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Godland

AN H. PÁLMASSON FILM

The struggle between the strictures of religion and humankind's brute animal nature plays out amid the beautifully forbidding landscapes of remote Iceland in this stunning psychological epic from director Hlynur Pálmason. In the late nineteenth century, Danish priest Lucas (Elliott Crosset Hove) makes the perilous trek to Iceland's southeastern coast with the intention of establishing a church. There, the arrogant man of God finds his resolve tested as he confronts the harsh terrain, the temptations of the flesh, and the reality of being an intruder in an unforgiving land. What unfolds is a transfixing journey into the heart of colonial darkness—one that's attuned to both the majesty and the terrifying power of the natural world.

Iceland, Sweden, Denmark, France | 2022 | 143 minutes | Color | In Icelandic and Danish with English subtitles | 1.33:1 aspect ratio

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DIRECTOR BIOGRAPHY

Hlynur Pálmason is an artist and filmmaker who was born in 1984 in Iceland. He started out as a visual artist and went on to pursue an education at the National Film School of Denmark. Pálmason lives and works in Iceland and Denmark with his wife and three children.

2022	<i>Godland</i> (feature)
	<i>Nest</i> (short)
2019	<i>A White, White Day</i> (feature)
2017	<i>Winter Brothers</i> (feature)
2014	<i>Seven Boats</i> (short)
2013	<i>A Painter</i> (short)
2012	<i>A Day or Two</i> (short)

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Godland explores family bonds and the acceptance of myth or some kind of magic realism.

It's also a film about a journey into ambition, love and faith and the fear of God, and the need and want to find your place in all this, to be seen, to be a part of something.

It's also about communication, the foreign aspect of dialogue, and the way we communicate—or, rather, miscommunicate.

It's about inner and outer conflicts.

It's about humanity and nature and how these things collide with each other, through man, animal, and the world around us.

In the end, I found out that this film is very much about what divides us and what ties us together. And I was surprised to find out that, in the end, death might be the only thing that ties us together. This is the core of the film, the beating heart.

CAST

Lucas	 Elliott Crosset Hove
Ragnar	 Ingvar Sigurðsson
Anna	 Vic Carmen Sonne
Carl	 Jacob Hauberg Lohmann
Ida	 Ída Mekkín Hlynisdóttir
Vincent	 Waage Sandø
Translator	 Hilmar Guðjónsson

CREDITS

Director	 Hlynur Pálmason
Screenplay	 Hlynur Pálmason
Cinematography	 Maria von Hausswolff
Editing	 Julius Krebs Damsbo
Production design	 Frosti Friðriksson
Costume design	 Nina Grønlund
Sound design	 Björn Viktorsson
	Kristian Eidnes Andersen
Music	 Alex Zhang Hungtai
Production companies	 Snowglobe in collaboration with
	Join Motion Pictures
Coproduction companies	 Maneki Films
	Garagefilm International
	Film i Väst
Producers	 Katrin Pors
	Anton Máni Svansson
	Eva Jakobsen
	Mikkel Jersin
Coproducers	 Didar Domehri
	Mimmi Spång
	Anthony Muir
	Peter Possne
	Guðmundur Arnar Guðmundsson

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IN CONVERSATION WITH HLYNUR PÁLMASSON

Interview by journalist Marta Bałaga

Godland is set in the period when Iceland was under Danish rule. What drew you to depict a story from this time of colonization?

My life has been divided between these two very different countries that have shaped me in many ways. It was not that long ago that Iceland was under the Danish crown, and I haven't really seen it explored in cinema. I wanted to explore the opposites in the landscapes, the temperaments, and the languages, or the source of misunderstanding, but also the opposites in form and feeling and how they reveal themselves when you put these two countries up against each other.

