

TWO GIRLS BY THE SEA:

Reflections on the role of the island in the Faroese film *Dreams by the Sea*

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ABSTRACT: This essay discusses island films as a possible cinematographic genre based on the case of the Faroese feature film *Dreams by the Sea* (Sakaris Stóra, 2017). It examines the role and meaning – as focus and locus – of the island in the award-winning Faroese production, which takes viewers to a small remote village in the northwestern Atlantic island community. *Dreams by the Sea* is about young lives, islandness, and future dreams. New Faroese cinema aims to de-exoticise the islands and to picture and narrate the stories that too often are – intentionally or unintentionally – kept out of the public eye. This essay is based on my extensive ethnographic research among Faroese youngsters since the beginning of the 21st century with special focus on the film landscape of contemporary island youth. The main findings of the essay were presented at the international *Islands and audiovisual media* conference organised in Torshavn, the Faroe Islands, 26-28 June (2024).

KEYWORDS: Film, island, youth, migration, temporality

Introduction

The objective of this anthropological essay is to discuss the Faroese feature film *Dreams by the Sea* (2017) in relation to contemporary critical discourse on the intersection of films and islands and ask the question ‘what makes a film an “island film”?’ The essay aims to examine the relationship between island cinema and island life from the case of the Faroe Islands (Faroes) in the northeastern Atlantic. It is based on my research into Faroese youth and draws on audiovisual media as tool for communication of ethnographic knowledge. *Dreams by the Sea* is not an ethnographic or documentary film, but it is a film inspired by the everyday life of young people living in a small island community. Ethnographic films, says Hastrup, “are extremely powerful in conveying the plurality of the world” and “their value is indisputable” (1992, p. 21). Visual anthropology, including feature films and, basically, any other audiovisual media in its studies, explores film styles versus cultural styles in its discussion on the issue of representation (MacDougall, 1992, pp. 91-91). In this essay, I am focusing on the cinematic portrayal of young people in a remote island community struggling to cope with challenges relating to the transition from adolescence to adulthood. The connection between young people and film, Aitken and Rowlett argue, “is long-lived and enduring”, and, thus, “understanding child/film relations is perhaps more pressing now than ever” (Aitken and Rowlett, 2024, p.7). If you provide young people, and more specifically young islanders, with a camera, many of them will create audiovisual productions

demonstrating their social, cultural and political lives (Skelton, 2024, p. 228). In *Dreams by the Sea* (manuscript written by the Faroese author Marjun S. Kjelnæs), the young director Sakaris Stóra is shaping the visual narrative on the youth of his islands. This essay contextualises Faroese cinema, critically discusses islands as symbols of alterity, reviews *Dreams by the Sea* as a youth island film and reflects on the temporality of island and coastal landscapes in cinematographic representations.

Island as utopia/dystopia

Cinema anywhere is a “conspicuous and pervasive entity”, which “cannot avoid circumspection from society at large” (Udden, 2009, pp. 28-29). But why are islands in audiovisual fiction captivating? Remote islands “can be prisons for marooned communities incapable of escape” (Boon et al., 2018, p3), but the myth “of the island beyond the farthest horizon has existed for as long as people have set out to sea: Atlantis, Ultima Thule, Elysium” (Ball, 2022, p.58). Islands have also been portrayed as utopia, and films provide the “freedom to construct and deconstruct national utopia... freedom necessary for allowing heterotopias to enter into one’s thinking” (Kramer, 2006, p. 55). Islands are indeed also popular locations for modern horror cinema (Hayward, 2007, p. 93) and have very often served as laboratories or workshops for innovative and speculative projects about human society – today and tomorrow. Fictional islands illustrated “in western literature and, more recently, audiovisual media have been more varied [in modern era] and have often demonstrated grotesque or threatening types of alterity” (Hayward, 2021, p. 7-8). In Golding’s novel *Lord of the Flies* the boys stranded on a faraway tropical island ask: “What are we? Humans? Or animals? Or savages?” (Golding, 2006, p. 49). Islands are not only good to think with, but also good to locate yourself in relation to. Hayward (2007, p. 96) asserts that islands, compared to overcrowded cities, enjoy their position as “places of imagined otherness” where curiosity is reinforced. Islands are also characterised by the challenge of boundedness, which reduces escape options for those beleaguered upon them. Utopia is not a realistic vision of the future, but it is an important and creative way of relating the present to the future. Thus, “utopia is chiefly about prophecy, or imagining, though not necessarily foretelling, the future” (Claeys, 2020, p. 186). This is often imagined in relation to cinematographic island settings.

