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Borealism

*Folkloristic Perspectives on Transnational Performances
and the Exoticism of the North*

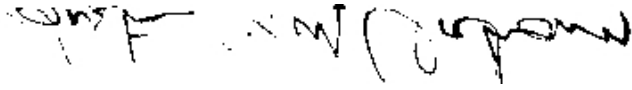
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2011

Statement of Authorship

I hereby declare that I am the sole composer of this thesis and that the work is entirely my own.

Kristinn H. M. Schram

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kristinn H. M. Schram", written in a cursive style.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the exotic performances and representations of Icelanders and 'the North' (borealism) in both contemporary mediums and daily life focusing on their practice within intricate power-relations and transnational folkloric encounters. It sets forth theory in understanding the dynamics, agency and ironies involved with performing one's identity and folklore and a corresponding methodology of fieldwork and audio-visual documentation. It looks at the representation of the North through the produced and widespread images of Icelanders. It sheds light on the dynamics behind these representations and the coalescence of personal experience; everyday cultural expression; modes of commodification; and folkloric contexts from which many of these images emerge. The primary case study is an ethnography of Icelandic expatriates in Europe and North America that explores the roles of identity and folk culture in transcultural performances. In approaching the questions of differentiation and the folklore of dislocation everyday practices such as oral narrative and food traditions are studied as an arena of the negotiation and performance of identity. Interlinking theoretical and methodological concerns the thesis brings to bear how expressive culture and performance may corrode the strategies of boundary making and marginalisation re-enforced by exotic imagery by tactical re-appropriation. Finally the thesis explores the concept of ironic, as opposed to 'authentic', identities.

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1. Introduction

“I did actually get the question: a good friend of mine from Taiwan asked me if we lived in snow-houses. I thought that was absolutely astounding. Of course I had heard that people had been asked this question. But I just thanked him for asking, it would make a great story.”

Haraldur Guðmundsson- an Icelander abroad

I begin with a quote from the liminal space in which the speaker, a participant in my fieldwork, finds himself. When faced with an exoticising representation, multiple responses are possible. As is revealed in the closing comment the course he takes is not that of resentful correction of a blatant misrepresentation but of gleeful realisation of its narrative potential. Being an Icelander abroad myself, I am no stranger to the question my informant received with such good humour: “do Icelanders live in snow houses”, nor am I innocent of appropriating it to various narrative contexts.¹ Firstly, from the few years that I spent as a young child in California, I remember, somewhat hesitantly accepting the air of northern exoticism my peers were inclined to attach to me.² Later in life, as a postgraduate in Scotland, I often found myself as cultural commentator, mediating exotic images of Iceland with my own experiences and identity. On one such occasion, I had been invited to a film club dinner party and was placed, aperitif in hand, beside the screen. The film of the evening was, by no suggestion of mine, the iconic and somewhat exoticising Icelandic film *Börn*

¹ Interestingly a group has been established on the Internet networking site *Facebook* that appropriates just this question. The group is called: “I’m Icelandic, I live in an igloo and my only pet is a Polar Bear.” Among recent comments are: “I’m Icelandic and proud of our igloo heritage :)” , <<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=259965095923&ref=search>> [accessed 31 May 2010]

² As an example I distinctly remember appropriating a Disneyland-bought leather belt in Native American style. Having had my name engraved on the belt I claimed it was a gift from “the Icelandic Eskimos” and that my name in the mother tongue actually translates as “the Heroic one” (as opposed to my much “duller Christian name”).

náttúrunnar or *Children or Nature* (1991).³ Still rather unsure if this was in fact a “set-up”, I was somehow compelled to answer questions at great length. I would comment on cultural situations and sometimes mutter self parodies such as “been there, done that” as the film protagonist enjoys a hotdog at the bus station or violates a traffic law before disappearing into a mountain. As in my informant's experience, I was positioned in a liminal, spatial transcultural encounter, with a heightened sense of difference, prompted and reinforced by the media images.