I do think this period reverberates today because, in a way, we haven't really changed that much as human beings. We still have all the same basic primitive feelings, wants, and needs, and we all share the same fate of being mortals and becoming earth. I think it's wonderful to read diaries or letters from this period and also further back in time and see that people are thinking about the same things as today: How much money do I have for bread and wine? I saw this beautiful woman down the street. The weather was dreadful today. Why am I here? Etc.

Lucas, your protagonist, travels from Denmark to a remote part of Iceland and is confronted with this contrast.

I see Lucas as a young, ambitious priest with ideals. But these ideals, when confronted with something so unforgiving and foreign, become irrelevant and are very quickly crushed by the reality of life, nature, or whatever we want to call it. I think Lucas and I slowly realized in the process of making this film that we are very small and brief, and only here for a very short time.

How was the experience shooting the film?

The film was written and developed for the area around where I live. The rotting horse was my father's horse, and I filmed it for over a year on our neighbor's land. The seasonal images of the glacier were filmed for over two years at a place where we pick mushrooms during late summer. The first camp in the film is where we fish trout through ice during winter. Most of the locations are spaces that I've revisited many times, and slowly they begin to reveal themselves in my writing.

Some of them were also very hard to reach, and it's impossible to drive there. So we

had to carry all the equipment ourselves and travel only by horse. I think this process made it possible for us to depict the landscape around here in a very truthful way. We were experiencing the journey along with our characters. It was a very challenging film to make. We shot it chronologically, which was a huge gift, and I can't even imagine doing it differently.

Your narrative style and sense of plot alludes to classic Icelandic sagas.

Where do you find inspiration for your own storytelling?

I always think a lot about the narrative style and the flow of the film. This interests me more than the plot of the film—something that has never been very strongly present in my films, because I don't experience plots in my own life.

I was, for example, very excited about dividing the film into two parts, the traveling part being the first and then the arrival at the location where they build the church as the second part. Creating movement from the first part to the second part was a very creative and satisfying process to work on. I often try to find narrative forms that excite me and make me want to explore something new.





The form and narrative story somehow have to blend totally into each other.

Except for the end of the film, the soundtrack is very sparse. It sounds a bit like the wind.

For a long time, I thought there might not be any composer on the film. I knew there was a piano in Carl's house, and I had an impulse to allow Ragnar to play the harmonica at the wedding. There is also quite a lot of singing throughout the film: Ragnar with his old poems and the introduction of the sisters; when Ida sings a murder ballad on her way to the house; and then Anna sings by the piano at the end of the dinner scene. So, in a way, I thought I had enough music already built into the narrative. But I had been in contact with the musician Alex Zhang Hungtai for quite some time now, and I really wanted to work with him.

My editor, Julius Krebs Damsbo, and I got some saxophone improv sessions from him that we really loved and just started trying them out with the film. It ended up being a really great collaboration, and he is also behind the music for our short film *Nest*, which we made parallel to *Godland*. But I agree that it feels very much like the wind—you don't really know what instrument you are hearing. We felt like we hadn't heard this music before. It was quite mysterious and felt very right for this film.

You shot the film thinking about daguerreotype, it seems. Were you—and cinematographer Maria von Hausswolff—fascinated by the images from that time?

We were actually using the collodion wet-plate process that replaced the daguerreotype somewhere around 1860.

I was attending a lecture in Denmark on the collodion process held by Hörður Geirsson, who is a museum photography specialist. We became friends, and he showed me the whole process of preparing a wet plate, exposing and developing it. I got very fascinated by it and fell in love with the quality of the image and the smell of the chemicals. This discovery completely transformed the writing process for me and made it very enjoyable. Suddenly, Lucas had this modern process of capturing images, and this really tied the project together for me.