Films from the Faroes

Sakaris Stóra, who was born in the fishing village of Skopun on the island of Sandoy in July 1986, is the most successful Faroese film director and screenwriter today. As a native of a very young film nation with few (mostly low budget) local film projects, Stóra is a pioneer belonging to the first generation of internationally oriented Faroese filmmakers (Gaini, 2024). There is no national Faroese cinema, White argues in a 2009 volume on cinema from the North Atlantic, but one-and-a-half decade later, I think we can maintain that a national cinema is emerging.



Figure 1 - Map of the Faroe Islands (Wikicommons, 2024).

The Danish entrepreneur Ole Olsen, who was the founder of Nordisk Film (one of the world’s first film companies), filmed the Faroes during the Danish Royal family’s visit to the islands in 1907. After him, other foreign directors travelled, infrequently, to the North Atlantic to use the Faroes as backdrop for their film projects: a Swedish production from 1930, an East German (DDR) production from 1952, a Norwegian production from 1953, a Danish production from 1960, a West German (BRD) production from 1961, etc.¹ In the 1970s the Spanish filmmaker Miguel M. Hidalgo, who lived in the Faroes for several years, produced the first films featuring a Faroese cast speaking Faroese: *Rannvá* (1975), *Páll Fangi* (1975) and *Heystblómur* (1976), all based on Faroese stories and legends. Hidalgo’s work represents an “initial catalyst for domestically produced film on the islands” (Harmon, 2020, p.140). Faroese cultural entrepreneurs Dánjal Jákup Mortensen and Jákup Andreas Arge started producing

¹ The films: *Farornas Ö* (1930), a Swedish documentary directed by Sten Nordensköld; *Schatten über den Inseln* (1952), an East German feature film instructed by Otto Meyer; *Selkvinnen* (1953), a Norwegian feature film directed by Lauritz Falk; *Tro, håb og trolddom* (1960), a Danish comedy directed by Erik Balling; and *Barbara – Wild wie das Meer* (1961), a West German drama film directed by Frank Wisbar.

short films about daily life in the Faroes in the 1960s and 1970s (faroeislands.fo)². The National Faroese Television Company (Sjónvarp Føroya), established in 1984, produced documentaries and a few fictional films in the 1980s³. There were very few television sets in the Faroes in the early 1980s and people gathered around the “magic” screens (White, 2009, pp. 90-94). The first Faroese film director was Katrin Ottarsdóttir who has been based in Denmark since she moved there in 1976. She graduated from the National Film School of Denmark as a young adult in 1982. Her award-winning 1989 debut film, a full-length humoresque feature entitled *Atlantic Rhapsody*, is composed of 52 scenes offering a kaleidoscopic view of Tórshavn during a single day (Sundholm et al., 2012). The prominent Danish filmmaker Niels Malmros also made the historical melodrama *Barbara*, based on a novel set in the Faroes in the 17th century by the writer Jørgen-Frantz Jacobsen, in the Faroes in 1997.

Ottarsdóttir’s 1999 tragi-comic road movie *Bye Bye Bluebird* has had a major impact on 21st century films from the Faroes, including Stóra’s ambitious projects. It discusses key themes in new Faroese cinema: migration, isolation, religion, family and island culture. The self-educated Teitur Árnason’s 2002 documentary *Burturhugur* (as well as his parallel documentary from Cuba⁴) has been described as an interesting “gently patient and visually sophisticated” portrait of everyday life on a very small and remote island in the Faroes (White, 2009, p.24). Since 2007, the publicly funded film workshop Klippfisk, has been an important arena for the new and upcoming generation of film directors. The annual Faroese film prize (*Geytin*) was introduced in 2012, and the Faroese Film Institute was established in 2018. Since 2014, the Faroese Government budget has included (moderate) grants for filmmaking. When Stóra’s *Dreams by the Sea* (*Dreyamar við Havið*) was launched in 2017, it was celebrated as the “largest breakthrough in Faroese film” (Birgir Kruse cited in Harmon 2020, p. 137) and was regarded as a “milestone for Faroese cinema” (Harmon, 2020, p. 138).⁵ Today, Faroese cinema can be seen as a “nation-building practice” (Harmon, 2020, p. 137), but it is also, as this essay will outline, an island cinema with islands as focus and locus. Faroese film is commonly discussed as an integral part of Nordic cinema (e.g., Hjort & Lindquist 2016), but it is also a unique cinema with emphasis on island life, which is a theme that is rarely mentioned in introductions to Scandinavian cinema. The audiovisual culture of the islands is strongly linked to its island culture.