When national images and stereotypes come into play in people's lives, as demonstrated in these rather ironic auto-ethnographic examples, they incite reactions and narrative.⁴ The dynamics of reflexive identity negotiations such as these within everyday life are a compelling research topic in today's globalised world where identities and images are repeatedly clashing. When Icelanders, and other nationalities of the global north, travel or emigrate an illusive set of images often precedes them. Through history the concept of the north is full of extremes. As revealed in Peter Davidson's exploration of the concept in art, legend and literature, two main opposing ideas of the north repeat and contradict each other from antiquity and well into the 19th century. First of all it is “a place of darkness and dearth, the seat of evil. Or, conversely, [...] a place of austere felicity where virtuous peoples live behind the north wind and are happy.”⁵ From savage dystopia to enlightened utopia, the pendulum has swung back and forth between the civilised and the wild. This *Borealism* of sorts, to appropriate Edward Said's term *Orientalism*,⁶ an ontological and epistemological distinction between east and west, could arguably be seen as a recurring pattern

³ This feature film debut of Friðrik Þór Friðriksson was Oscar nominated and received much acclaim both at home and abroad.

⁴ As dealt with in the methodology various aspects of auto-ethnography will be employed in this thesis. This reflexive orientation blends the practices and emphases of social science with the aesthetic sensibility and expressive forms of art. The method aims to narrate physical, cognitive and emotional experience and often includes the author as an object of research. See for example Carolyn Ellis, *The Ethnographic I : a Methodological Novel about Autoethnography* (Oxford: AltaMira Press, 2004).

⁵ Peter Davidson, *The Idea of the North* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), p. 21.

⁶ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), p. 5.

in North - South distinctions. While Iceland's postcolonial condition offers only a modest counterpart to the gross colonial and post-colonial appropriation of many eastern nations in terms of culture, identity and wealth, banal marginalisation or ennoblement of the north in transnational everyday communication should not be underestimated in terms of power and its effect on people's lives.⁷

Folkloristic and ethnological perspectives have much to offer in illuminating the dynamics of these images and identities. On top of an emphasis on fieldwork and a critical understanding of tradition, the disciplines' emphasis on cultural context, practice and performance offers fresh perspectives on the relationship between image and identity and how the latter is formed and sustained. In the wake of numerous adaptations of Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony, a form of dominance through cultural authority, much scholarship on national identity has been focused on its top-down delivery from an emergent nationalistic intelligentsia to "the masses".⁸ While making a remarkable contribution to illuminating the processes of nation building these analyses tend to overlook the elaborate contextual, and in a sense horizontal, identifications in everyday folkloric communication: that is to say when people, of more or less equal social status and cultural capital, form or rather negotiate their identities in everyday interaction, while talking, eating, dressing, playing and so on, rather than within the pedagogical environment of a classroom, a museum or the hegemonic and ordered space of ceremony and festival. Much of these vertical approaches also fail to adequately address the many complexities of contemporary transnational communication and commodification of culture and identity. Among these are the power or force relationships within folklore; the

⁷ One can find few mentions of the term *borealism* but within post-colonial studies and political science it is usually used either tentatively or dismissively (see for example Norbert Götz, "Blue-eyed angels" at the League of Nations: the Genevese construction of Norden", *Regional Cooperation and International Organizations: Transnational alignment and the Nordic States* (New York: Routledge, 2008). This thesis will discuss the term's validity and application regarding transnational power relations within everyday culture.

⁸ Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992). See also an analysis of Icelandic nationalism based on the works of Renan, Anderson, Bourdieu og Gellner in Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, *Íslenska þjóðríkið, uppruni og endimörk* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag & ReykjavíkurAkademían, 2001).

irony or inner and outer meanings of representations; and the expressive bricolage, that is the resourceful use of whatever materials are at hand, often employed in the practice of tradition.⁹

In a critique of these perhaps overly hegemonic discourses on the construction of national identity this thesis examines the often ironic representations of Icelanders and “the North” in the both media and daily life focusing on their practice within intricate power-relations and from multiple phenomenological perspectives. I present two case studies in which identity is negotiated and performed. One case study focuses on the producers of widespread images of Icelanders. These are individuals in the field of arts, film, finance and advertisement who are, in one way or another, responsible for certain representations of Iceland and Icelanders. The main emphasis of this enquiry is however not put on the content of professional, commercial or artistic representations. Rather I seek to illuminate the dynamics behind these representations that could have been so easily brushed aside in the past as inauthentic “fakelore”, ignoring the coalescence of personal experience; everyday cultural expression; modes of commodification; and folkloric contexts from which many of these images emerge.

