

LUX FILM DAYS

3 FILMS
24 LANGUAGES
28 COUNTRIES



WOMAN AT WAR (KONA FER Í STRÍÐ)

by Benedikt Erlingsson
Iceland, France, Ukraine



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BY BENEDIKT ERLINGSSON

Halla, 50, leads a choir in Reykjavik. She is extremely attached to her beloved Iceland and its exceptional natural beauty, and is deeply concerned about global warming and environmental disasters. She is particularly horrified at plans to expand an aluminium plant. In secret, she sabotages a high-voltage power line in an attempt to bring the plant to a standstill and raise public awareness of the issue. Her clandestine activities are interrupted, however, by a piece of news she had long given up hope of ever hearing: having been on a waiting list for adoption for several years, she is told that a little girl is waiting for her in Ukraine.

Woman at war is a green fairy tale which raises questions — sometimes humorously — about the point and effectiveness of individual action in the face of the failure of the powers-that-be to address climate change.

A GREEN FAIRY TALE

From the very beginning, *Woman at war* presents itself as a green fairy tale. Its opening scene shows Halla holding a bow and firing an arrow to connect the cables of a high-voltage power line, thereby likening her to figures such as William Tell or Robin Hood — someone who, with a great deal of skill and panache, pulls off a spectacular stunt. This impression is later confirmed when we learn that Halla, an ordinary person with a bold plan, is taking on the aluminium industry: a hugely formidable foe. The name she gives herself when she carries out her acts of sabotage ('Mountain Woman') and the mask (of Nelson Mandela!) she wears to cover her face when she is filmed by a drone complete the image of a 'caped crusader'.

Other elements of the film also give it the air of a fairy tale or fable: in addition to the lack of detail about the main character (What is her background? How does she make a living?), the regular presence in shot of a band and a trio of Ukrainian singers also serves to distance the viewer from the action. These two groups, which in some way convey Halla's emotions, sometimes resemble mischievous accomplices, and at other times an ancient chorus. This represents a break with the basic convention of narrative cinema: while films usually ask us to suspend our disbelief and believe what we are seeing, the appearance of musicians and singers on screen reminds us that we are watching a fictional narrative.

But perhaps even more than these cinematographic choices, the deliberate vagueness of the story creates parallels with fairy tales: the background to the conflict between Halla and the industry is never expanded upon. (Why is Halla attacking the aluminium industry, as opposed to any other? In what way is this industry a threat to the environment? What bearing do the Chinese investors have on the situation? What exactly does Halla want? None of these questions is ever answered.) Halla 'simply' defends Nature — which is essential for human survival, and for the survival of all life on earth — and takes a stand against industry, which pollutes and which bears a great measure of responsibility for climate change and many environmental disasters around the world. 'I am not the criminal; they are,' she says to the farmer who comes to help her. The opposition between the two sides is elemental; a simple story of good versus bad, as in fairy tales.

A ONE-WOMAN BATTLE

The example of Halla, who, alone and anonymously, takes a stand against a powerful industry backed by international investors, appeals to the whimsical belief that many people share that one person can change the world. Watching Halla go undercover to break the rules for a cause which is seen as good is gratifying. Gripped by the action, the risk and the suspense, the viewer momentarily suspends disbelief to applaud the character's audacity. But the debate prompted by Halla's actions stays in the background: we are alerted to it by the newsreader on the television and by programmes discussing the acts of sabotage and their economic implications. One day, however, 'Mountain Woman' is mentioned by an anonymous individual complaining about the likely rise in living costs: Halla's actions could have damaging consequences for 'ordinary people's lives' (and in particular the lives of the very poorest, which is certainly not what Halla had in mind). Halla would most likely not have given these objections much thought if her twin sister, Asa, had not joined in the conversation to call into question the legitimacy of individual action which has such broad repercussions. Is it right for a person to engage in actions that will affect people who are completely blameless?

While Halla advocates spectacular exploits with far-reaching consequences as a response to extremely serious and pressing issues, Asa defends the idea that it is better to perform lots of good deeds on a smaller scale: 'every little helps,' she says. For Asa, the adoption of Nika is more than just a reason for Halla to compromise by holding back on her acts of sabotage for a while and publishing her manifesto earlier than she had originally planned — it is a completely separate issue: saving Nika from a life of poverty and isolation (not to mention floods) is akin to 'saving the world'. In this way, two diametrically opposed points of view (using drastic means to achieve ambitious results versus performing modest acts with reasonable objectives which, when repeated over time, can be a catalyst for deep change) find their focus in this little girl, whose adoption will naturally transform her life, her mother's life and the lives of those around them.