Dreams by the Sea

A girl called Ester (played by Julieta Nattestad), aged 16, lives in a small village on a small island with her religious and conservative parents who have a central position in the tightly knit (and rather claustrophobic) local community. Ester’s life seems safe and mundane, and nothing out of the ordinary ever happens until a new girl, Ragna (played by Helena

² Examples of films from the 1950s-1970s include *Síðsti kornakurin* (1959), a Faroese documentary directed by Jákup Andreas Arge. Jákup Andreas Arge and Dánjal Jákup Mortensen made many short ethnographic films about whaling, farming, everyday life, etc. in the 1960s. Another notable production is *Triggir varðar* (1977), a Faroese documentary trilogy about the Faroese writers William Heinesen, Christian Matras and Heðin Brú produced by Tór Film.

³ Examples of films made by the National Television Company include *Alfred* (1986), a feature film directed by Eir í Ólavsstovu and *Stjórin er á floti* (1987), a feature film instructed by Øssur Winthareig.

⁴ Teitur Árnason’s film *Burturhugur* (2002), was about the island of Fugloy and *Faroese observations* (2002) was about Cuba.

⁵ Stóra’s 2013 short film *Vetrarmorgun* (*Winter morning*) won a special prize at the Berlin International Film Festival 2014.

Heðinsdóttir Jørgensen), arrives in the village. Ester meets Ragna at the local Sunday School, and they become friends and soulmates (Figure 2). Ester has been longing for change, and Ragna is the person disrupting the humdrum, everyday life of the cheerless and pensive village girl. Ragna, a straightforward and restless girl, has moved to the island with her alcoholic mother (Figure 3) and 8-year-old little brother. Ragna takes care of her mother and brother and works in a small burger joint to earn some money for her fragile family. She is a strong and resilient young woman who serves as the de facto head of the family. The attraction of opposites, you could say, makes Ester and Ragna best friends (adomeitfilm.com). “Then everything’s possible,” Ester responds timidly, when Ragna with a twinkle in her eye asks her why she wants to move away (“anywhere,” she says, away from the island). They need each other in a village community with very limited space for young people. Ragna is Ester’s gateway to the exciting yet dangerous universe beyond the insular religious family and congregation in the village (Gaini, 2024). Ester’s family, especially the father who is the church leader, gives Ragna the relieving sense of stability and continuity that she has been searching for. Ester and Ragna are not rebels, but they both have dreams and hopes for another tomorrow. Both girls, albeit from very different social and cultural positions, encounter the predicaments of the complex transition from childhood to adulthood in the context of a small island community. In the summer nights that they are enjoying together, the girls ponder if they should leave or stay. What is awaiting on the other side of the sea? Ester also learns through this summer that freedom and personal choices have a price. While dreaming by the sea, the girls soon realise “that it’s only their own self that they want to escape from” (adomeitfilm.com).



Figure 2 – Ester and Ragna, in *Dreams by the Sea*.

In the intimate and poetic *Dreams by the Sea*, with its raw realism, nature seems frozen, or timeless, with only the harmless waves at the rocky seashore, watched over by drifting clouds, hinting the passage of time. Despite its very serious theme, the film gives the audience a sense of (almost therapeutic) calmness and decelerated tempo. The film represents an insider’s guide to everyday life in a small village rather than a touristic representation of exotic (and ‘authentic’) small islands in the North Atlantic. Stóra’s direction and Belgian Virginie Surdej’s cinematography emphasise the islanders’ feelings and

dreams in relation to their social realities and imagined isolation. The majestic nature of the islands is not in focus, but it is there, constantly in the background, as a passive character with a supportive role in the film. Living on small islands is always equivalent to living close to the coast, which is a precarious zone of exchange associated with arrivals and departures. “Use your wings!”, Ragna shouts from the deck of the outbound ferry in the final scene of the film. She is looking at Ester who is standing on large rocks on the shore of the island to get a glimpse of the departing vessel. Ragna is leaving after a tragedy in her family, Ester is remaining in her small island village. Young people from small islands do invest in imagination of how life is beyond the oceanic horizon, as observed in the girls’ conversations, but this does not necessarily trigger an urge for geographical relocation (Pedersen, 2022). It might also bolster the emotional attachment to the place called home.