Having addressed qualitatively the making and the makers of these images the second case study looks beyond to the images reception and receivers. But rather than approaching them as “receivers” in the full passive sense of the word they will be engaged as active participants within their daily practice and liminal spaces of transnational encounters in which Icelanders may find themselves. These encounters are of course not limited to actual spaces outside of one’s national borders or specific periods of time within them. Indeed, as will be dealt with in this thesis, global media, communication and tourism have made transnational culture an almost universal experience – even within one's own locality. Nevertheless unique insights can be offered by vigorous

⁹ The terms irony and power are central to my thesis and will be discussed thoroughly in relation to theorists such as Michel de Certeau as well as Sören Kierkegaard and James Fernandez (on irony).

ethnography into the experience of Icelanders living abroad in the midst of transnational communication and representations.

Answering questions such as these requires research over an extensive period and field. While the ethnography on which I base this case study is not quantitatively conclusive, but based rather on qualitative methods, its range is nonetheless extensive. The fields of choice are many of those spaces in which Icelanders are met with at least some sort of media backdrop (such as film, advertisement or product marketing), significant relations of either an historical (for example colonial ties,) or current nature (tourism, education, business, arts and culture). The fieldwork began in 2005 and ranges over many Northern European cities and various countries across the North Atlantic. Fieldwork that is stretched out over transnational boundaries has offered an opportunity to study nationality in terms of space. Fieldwork that is spanned over a number of years has in turn offered insights into nationality in terms of changing roles and unfolding events. Since my fieldwork began various seismic economic and social developments have affected Icelanders and their image abroad. The liminal space of foreignness, which the Icelanders abroad inhabit, has therefore been charged with various shifting dynamics. Perhaps the most influential of media backdrops has sprung from news coverage of Icelandic business abroad. While Iceland may still be relatively obscure in the minds of many Europeans and North Americans the coverage of the country's cultural and economic adventures and later misadventures, to say nothing of its effects on foreign depositors, has been considerable. Indeed since my research began major news outlets covered various aspects of aggressive Icelandic business ventures as well as the disastrous collapse of an overgrown Icelandic banking sector.¹⁰

¹⁰ The collapse of Icelandic banking brought on various chain reactions: the early stages of an economic depression; ensuing international disputes over state guarantees of foreign deposits; the eventual involvement of the International Monetary Fund; and the centre-right government's downfall through protests and riots. All this has been widely publicised in the global press. The high profile that Icelandic businessmen have had in countries of Northern Europe such as the Scandinavian countries as well as in Holland and Britain, often referred to as Viking raiders, has now become ironically counterproductive. Indeed many Icelanders

Fieldwork among people in the midst of these processes is therefore especially important and can offer insights into the experience and culture that preceded these events and the images attached to them.

Nevertheless the scope of the ethnographic enquiry involves a lot more than merely probing the effects of “current events”. Much of the fieldwork (particularly in the second case study) was carried out in collaboration with fellow folklorist and partner Katla Kjartansdóttir, centring on reflexive participant observation, qualitative inquiry and audio/visual documentation of how Icelanders abroad conceptualise, perform and negotiate their identities. Going from the common ground of exploring Icelandic identities abroad, we attended gatherings and visited private homes in cities such as London, Glasgow, Berlin, Edinburgh and Copenhagen as well as interviewing participants who live or have lived in various other locations in Europe and North America. Through qualitative interviews and participatory observation we explored self-image as well as self-representation under “the others’ gaze”.

The others’ gaze is not only a foreign one in terms of nationality, but also involves the ethnographic “other”: the *othering* gaze of the fieldworker/researcher/collector and therein lies my specific methodological concerns. In researching performance, or the more non-performed aspects of everyday life, a reflexive approach is instrumental to the credibility of fieldwork “data” and its analysis. Researching identity and performance involves of course the study of meaning, knowledge and its representation. A tool for this purpose, and also a complication, is increasingly sought in the use of audio-visual recording technology. Performance, as artistic communication directed towards an audience of some sort¹¹, encompasses varying levels of earnestness, irony, gloom or humour, which can to some extent be recorded and better conveyed through audio-visual recording as opposed to text. But film does not only become a viewpoint and extension on this performance but a variation in itself.

report negative encounters, and even altercations, abroad while others receive sympathy, condescension and even offers of financial assistance.

¹¹ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: an Introduction* (London: Routledge 2002).

Recording, like researching, also involves intricate power relations such as framing and ordering behaviour that will be dealt with here in context with current theoretical debates on the crisis of representation.¹² Therefore the methodological aspects of this research not only aim at ensuring the reliability of the gathered data. These aspects are also an integral part of the theory set forth in understanding the dynamics, agency and ironies involved with performing one's identity.

