current Prime Minister, Katrín Jakobsdóttir. Icelanders also voted up the first democratically elected female president in the world, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, who governed from 1980-1996. At the same time, though *Woman at War* does not frame its central conflict as "motherhood vs. vocation" the way many American dramas and comedies do, it is clear that Halla's activism will complicate her bid to adopt a child. How central an issue was Halla's gender for you?

Foreigners and Xenophobia: Halla's fight is not only against her own government but against multinational corporations and surveillance forces (American, British, Chinese, Israeli) that are polluting Icelandic resources and/or helping to block activism like hers. At the same time, through the serial, semi-comic arrests of that Spanish tourist, *Woman at War* makes a point of how easily "foreigners" become targets and scapegoats at times of crisis. Where do you draw the line between resisting the power of mighty global forces and vilifying outsiders?

Environment and Climate Change: Beyond featuring Iceland's singular, beautiful landscapes, *Woman at War* crucially takes place in a country where nature holds a sacred status; several Icelanders I met agreed that respect for the environment plays a role similar to that of religion in many other countries. The mosses covering many areas you see in the film, for example, take thousands of years to grow and can be destroyed overnight by careless tourists or industrial pillage—which is part of why Halla's activism is so strenuous. That said, *Woman at War* ultimately depicts the scale of climate change as tremendous and worldwide—not unlike what *Parasite* did with that disastrous mid-film rainstorm. Across the movie, but especially by the end, did you believe in Halla's ability to protect the ecology around her, and hope more citizens would do the same? Or does the problem ultimately feel too big?