Figure 3 – Ragna and her mother, in *Dreams by the Sea*.

The actresses playing the leading characters, Helena Heðinsdóttir Jørgensen and Juliett Nattestad, have said that they “believe everyone [in the Faroes] can identify with something from the movie” (Røddin, 2017). It reflects real life in the villages. Juliett is from the capital Torshavn while Helena is from the village of Sørvágur. Even if these places are larger than the village community represented in the film, the girls explained in a podcast (Røddin, 2017) that they learned a lot about themselves through the filming of *Dreams by the Sea*. New Faroese cinema aims to de-exoticise the islands and to picture and narrate the stories that too often are – intentionally or unintentionally – kept out of the public eye (Gaini 2024).

Island film landscapes

The fact that the filmmaker is from an island (and went to film school in an island community), the production company (Fish & Film) is from an island, the story is from an island and the visual landscape is from an island, does not per se make the film an ‘island film’ or ‘island cinema’. Stórá, who uses his childhood home – the island of Sandoy – as main scenery in *Dreams by the Sea*, does not actually talk much about islands when he is presenting his film projects. They are about small-scale communities, relatively remote

coastal communities, which might not necessarily be located on islands. From another perspective, you could also claim that Stórá, like many other islanders, takes the island nature for granted. It is there, but it is not offered explicit attention. When I asked Stórá about his thoughts about the role of island nature in his films, he explained to me that he did not want to exoticise and romanticise the Faroes in his work. He talked about “overused” nature and the need to consider the natural environment (that simply is there as a backdrop) as something neither to hide nor to emphasise in audiovisual productions. In the case of Stórá, in other words, the filmmaker’s objective is to circumvent romantic stereotypes about people from small island communities. Stórá’s cinematography aims to be ‘placeless’ and to capture the feelings and spirit embedding the everyday lives of the characters through (facial) expression, body language, movement, and minimalistic dialogue. Island meanings emerge from “visceral lived experience, says Hay (cited in Boon et al. 2018, p. 6), and this is, in my point of view, is what Stórá intends to illustrate in his artistic films.

Adomeit Film, the Copenhagen-based company producing *Dreams by the Sea* (in collaboration with the production company Fish & Film from the Faroes), quotes Stórá in its brief website introduction to the film:

Making my films in one of the world’s smallest countries, it’s important for me to keep things small and intimate. Like some dedicated and passionate individuals coming together and starting a band. Jamming, putting their soul into it, and chasing the same dream. But at some point, every band needs its manager, to make things happen, preferably a manager with the same kind of rock’n’roll approach, passion and understanding. (adomeitfilm.com)

With this slightly convoluted message, Stórá explains that he has taken the role as manager of a small group in a small society that makes audiovisual productions about their own society. The smallness of the place is key to his project. People know each other and the film crew knows the filmed characters. Nevertheless, *Dreams by the Sea* would not have been *Dreams by the Sea* without the island. The ferry is the link to the world beyond the island. The harbour is the meeting place between the local and the global landscape. The girls are dreaming by the sea because the sea is the territory separating them from alternative islands and continents. The sea, as the space that isolates and connects them from/to other landscapes with other societies, is the liminal shore of their imagination. On the film’s poster (Figure 4), you find Ester and Ragna, happy and laughing with arms around each other’s shoulders, facing the sea. They enjoy the seductive lightness of the summer night and forget the spatiotemporal predicaments fuelling their dreams about another life in another place/time. The summer nights by the sea are also softening the girls’ feelings and dreams about departures. People on islands are always, in some way or the other, thinking about the crossing. “The crossing – a symbol of separateness and connectedness – is one of the defining elements of islandness”, states Laurie Brinklow (2024, p. 2). The crossing can be compared to the practice of “stepping out of one world into another” (Wood cited in Brinklow, 2024, p. 9), and for the girls in *Dreams by the Sea*, future dreams are structured in crossings, back and forth, between islands/continents as well as between adolescence/adulthood.