In my analysis special attention will however be paid to the correlation between these transcultural exchanges of everyday life, for example through personal narratives and anecdotes, and representations in media (for example press; advertisement; film). Increasingly, representations in the global media make their mark on the transnational and transcultural encounters practised in the liminal space of “foreignness” and being “abroad”. Folklorists have effectively turned their attention to the problems of such encounters and the role that expressive culture and performance plays in them. Going beyond the discipline's prior emphases on the artistic beauty and skill of folklore, great strides have been taken in examining the processes with which boundaries are drawn and differential identities solidified through traditional and expressive culture. Folklorists have also gone further in illustrating the negotiable processes rendering people and symbols foreign and marginal. They have also laid bare the latent and overt strategies involved in the manipulation of identity symbols such as dress and food traditions.¹³ Food has long been a major component in this folklore of differentiation and play, an especially significant role in my participants' performances whether through the media of film or quasi-tradition midwinter festivals. In both textual analysis and in the ethnography special

¹² See for example James Clifford and George E. Marcus, *Writing Culture* (California: University of California Press, 1986).

¹³ This work, which will be discussed further, includes Regina Bendix, & Barbro Klein, “Foreigners and Foreignness in Europe: Expressive Culture in Transcultural Encounters”, *Journal of Folklore Research* 30 (1993), 1 -14 (p. 5); Roger Abrahams. “Narratives of Location and Dislocation” in *Folklore, Heritage Politics and Ethnic Diversity, A Festschrift for Barbro Klein*, ed. by Perti. Anttonen and others (Botkyrka: Multicultural Centre, 2000), pp. 15 – 20.

emphasis will be put on food illustrating its symbolic importance in contemporary mediums as well as in “real” life and to give an example of how folklore moves between the two arenas.

Running through this thesis is the *theoretical and ethnographical examination of the dynamics of performing identity and folklore in transnational contexts*. But it also attempts to answer more specific research questions that, in their most succinct form, include the following:

- How may one research identity performances in the field and document them audio-visually (primarily dealt with in chapter two)?
- What are the dynamics of producing representations of a nation, Icelanders in particular, throughout history and within contemporary mediums (means of mass communication within art, film, advertisement) and what is the relation of these images to people’s daily life, identity and folklore (primarily dealt with in chapter three)?
- How do Icelanders react to or enact exotic representations of themselves abroad and how does that relate to power relations (primarily dealt with in chapters four to six)?
- Why are some aspects of national identity, particularly food traditions, performed ironically and what does that entail (primarily dealt with in chapters four to six but particularly in chapter five)?

The order of the research questions, as presented here, corresponds with the order of chapters in the thesis, which is structured to elucidate their examination comprehensively. Chapter two seeks first to clarify the central terms and concepts of the thesis before they are brought to bear on the primary empirical data. My theoretical point of departure is made clear from the start and then the theory and methodology that is appropriate for my field, transnational everyday life, is set forth. Whereas this thesis is, at its core, an examination of the dynamics of performing identity, image and folklore, these terms are

problematized with examples from critical scholarship and my position on them made clear. The material collected to answer my research questions is largely narrative and performative in nature. This chapter therefore also deals with narrative and its relation to performance. As the fieldwork clearly shows the two are far from being mutually exclusive. Quite the contrary: to understand the practice of narratives, contextual and performance-centred approaches are central and therefore stated clearly. The humorous and often ironic modes of the performances collected also call for engaging with humour theory and the interrelationship of irony and power.

Having dealt with theories, critical scholarship and central concepts relevant to the field, the methods of accessing and analysing it are made explicit. The theory already set forth is integrated into a corresponding methodology of fieldwork and audio-visual documentation. This includes a clear reflexive stand on fieldwork, the use of recording technology and its theoretical implications. Consequently it is argued that the reflexive and performative aspects of fieldwork may transcend rigid definitions of “staged” and “authentic” folklore performances. The relevance of these critical approaches to identity, performance and irony become increasingly clear in consecutive chapters as they are brought together in context with new collected data.

After the theoretical and methodological groundwork has been laid, chapter three begins to apply them to empirical material, introduced first through a short history of borealism: ranging from the most ancient images of the north; through medieval times; the Enlightenment; early modern nationalism; and finally to their contemporary exotic and ironic practice. This exposition culminates in an elucidation of my producer-oriented case study. Many of the approaches introduced in chapter two are applied here in the making and the makers of borealistic images: many of them professionals in film and photography. Further constructions such as filmic borealism and food exoticism are explored in depth to throw light on the relationship of these borealistic images with people’s daily life, identity and folklore.

