



Two Icelandic films from the producers at Ground Control Productions show us Iceland past and present and look at the impetus to protest in the face of capitalist ecology. But does the desperation run deep enough to say yes to any investment deal, asks **Melanie Sevckenko**.

## A VICTIM OF ECONOMIC HIT MEN

**A**s the last embers of Eyjafjallajökull's volcanic ash faded from the sky last April, European and international flights were finally resumed. Iceland had never been on the tongues of so many international citizens before those few weeks. I had just made my flight to Toronto for Hot Docs, after others had suffered countless delays and cancellations. As I sat in the cinema one evening, waiting for a film to start, I noticed a peculiar ad on the screen: "Cheap Flights from Toronto to Iceland, Only \$200!" How strange. I barely escaped a volcanic ash cloud and now I'm being encouraged to visit a physically erupting and economically collapsing country. But I suppose Iceland has always been the distant star of ecological beauty, and despite the risk, it might still be worth the cheap airfare. Then I saw *Dreamland*, and my casual dismissal shifted to a clearer perspective: Iceland faces an imminent catastrophe that stretches well beyond an erupting volcano.

**The documentary** *Dreamland*, is made by director Þorfinnur Guðnason and writer Andri Snær Magnason, who penned the original book upon which the film is based, *Dreamland - A Self-Help Book For a Frightened Nation*. They

looked at capitalist ecology in Iceland, as large portions of the nation's highly condensed natural resources and majestically diverse habitat are being exploited for the benefit of corporate gain. When the book was originally published in 2006, it became an instant bestseller and won the Icelandic Literary Award. It seemed that Magnason's book was the first of its kind to speak to Icelanders philosophically about who they are as a nation and how they want their future to look.

The documentary, however, tells a more pragmatic story by finding a dominant antagonist in Alcoa, the world's leading producer of aluminum, which has been building smelters in Iceland's hydroelectric and geothermal areas. Alcoa is just one company out of many that operate in a similar way - moving in and taking over, one region at a time. "And they don't stop, they always want more," says *Dreamland* producer Hanna Björk Valsdóttir to DOX. "When they finish in the east they go to the next place. And that is what people in Iceland were not realizing. They thought it was just one investment. With *Dreamland*, we were trying to tell them - *no, these companies are not going to stop!*" Ironically, as the world cries out for a shift to renewable energy, we fail to

recognize that the planet has a threshold, and tapping its pores for deeper investments can backfire. To some, wrath may come in the form of a revolt by Mother Nature, as exemplified by the Eyjafjallajökull volcano. But to others, the plague may be the evitable economic collapse that occurs when a nation produces beyond its national product.

Plucking the psychological and metaphorical strings of economic growth and morality through interviews with writers and financial experts, *Dreamland* follows Iceland's rise in the mid-90s as a highly developed modern society with no enemies - a country that missed the Industrial Revolution, yet reached the status of its neighboring countries without exploiting its natural resources. Then came the need for economic growth, and with it the corporations, the drilling, the pillaging, the empty promises. Bankruptcy devastated the nation in 2008, leaving Iceland a victim of economic hit men. Energy prices in Iceland are one-third of what they are in America and Europe: unbeknownst to them, Iceland was saving Alcoa 200 million dollars per year.

**Threaded through Iceland's** history, we see the division between those citizens who champion corporate investments for increases in employment rates, and those whose devotion to nature far surpasses economic gain. What emerges is a template for third world countries that have been ravished by corporate greed, for which Iceland is a perfect fit. A corporation gives a loan to a poor country with natural resources in exchange to build infrastructure, the country is unable to pay back the loan, so the corporation moves in and buys up all the natural resources. Adding insult to injury, the companies will often

## the corporations, the drilling, the pillaging, the empty promises



THE LAXA FARMERS

make deals with local politicians, promising them jobs once their terms are up.

"The people in the local areas had no idea who they were dealing with. They see these nice corporate people and they believe everything they say," says Valsdóttir. There are those, of course, who have championed the environmental movement for years which, according to Valsdóttir, has become much stronger since companies like Alcoa moved in on fragile fault lines and built the Karahnjúkar Dam in the east. When the crash hit, the bubble burst and the people of Iceland, including the politicians, finally had a clear picture of what was really happening. After all three major banks collapsed, rising protests forced the government to resign and new elections to be held.

Icelandic life after *Dreamland* is a precarious one. Even with a new government in a two party system – the Social Democrats and the Left-Green Movement – the course is uncertain. Protests continue but new politicians have realized how powerless they actually are, as Iceland's energy sector was privatized under the former government, before the crash. As Valsdóttir explained, one of the energy companies in the south of Iceland was recently sold to a Canadian company and the government had no power to stop it. At its conclusion, *Dreamland* proposes two sides to a very uncertain future: will the financial crisis stop the exploitation of Iceland's resources, or does the desperation run deep enough to say yes to any investment deal? Alcoa's progress has actually slowed, due to a drop in aluminum prices. But things will get a lot harder for them if they continue, thinks Valsdóttir. After screening *Dreamland* to the local people of Alcoa's next

target, votes to build a new smelter dropped from 70 percent to 40 percent.

**The Icelandic people's** deep connection to nature and their fight to preserve it is not a new phenomenon. Hanna Björk Valsdóttir and the team at Ground Control Productions in Iceland are in the midst of producing another film, *The Laxa Farmers*. It tells the story of a group of anonymous farmers, forty years ago, who blew up a dam that was threatening their homes and land. The government sued the farmers but they miraculously won the case through solidarity in numbers. In the end, about 160 farmers confessed to blowing up the dam, a number far too great to prosecute. This was the first time in Icelandic history that a dispute over nature had entered the courtroom. The actual events of that night are still shrouded in mystery, a mystery which Valsdóttir and her crew plan to uncover when they begin shooting this summer. Research started two years ago while the producers were still wrapping up *Dreamland*. The idea was to make a smaller film after *Dreamland*, from a local perspective, to add to the environmental protection debate in Iceland. The process, however, was slow to start. The farmers were hesitant to open up, simply because the true identities of those who committed the act has been a local secret for forty years. Valsdóttir said they are now finally ready to talk.

Foreshadowing the events of *Dreamland*, the dam site in *The Laxa Farmers* is located in exactly the same area that Alcoa has set its sights on for another aluminum smelter. Perhaps the actions of these farmers has set a precedent for further aggressive protest. At least Valsdóttir thinks so. "In *Dreamland* we saw protesting in

every professional way – writing articles and talking to politicians – but we haven't actually destroyed property since then," she says. "But maybe that's what we should be doing, because they're not going to listen. *The Laxa Farmers* is a reminder that it is possible to stop it. But the people have to do it because the politicians are not going to. I don't think there's fear in the Icelandic people," continues Valsdóttir. "I think the protestors are more determined than ever. But at the same time they're also very tired. This has been going on for years now and we have to continue all the time to fight for our land. It's a constant struggle."

**However strong** the opposition might be, the filmmakers at Ground Control Productions are having no trouble finding the pulse of their nation. So far, *Dreamland* is the only film of its kind and, in all probability, the biggest documentary production to come out of Iceland. It broke cinema attendance records for three months in a row. For years, Icelandic docs were made by individuals or small crews more used to producing nature films. But recently – due to a growing film fund and a heightened interest in docs – Icelandic filmmakers and film companies are on the rise, popping up at international film festivals and covering themes from inside its borders and beyond. "I think there's going to be a lot more documentaries coming out of Iceland," says Valsdóttir, "especially after the crisis. When the banks collapsed, so many people got out their cameras and started shooting. So we still have to see what comes out of that. It's a really interesting time in Iceland."

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