Figure 4 – Promotional poster for *Dreams by the Sea*.

Time and water

Islands are good to think with (Boon et al. 2018). For many people, to be surrounded by water is experienced as a blessing. Reflecting on the multifaceted special qualities of island life, Brinklow says:

For many, to be surrounded by water is a blessed state: the defined edge, the demarcated yet liminal space found at the shore and in our interactions with it; the deliberate choice we must make to cross to and from an island; the isolation it brings; relative ease of access to nature and the possibility of living in tune with the rhythms of the ocean and land; its distinction from ‘the other’; the existential nature of the sea; the infinite horizon; the ocean as the subconscious or hinterland for creativity and the imagination; the symbol for restlessness and changeability, God, evolution. (2013, p. 40)

There is a realness accompanying the isolation of islands:

for some it’s comforting, knowing where your edges are. For others it’s confining, cloying and you can’t wait to escape its clutches. (Brinklow, cited in MacKinnon, 2016, p. 41).

Island films have a special capacity. The island is an avenue to more creative and innovative descriptions of island communities. The island is a rich metaphor in Faroese

cinematography, crafting the complicated and shifting relationship between the Faroese girls in Stóra's film and embodying the schism between home and away, roots and routes, hence also narrating young people's manoeuvring between individual dreams and collective expectations. The seashore, as in the previously mentioned film poster (Figure 4), is essential here, because the littoral landscape is where hybridity and change are "most easily imagined." (Gillis, 2012, p. 61). In rhapsodical Faroese cinematography, for instance *Bye Bye Bluebird* (Ottarsdóttir, 1999) and *Dreams by the Sea*, the viewer obtains an affectively powerful image of island living as an open-ended collage of bodies and things in rhythmic circulation.

Dreams by the Sea can also be discussed as an island film drawing on its peculiar cinematographic temporality. The island film needs to be examined through "sensory approaches" beyond the conventional spatial images of islands (Merican, 2024). In a Faroese television documentary entitled *Nothing is called Clock* (2020), about life in the remote island of Fugloy, the few inhabitants who are living there all year round (less than 15 persons in two villages combined) talk about their everyday life and attachment to the place. One of the islanders, an elderly woman living on her own without feeling lonely, says: "we are free from the clock out here". She mulls over time and says: "I have done my part in following the clock, when I was working... now I don't adjust to the clock... I go out and I don't even bring it with me." She looks out over the familiar sea and confirms: "Here, nothing is called clock." The only exception, she adds, is the time of the ferry boat or helicopter (which is only interesting for the travellers). She gets up when it is bright and goes back to the house to rest when it is dark (KVF, 2020). In *Dreams by the Sea*, we also sense a place with the slow and gentle passing of time. The girls spend their days without any rush or stress triggered by the tyranny of calendar time. Rather than focusing on spatial thinking about islands, we need to examine the temporal film landscape of islands (Merican, 2024). The island film is elongating and thickening the temporal horizons that we are used to.

Conclusion

In *Dreams by the Sea*, the island is a metaphor and symbol as well as a place surrounded by water. Stóra composes a narrative about young people, insular sentiments and small coastal places through the possibility of an island. The tropes of isolation and (im)mobility in small island contexts are outlined and contested through the experiences and dreams of Ester and Ragna. The film in focus is exploring islandness from the perspectives and feelings of two young Faroese women. "If we think of islandness through the minutiae of affect or feeling", Vannini and Taggart say, "we can begin to examine more critically the connections between our selves and our islands" (cited in Boon et al. 2018, p. 118). The film reveals the female islanders' challenging struggle for a future in the island community that they call 'home'. The women dream about an island offering more opportunities for girls and women. Places and spaces, says Karides, referring to island communities, "are gendered, oriented by sexuality regimes, class and racial hierarchies, and sculpted by coloniality and national status" (2017, p. 30), and spatial island imaginaries are therefore highly gendered. The two girls living and dreaming by the sea in Stóra's cinematographic project embody the ambivalence of island communities: free, safe and slow life versus controlled, confined and wavering life. While the question about the definition of island films/cinema has not been solved in this essay, I have used a film from the Faroes to discuss some of the characteristics that films from/in islands share.

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