Chapters four to six engage with the primary case study on the practice of boriealism among Icelanders abroad in their everyday lives. Here all the major concepts and critical approaches of the thesis are brought together through a thorough investigation into the transnational ironic performance of folklore. In a reflexive analysis of the fieldwork, and utilising audio-visual fieldwork methods, these final chapters also deal specifically with the everyday tactical performances of identity, the ironising of food traditions and the folkloric and sensory uses of “exotic nature” in gaining access to host societies.

2. Theory and Methodology

Throughout my PhD studies I have engaged with a wide scope of scholarship in the broad field of folkloristics and related disciplines. This literature, represented in my bibliography, includes both theory and specific case studies focusing on folklore, performance, identities and representation. While not all of this material is dealt with directly in this thesis it has nonetheless informed my own understanding and development as a scholar and lead me to a point where I feel I might contribute and bring the scholarship further. While I am aware that it is sometimes standard to elaborate on such material in a self-contained literary review I wish to deal with much of the relevant literature consistently throughout the thesis. In so doing my synthesis of otherwise general theory, from within subtraditions of ethnology and related disciplines, may be better put into context with the state of research and the empirical data presented here. The relevance and interrelations of the scholarship will become increasingly clear as will my own theoretical and methodological approaches.

2.1. Theoretical Point of Departure

Prior to any context-specific deliberation I wish to elaborate on the scholarship that is central to my theoretical point of departure as well as the terminology and methodology on which my research strategy is based. This strategy is designed to answer my primary research questions. In working towards a research strategy designed to answer such questions I have drawn on a number of theories on folklore, ethnography and transnational performances. While being increasingly drawn to practice theory, and performance-centred and contextual research I have sought methodological grounding in reflexive fieldwork, audio-visual techniques and a synthesis of contemporary folkloric and ethnological scholarship as well as other recent critical ethnographic theory.

2.2. Identity, Image and Folklore

The fundamental concepts in this study are those of identity and image. The latter can be understood in a variety of senses, but is perhaps more readily defined than the former. In this thesis it is not used in the pictorial or generally metaphorical sense, but as a perception *or the mental shape of the other*. In that sense images are cultural practices; they form integral parts of individuals' worldview and daily lives and they can be treated as temporally and regionally consistent but negotiated by individual members within folkloric communication. Those who investigate images in this sense are not necessarily concerned with the accuracy of images as much as with their construction or practice and bringing to light their underlying power relationships. Images come into being in all areas of human society, at all times and in all parts of the world and have always played an extensive role in human interactions. It is thus difficult to overestimate the significance of images or the representations that both reveal and perpetuate them.

The study of identity, image and cultural representation has often been focused on the production of identity and less on "consumption" or indeed its practice. In the field of oral narrative studies and other ethnological and folkloristic subjects this end of the equation has, on the other hand, been engaged in various ways.¹⁴ But the idea of popular consumption is perhaps a limited and inadequate concept and implies a false passivity in the cultural processes of the so-called "masses". An important hypothesis in this study is that identity, personal as well as national,¹⁵ is to a great extent negotiated in everyday life. This poses a potential contrast to a hegemonic premise that

¹⁴ Extensive theoretical and contextual examples will be drawn in the chapters three and four.

¹⁵ As will be argued I hold that national identity, in the sense of a large nation's common identity is largely metaphorical and can indeed be seen as part of a personal identity, how one sees and acts on oneself, however widely or accurately this image of self may be shared.

national identity is primarily forged among an intellectual and political elite and delivered down the cultural strata. A particularly common form of this premise can be found within the study of Nationalism where national identity is widely seen as a necessary precursor to the forming of a nation-state. While such theories are not central to this thesis a brief look into nationalism research is helpful - if only in understanding the problems and ambiguities of identity studies.

The term “nation” is in itself steeped in historical ambiguity. Both its Latin origin *natio*, and Germanic counterpart *Volk* have unclear and varying references. Even in medieval European academies the term could refer to university departments as well as to a population. In the face of these historical discrepancies and modern variations in the meaning of the term many scholars draw a chronological line after the French Revolution. Some even deem all references to nations before that time as inconsequential because of the enormous impact late 18th century thought had on the term as to blur all past distinctions.¹⁶

Looking back through just a quarter of a century within Europe issues of globalisation and colonialism, the fragmentation of nations and states, an expanding centralised European Union and the struggles of Unionists and Republicans, have rendered nationalism studies as anything but a superfluous intellectual exercise. Whether building on the foundations of modernists such as Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm and Benedict Anderson and their emphasis on economical and political elements¹⁷ or on the ethnosymbolist approach of Anthony Smith or Walker Connor¹⁸ who put most weight on the cultural factors involved in the shaping of nationhood, it would be an understatement to say that

¹⁶ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), pp. 17-18.

