

**Speech by Fridrik Thor Fridriksson delivered during the training
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Fridrik Thor Fridriksson (r.) with one of the trainees

I'm born 1954, 2 years after Iceland received aid from the Marshall Plan. One of the many conditions of the aid was that all the large Hollywood studios were to get their own cinema in Iceland. So that meant a strict Hollywood diet for cinema-goers, which is still almost the only thing on the menu. The Marshall Plan expired in 2002, but the only thing that changed was that the biggest newspaper in Iceland no longer needed its front page approved by the Pentagon. The front page hasn't changed much, however.

By and large the aim of the Marshall Plan was to spread an American way of thinking, and the American movie was, and still is, the most powerful way to preach this gospel.

Consumers in different cultures have different needs due to different values and means. If a film product is to be international all the cultural specifics must be eradicated from it, leaving an ideologically level, dead thing. Popular films unite taste and demand, and so they are a powerful tool for global consumerism, first and foremost.

As the German director Wim Wenders said, "American movies make colonies of our souls.... All films are political, but especially those that pretend not to be: those labeled "Entertainment". They have the greatest political import, because they smother people's idea of change. "Everything is as it is", is the message in every frame. They are a giant advertisement for the status quo. These films make puppets of their characters, and so in turn the audience is also turned into puppets.

Such films were the only films that got distributed in Iceland; a situation that can best be described as a intellectual and spiritual wasteland.

And what could one do about it? I think Wim Wenders [got it right] in an interview I took in 1978, when he said “To make up for the great damage that has been done and convince the cinema going public to seek out something else, you need a massive amount of money. You need investment and I don’t know from whom. No one will make it.”

At the age of 14, just by coincidence, I walked into a screening of Milos Forman’s *Fireman’s Ball* – a small European feature that got screened because it was considered anti-communist. This was a massive eye-opener for me – not only because it was a window into a new culture, but also because of how instantly recognizable this culture was, how similar to the icelandic provincialism I had grown up with.

This led me and my friends to found a Film Society. We got our projectors from the American Embassy, but our films from the Russian one.

Admittedly, *Fireman’s Ball* was not the only non-Hollywood production I had seen, as they sometimes screened movies in school in Reykjavík, and the story goes that the man charged with buying films at an educational film festival got so drunk on his trip, that after a week-long binge, on the last day of the festival, he stumbled into the Indian booth in a panic and bought Satyajit Ray’s *Apu Trilogy*, thinking it was a children’s film. So I, along with most children my age, had seen those fine films, which we did not appreciate much at that age.

So when I started Junior College, a Film Society that screened interesting films, had been operating in one of the Junior Colleges, but sadly not in the one I went to. So I, along with many others, set out to unite our Film Societies. Once we managed to bring all the Junior Colleges into the fold, our membership reached 700, which meant that we could screen a new movie each week. When I started University this had become a part time job for me, and we acquired a run-down theater. Most of my friends dreamed of opening café's, I dreamt of opening a Cinema, and programming it.

Just to give you some idea of the cultural background we were operating in: there was only one radio station that broadcast in Icelandic, which had a 2 hour quota on Rock Music per week. The only Icelandic TV station only broadcast for four hours each day, except thursdays, when there was no broadcast. However there were both an American TV channel and Radio station that broadcast American films and rock and roll 24/7.

At this stage our Film Society became enormously popular, having over 2000 paying members – they bought a certificate that lasted the whole winter. We had enough money to buy what we wanted and could screen as many movies as we could get our hands on. We bought most of our prints from England with English subtitles, and we had good relationships with the foreign embassies in Iceland. Our theatre was particularly well suited to the films of Tarkovsky, as the roof was leaky. That set the right mood.

The program ranged from brand new political documentaries to overlooked classics. The backbone of the program was classic film history; we paid particular attention to Japan, and no less to Italy. I also tried to pick arthouse films that were a year old or younger, but mixed them in with older classics and concert films – these appealed to an older and broader audience. The political documentaries also brought in a broad

audience, the many rebels and dissidents, whether their revolution was purely rock and roll or more explicitly political. Vietnam was a burning hot topic of course, and Iceland had its own particular antagonistic relationship with America because of the army base and what many considered the bad cultural influences of the occupation.

Picking a film to screen formed a personal bond of sorts; I felt a personal responsibility for the film that was now in my care. I usually placed myself by the exit during a screening, and I gave walkouts such an evil eye that most of them returned back to their seats.

A few of the films, although not many, were Hollywood studio productions, or at least distributed by them. This made other cinema owners paranoid about their studio-connections, and sometimes they wouldn't loan or sell us old prints even though we were obviously not going to be taking over their business with United Artists or Universal.

Sometimes we did retrospectives of particular Directors. Werner Herzog came to Iceland in 1977 – at that point there was no film production in Iceland. He gave a press talk, where he was asked whether he believed there would ever be an Icelandic Cinema. He answered that he did not expect there to be. He had just arrived from Peru where he had been shooting *Fitzcaraldo*. There he had seen such pain in the streets of Lima, but there was no pain on the streets of Reykjavík, and he believed pain was necessary for cinema." At that point I stood up and told him "we have pain on the brain, Mr. Herzog".

Our financial situation was so strong that we could afford a small editing table and a 16mm camera, allowing me, and other young filmmakers, to make their first films. We also started publishing a Film Magazine.

In 1978 the head of the Reykjavík Art Festival approached me to run the first Reykjavík Film Festival. I only had one screen that seated a thousand people, but total attendance reached 21.000 people, which meant the festival was here to stay. The festival got a lot of press, as my connections in the French Embassy had gotten me a print of *Realm of the Senses*, which caused an absolute outrage - that just goes to show the frankly primitive state of Icelandic society back then. Our budget only allowed for two guests, one of which was Wim Wenders. After his visit he wrote a letter to the Icelandic Parliament, urging them to found an Icelandic Film Fund, which they promptly did.

At the time there was simply a hunger for all of this. There was such blandness and censorship on television. People were hungry for something forbidden, for a different perspective. When Pinochet ousted Allende and the Junta took over in Argentina, people would flock to see anything South American. Our success was largely dependent upon taking note of the political present. And I still believe today that you can't run a decent arthouse theatre without paying heed to politically charged cinema as well as to the fringes of filmmaking. Gaza, Iraq and Afghanistan need to be up on the screen.

On that note, I have a theory that countries that don't have a national cinema are more likely to be attacked or oppressed. It is easier to bomb a country and culture you've never seen, people that are only numbers, not main characters. I believe this might even be the reason that there are American soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq, but not in Iran – not yet, at least. In this sense, arthouse cinemas contribute to world peace.

So far I've been describing how things were, what I did as a young man, and I know that it's all a lot harder today. Not only has the consumer pattern changed due to technological changes – the Marshall Plan has also had another 30 years to shape the

consumers themselves. My analogy has always been fast food: It is something you eat so as not to be hungry, just like a Hollywood product is something you watch to kill time. We all know that if you only eat Fast Food you die – and if you kill all your time you might as well be dead. A real film is like dining at a restaurant, where you go not just for calories and a sugar fix, but the carefully prepared meal, the ambience and the companionship. So you, who are trying to run these restaurants, have all my sympathy, and I wish you the very best.