The frame of the film is something that I stumbled upon while researching another project. I was testing film formats and realized that the old Academy format suited me really well—I had a couple of problems with the wider format in some of my previous work. It just became very effortless and fun, framing again with this new aspect ratio. It made the faces look so gorgeous, and I was actually beginning to avoid going too close when I was filming in the wider format. I also think that the

black gate surrounding the image creates a harder cut each time when we go from one image to another, and this gives each cut a bit of a temper. The black frame also softens the image and gives it this beautiful, feminine shape when it comes to its edges. The format of the film is very close to Lucas's photography, so it ended up being an obvious choice.

It's interesting that Elliott Crosset Hove's character [Lucas] is looking at everyone for the longest time. Only at the end does it feel like someone is finally looking at him. Could you tell me more about that perspective?

Lucas is a foreigner, a stranger in this very harsh land that he knows very little about and whose language he doesn't speak. The film starts out by pitting this man against the land, or nature. But later, when you move deeper, this conflict begins to build up between the priest and the guide, and it becomes a man-against-man kind of story. In the very end, it feels like the perspective might have shifted and that we finally see him—or that he finally sees himself. And, therefore, it's about a man going against himself.

*There is an earnestness about this film that reminded me of [Martin] Scorsese's *Silence*, also because of its religious aspect. But what were your inspirations?*

I think I was inspired by my surroundings. I wanted to make something that was

connected to my roots or the place where I come from and grew up. I haven't really seen the Danish-Icelandic relationship portrayed in cinema before. I thought it was worth exploring and very quickly got swept away in this fictional story.

The relationship between these two men, played by Crosset Hove and Ingvar Sigurðsson, is very interesting. How did you see their conflict, which at the same time has elements of mutual fascination?

In many ways, I saw them as opposites. Lucas, the bringer of light, a young and ambitious man of knowledge and ideals, comes to this foreign land and is met by nature that slowly strips him of everything and defeats him.

Ragnar, being an older man, is a man of nature who obviously feels very at home in the wilderness of Iceland. But in the second part of the film, he is kind of out of his element, and we see that he is also struggling with his thoughts and this fear of God that was often rooted in people during those times. I was very determined to portray them both as human beings—I didn't want anyone to be just good or just bad. I didn't want us to experience Ragnar as some kind of Zen-like nature lover or Lucas as a fanatic religious priest. I wanted us to see them being one thing but also

to show they are capable of surprise and becoming something completely different.

There is a western feel to the story as you show a nation under construction, so to speak. Was it something on your mind?

I agree that the film has a western feel to it. I think it's because you feel the inner conflict of a character through the way the world around him is being portrayed. This is probably a bit like the westerns, but I actually think it's also embedded in the Icelandic literature I grew up with and am still reading today. I do think the weather here, the seasons and the landscape, does shape us in a very profound way. So perhaps it's more of a northern than a western.

You are working with your daughter again. Is that something you want to continue with?

Ida has been working with me from the very beginning, as well as my two sons. We just had a premiere in Berlinale with a short, *Nest*, that I made with my children. I'm very fond of that film, and we had a great time making it, so we are working on the next short film now, and it's called *Joan of Arc*. Ida has had very significant roles in my films, and I would love to write more for her. She is a very smart young woman

and great fun to be around. I'm sure we will make more films together—if she doesn't get tired of me!

You used to live in Denmark and met many of your collaborators there. You said once that you were in between these two countries, so did that influence this story?

The title of the film is inspired by a poem by Matthías Jochumsson, an Icelandic poet who studied in Denmark and moved back to Iceland with his family.

He experienced a dreadful winter and wrote a diatribe, or a "hate poem," to Iceland called "Volaða land." He received harsh criticism for it and had to write a counterpoem where he focused on the beauty of the country and how wonderful it was. Maybe the next film we make will have to be this kind of counterpoem to this film, where we will indulge in nationalism.

The funny thing is that, during my research and development process, I found out that my great-great-grandfather actually used to run Matthías Jochumsson's land at one point in his life. Supposedly they used to be friends.

Marta Balaga is a freelance journalist based in Finland and a frequent contributor to the Finnish film magazine Episodi.