¹⁷ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983); Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

¹⁸ Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986); Walker Connor, *Ethno-nationalism: the Quest for Understanding* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

identity studies have tended to be highly politically charged.

Besides my research on issues of Icelandic nationality my understanding of the identity issues has been greatly informed by the study of Scottish cultural and national discourse. Of great theoretical value within these studies is the thematic preoccupation nationalism theory has had with the “problem” of Scottish nationality, referring to the historically unusual relationship between the Scottish nation and state. Commentators on Scottish nationalism tended to divide into unionist and separatist stances. A key author of the latter group, although perhaps the odd one out, is the forcefully articulate Tom Nairn. Like other modernists his emphasis is mainly on the materialistic roots of nationalism. Rather than claiming an ideological basis he examines the economics and politics of Post-Union Scotland and especially the rise of the bourgeoisie. Nairn shares the view with many others¹⁹ that this middle class had such socio-economic strengths that Scottish civil society within the Union was unusually empowered. This condition, joined with the effects of early development,²⁰ was an anomaly from the usual conditions contributing to the rise of nationalism in Europe. While not experiencing a sense of blocked mobility the Scottish elite did not attempt to immobilise “the masses” or fuel separatist feeling among them. Having “failed” to serve their main role in the nationalistic era Scottish nationalism was left without political content or direction. A failure of Scottish nationalism is a crucial point in Nairn’s ideas and one with dire consequences:

Scotland had failed to turn nationalist and create its own political state. It had failed to do the normal thing, at the proper time. [...] Scottish society apart from the State, “civil society” was guaranteed in its independent existence by the Union. The church, the law, the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie of the Royal Burghs: all these institutions and the dominant social classes linked to them were confirmed in what they had demanded

¹⁹ See Linda Colley’s analysis of the Scottish position within the Union: Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (London: Vintage, 1996), pp. 125-140.

²⁰ Tom Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain* (London: Verso, 1981), pp. 92-196.

of separate identity. So was the distinct social culture they represented. The Scots pattern so strikingly counterposed to the usual models is therefore that of a distinct civil society not married to “its” State.²¹

This historical analysis is of course not unique and some, like Nairn, view it negatively. But a characteristic element of Nairn’s political analysis is the emphasis on society in terms of class and his statement that it was the essentially conservative “upper crust” that embraced the Union and then portrayed a tyrannical and chaotic pre 1707 period.²² But what Nairn concedes as particularly unusual was that the “distant state that dominated the Scots” was not of the standard absolutist kind so dominant in Europe and that England was in fact a successfully post-absolutist state. Thus being the first of its kind this State was characterised by a nationalistic state-society relationship born of a revolution of the dynamic bourgeoisie class.

The development, condition and consequences of this state-society relationship is crucial in Nairn’s and arguably any other general analysis of Scottish national identity. Nairn’s analysis of this is brought forward in his most outspoken and fierce denunciation of a phenomenon of both intellectual and popular culture. It is in fact a lament of how instead of precluding a fully national culture the relationship between state and society led to what he calls “a strange sort of sub-national culture”²³ and which he finally calls a *cultural sub-nationalism*. In his opinion it is sub-national because it cannot be political or fully national and is therefore “neurotic” and “crooked” in venting its national content. Nairn sees the origin of this phenomenon emerging from the void left behind from the cultural emigration of the 19th century. He describes Scotland as being emptied of its literary talent and with no Zolas or Thomas Manns to ponder on such realities as the new class conflicts or the Highland tragedy an escapist Scots “Kailyard” tradition emerged.

²¹ Nairn, p. 135.

²² Nairn, p. 136.

²³ Nairn, p. 155.