A POLITICAL STRUGGLE

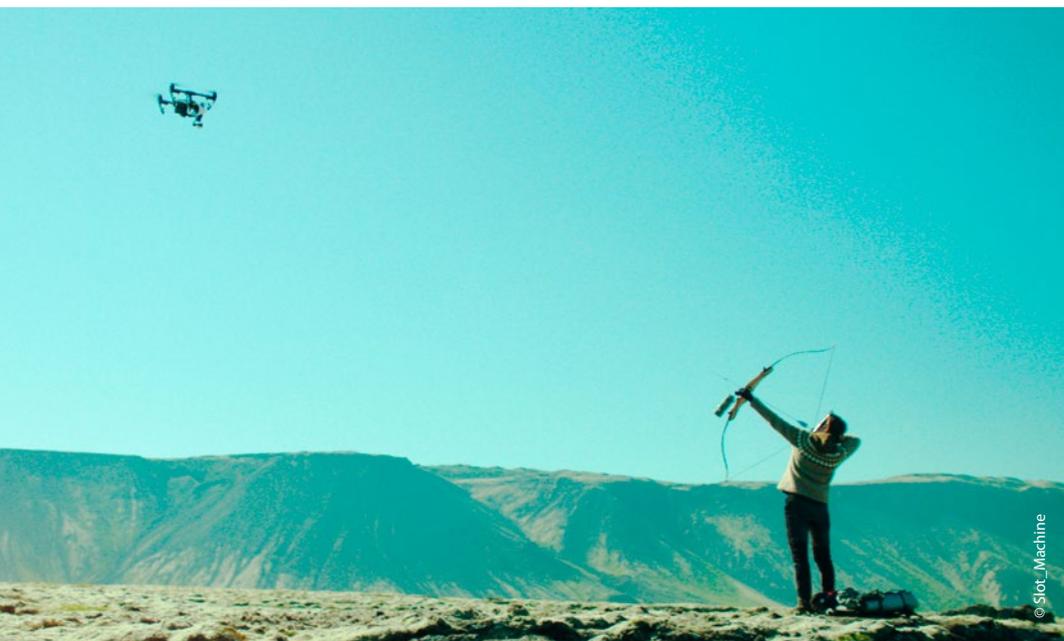
Through her acts of sabotage Halla attacks not only Icelandic industry but also the government, which cares only about boosting the country's economy. Halla's fight is a political one. In her manifesto she makes human laws subordinate to other, higher laws: ancestral laws for example. For Baldwin, her accomplice at the ministry, her choice of wording is awkward, if not unfortunate. The media quickly jump on the opportunity to speculate about these 'laws' and what they represent: they are open to many interpretations, from the most far-fetched to the most extreme. The media also invoke the concept of 'democracy': the approach taken by 'Mountain Woman' is said to be anti-democratic, because it stems from the resolve of a single individual. Beyond the rhetoric and the word games, at which the media and the government excel (the word 'violence' is used to refer to the acts of sabotage, for example, while Halla adheres to the non-violent philosophy of Gandhi and Nelson Mandela), the film depicts two contrasting realities. While the government and the media base their arguments on the idea of democracy, at the same time we see them installing surveillance cameras, using the latest technology to catch the saboteur in the act, urging the public to turn her in, 'burying' the manifesto by encouraging the media to showcase a whole battery of opinions discrediting 'Mountain Woman', and even arresting an unfortunate South American tourist three times. The President of the Republic, meanwhile, whose role is reduced to that of a glorified tour guide, is ridiculed. Halla, conversely, lives in accordance with her principles and in harmony with nature: she lies down on the ground and presses her cheek to the soil; she knows the mountain well and makes use of all its

hiding places — a crevasse, a sheep's carcass and the river, which she dives into to hide from a drone. As for the farmer who comes to her aid, he acts because he sees Halla as part of a hypothetical family tree linked to his own, illustrating the strength of social and family ties, and his help is all the more effective because of his remarkable knowledge of the land: the landscape tells him which way Halla will have run in order to escape, and he takes her to some hot springs to warm up. Not to mention the sheep, a symbol of ancestral pastoralism, which serves as a hiding place and a refuge for Halla.

And then there's the independence and proclamation of the Republic of Iceland, cited several times in the film. These events appear only as the subject of political anecdotes as part of the guided tour of the Þingvellir historic site where the Republic was born, whereas for Halla, who hands out her manifesto in front of the Parliament building and at the foot of the statue of Jon Sigurdsson, the leader of the pacifist movement for the independence of Iceland, and for the farmer, who wants to get his car back before the national holiday, they are full of significance. Halla's strength, spontaneity, naivety, sincerity and deep conviction are certainly more convincing than the plotting and scheming engaged in by the President's advisers.

AN UNEXPECTED DEPTH?

The end of the film is somewhat enigmatic. It is curious that this film, which gives prominence to adventure and humour, should close on the image it does: the characters, including Halla with her little girl in her arms and the six musicians who have been with her throughout the film, get off a bus and walk through water into the distance away from us. Behind the film's happy ending — Halla returning home with little Nika — lurk strange, more sombre feelings: their return to Iceland forces them to travel on foot through a flooded area, and so while the individual story of our heroine and her little girl ends well, the collective story remains unfinished. All over the world, the poor continue to lose their homes, their property and their land to disasters caused by climate change.