In Nairn's view the legacy of the Kailyard School of Literature along with "vulgar tartanry" has continuously plagued Scottish culture. Involving the Scottish public and intellectuals it infests a large field of popular culture in "the array of Kitsch symbols, slogans, ornaments, banners, war-cries, knick-knacks, music-hall heroes, icons, conventional sayings and sentiments (not a few of them "pithy")." ²⁴ Nairn criticises many scholars such as Anni S. Swan and Cronin for dismissing tartanry as innocent and irrelevant. He implies that its full impact can only be experienced in the course of everyday life suggesting that in actuality it is no laughing matter:

But it is something else to be with it (for example) in a London pub on International night, or in the crowd at the annual Military Tattoo in front of Edinburgh Castle. How intolerably vulgar! What unbearable, crass, mindless philistinism! One knows that Kitsch is a large constituent of mass popular culture in every land: but this is ridiculous! Ridiculous or not, it is obviously strong. In this sense, as the main body of cultural sub-nationalism, it appears to represent a national-popular tradition which has persisted more or less in the way one would expect. Precisely because it has been unconnected with a "higher" or normal, nationalist-style culture during the formative era of modern society, it has evolved blindly. The popular consciousness of separate identity, uncultivated by "national" experience or culture in the usual sense, has become curiously fixed or fossilised on the level of the image d'Épinal and Auld Lang Syne, of the Scott Monument, Andy Stewart and the *Sunday Post* - to the point of forming a huge, virtually self-contained universe of Kitsch.²⁵

Whatever the scope or significance of this "universe of kitsch" Nairn's analysis is an important one as few had made such prolific attempts at finding the origin of

²⁴ Nairn, p. 162.

²⁵ Nairn, pp. 162-163.

the tartan and kailyard discourses (or had taken them quite as seriously). Of course Nairn does have his antecedents. When it comes to criticising a “parochial backwardness” in Scottish literature scholars like William Ferguson supply ample commentary on the “cultural schizophrenia” in 19th century culture that due to a lack of self-confidence degenerated literature “into mawkish “kailyard” parochialism and painting into “ben and glen” romanticism.”²⁶ Others, like David Craig, have also pointed out how “Scotland might have been better off”²⁷ without the emigration of some of its most famous writers. But what sets Nairn aside in this matter is his view that emigration and kailyardism are not simply subjective or individualistic responses but a necessary reaction to an overall dilemma in Scotland’s social structure since the Industrial Revolution.²⁸ But also (unusually) inherent in Nairn’s notion of Scottish sub-nationalism is a certain disclaimer of the significance of ethnicity and cultural heritage in Scottish Nationalism and a greater emphasis on political issues. Political nationalism is central to Nairn’s agenda and apparent in his stance as a separatist and a “prophet” of Britain’s large scale break-up.

Nairn’s wider cultural discourse is apparent in references to the apathetic and disillusioned masses of England who, as well as the “Celtic fringes”, have been deserted by the Westminster system. While maintaining that the rather decelerated Scottish nationalism has a wide popular basis and deepening roots Nairn states that the cost of the project of maintaining the Union of Great Britain since the election of 2001 has been what he calls “an abyss between state and society.”²⁹ Overall Nairn’s is the discourse of a lack of the top-down flow of economical and cultural commodity from a distant state and slumbering middle class: the failed hegemonic nationalism of a diseased state/society relationship.

Nairn’s starting point in this reflection is to a great extent the

²⁶ William Ferguson, *Scotland: 1689 to the Present* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1978), p. 317.

²⁷ David Craig, *Scottish Literature and the Scottish People, 1680-1830*. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961), pp. 285-286, p. 276.

²⁸ Nairn, pp. 159-160.

²⁹ Tom Nairn, “Break-up: Twenty-five years on”, *New Democracy, Edinburgh Review* 112 (2003) 12-32 (p. 19).

representations he describes as kitsch or sub-national. Since the wake and aftershocks of Murray and Barbara Grigor's stark portrayal of national kitsch in the *Scotch Myth* exhibition at the Edinburgh Festival of 1981 one can of course find a range of interesting and often contrasting analysis on these representational discourses. Much of the initial commentary can be found in the edited collection *Scotch Reels* and articles following up the debate that took place at the 1982 Edinburgh International Film festival. Although many would still focus on culture in terms of hegemonic production an (almost overly) enthusiastic awareness of these cultural formations emerged. Many reacted to this by searching for an alternative general indigenous discourse that many would find in the romanticism of urban hardship. As articulated by Douglas and Quainé Bain this discourse of both art and politics depicts adverse conditions and mass action of heavy industrial workers in the Clyde basin.³⁰ In John Caughie's contribution to the debate he commends the tradition's basis in "working class experiences, which since the twenties, have seemed to offer the only real and consistent basis for a Scottish national culture"³¹.