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FURTHER FOOD FOR THOUGHT

- Do you, personally, find yourself leaning more towards Halla's point of view, or more towards Asa's? In your view, it is better to 'strike hard' to change things, or to perform lots of little daily actions that can help to bring about deeper changes? Do you think that the need to combat climate change is so pressing that small daily decisions are no longer enough?
- The portraits of Nelson Mandela and Gandhi in Halla's house show that she is acting in accordance with the principles of non-violent resistance. The film, with its frequent use of humour, certainly gets us on Halla's side. Can humour be a weapon, do you think? If so, in what context and under what circumstances?
- The two sisters each represent a kind of harmony: harmony in choral singing, harmony in tai-chi movements, harmony in nature, harmony in yoga, etc. But is there not also a kind of harmony at the other end of the 'philosophical' spectrum of the film, in the major industries Halla is fighting against? Are the high-voltage power lines she is attacking not also the instruments of a remarkable form of artificial harmony?
- Did you notice Asa's declaration, 'You are going to save a child and the whole world with it?' What does this mean, do you think?

les grignoux



EUROPEAN CINEMA FOR EUROPEANS

The LUX Prize continues to bring together a surprising variety of genres and moods in films created by young, talented European directors. The European Parliament is pleased to present the three films competing for the 2018 LUX FILM PRIZE:

STYX, a film by Wolfgang Fischer — Germany, Austria

THE OTHER SIDE OF EVERYTHING (*Druga strana svega*), a film by Mila Turajlić — Serbia, France, Qatar

WOMAN AT WAR (*Kona fer í stríð*), a film by Benedikt Erlingsson — Iceland, France, Ukraine

Adopting a sympathetic and intelligent approach, the films deal with topical subjects and reflect what is going on in Europe at the moment. They show characters who open their eyes to the world around them in order to understand their reality and the societies and communities to which they belong. By showing our stories sublimated by the emotions of the cinema, the quality and diversity of European cinema will be displayed, as will its importance in constructing social values and cultural communities. We invite you to see the films during the seventh edition of the LUX FILM DAYS.

LUX FILM PRIZE

Culture plays a fundamental role in constructing our societies.

With this in mind, the European Parliament launched the LUX FILM PRIZE in 2007. Through this project it hoped to boost the distribution of European films across Europe, and to encourage European debate on major social issues.

The LUX FILM PRIZE is a unique initiative. While most European co-productions are shown only in their countries of origin and are rarely distributed elsewhere — even within the EU — the LUX FILM PRIZE gives three European films the rare opportunity to be subtitled in the EU's 24 official languages.

The winner of the LUX FILM PRIZE will be chosen by the Members of the European Parliament and announced on 14 November 2018.

LUX FILM DAYS

The LUX FILM PRIZE gave rise to the LUX FILM DAYS. Since 2012 the three films competing for the LUX FILM PRIZE have been shown to a wider European audience during the LUX FILM DAYS.

During the LUX FILM DAYS event we invite you to take part in an unforgettable cultural experience that transcends borders. From October 2018 to January 2019 you will be able to join cinema lovers from across Europe in watching screenings of the three films in one of the EU's 24 official languages. Don't forget to vote for your favourite film via our website, luxprize.eu, or our Facebook page!

AUDIENCE MENTION

The Audience Mention is the LUX FILM PRIZE people's choice award. Be sure to vote for one of the three films before 31 January 2019! You might even be invited by the European Parliament to attend the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival in July 2019 and announce the winner of the Audience Mention.

WATCH,
DEBATE AND
VOTE!



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LUX
PRIZE
.EU

DIRECTOR: Benedikt Erlingsson

SCRIPT: Benedikt Erlingsson, Ólafur Egill Egilsson

CAST: Halldóra Geirharðsdóttir, Jóhann Sigurðarson, Juan Camillo Roman Estrada, Jörundur Ragnarsson, Davíð Þór Jónsson, Magnús Tryggvason Eliassen, Ómar Guðjónsson, Haraldur Stefansson

CINEMATOGRAPHY: Bergsteinn Björgúlfsson

PRODUCERS: Marianne Slot, Benedikt Erlingsson, Carine Leblanc

PRODUCTION: Slot Machine, Gulldrengrinn, Solar Media Entertainment, Köggull Filmworks, Vintage Pictures

YEAR: 2018

RUNNING TIME: 101'

GENRE: Fiction

COUNTRIES: Iceland, France, Ukraine

ORIGINAL VERSION: Icelandic (with some English and Spanish)

DISTRIBUTOR(S): Picturehouse (United Kingdom, Ireland, Malta)

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