There were however many critics who had quickly identified the limitations of the view. A sharp feministic perspective from Douglas and Quainé Bain (edited for publication by Gillian Skirrow) exposed the limited and romanticised constructions of women in tartantry, kailyard and Clydesideism as the ethereal "spirit of Scotland" or as overly maternal figures: "As counterpoint to the men viewed at work and home in the Clydeside films, we must assume a home with the necessary women (Mothers, often Grannies) who will service, pacify, comfort and nourish the men - who will ladle out the porridge to the sons of toil."³² In addition to pointing out the chauvinistic features of these traditions³³ authors like Cairns Craig have directed attention to the inadequacy of

³⁰ Douglas and Quainé Bain, Gillian Skirrow, "Woman, Women and Scotland: "Scotch Reels" and Political Perspectives", *Cencrastus* 8 (1983), 3-6

³¹ Colin McArthur, *Scotch Reels*, (London : British Film Institute, 1982) p. 121.

³² Bain, p. 5.

³³ See also David McCrone, Angela Morris and Richard Kiely, *Scotland the Brand: the Making of Scottish Heritage* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 69.

Clydesideism as contemporary discourse. With the altering basis of urban areas it could no longer function as an image of “the real” when the reality it depicted was in fact becoming historical. However Cairns Craig does not hold an alarmist view on this discourse and offers a creative observation on the complexity of these images.³⁴ He in fact dismisses their centrality in Scottish identity and any “wholesale” consumption of cultural kitsch:

The categorisation of Scottish kitsch as *the* element in the people’s identity operates within a simplistic expressivist view of the arts: the same people who participate in that Scottish tradition are also participants in the homogeneous, internationalised mass culture of jazz/swing/rock/pop; the same people who read the *Sunday Post* are not “expressed” by the Post, fulfilled, wrung out, their identity secured: they are also the people who watch *Dallas* and listen to Hank Williams - indeed, they are often also the people who read the *Sunday Times* and watch *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*.³⁵

Among those who share the view of diverse and elaborate consumption, and have actually carried out a case study in accordance with it, are David McCrone, Angela Morris and Richard Kiely. Their clear and prolific discourse analysis and overview is equally valuable and offers new insights into the reception of cultural forms, the construction of identity and more specifically the consumption of the heritage culture of Scotland. Their presentation of a multiple identity is also somewhat related to the above cited criticism by Cairns Craig of the simplistic expressivist view of the arts and Beveridge’s and Turnbull’s claim of an inevitability of negative expression in contrasting cultural forms. It is, on the other hand, in stark contrast to the common doubt, expressed by critics such as Nairn, regarding the ability of individuals to “choose their identities, and the way

³⁴ Cairns Craig, “Visitors from the Stars: Scottish Film Culture”, *Cencrastus* 8 (1983), 6-11.

³⁵ Cairns Craig, 11.

they play them.”³⁶ A multiple identity in this respect denies any overriding and systematic set of beliefs. As McCrone, Morris and Kiely write:

The late twentieth century is not made for homogeneous, mono-cultural “nation states”. States no longer have the political, economic or cultural power to imagine and then enforce national self-determination. This is not a failure of will (a concept orthodox nationalists find appealing) but a realisation of limited autonomy and multiple identity.³⁷

The key to their discourse analysis, or “the discourse on the discourse”³⁸ as they put it, lies in identifying implicit assumptions of an overpowering indigenous national culture. This perspective is in their opinion misleading in assuming that national culture must have “native” origins and broad cultural and political implications. Such “pathological” discourses of tartanry are simply alien: They are the “fly in the ointment” as it were.³⁹ In putting this analysis to the test in a case study of *life members* of the *National Trust for Scotland*, described as having a strong commitment to heritage, they set out to disprove two plausible assumptions: Their first assumption was that heritage was largely an institutional imposition with no deep significance for its consumers. This they proved wrong on the basis that the majority of the life members were able to distinguish between heritage and history and convey a strong sense of lineage and inheritance. For them heritage was a personalised force that had the power to confer identity. Their second hypothesis is that there was a putative link between politics and heritage. They also claim to have disproved this assumption stating that, on the contrary, political identity does not deny a cultural or national one. Many of the Conservative life members of the National

³⁶ McCrone, p. 71.

³⁷ McCrone p. 71.

³⁸ McCrone p. 66.

³⁹ McCrone pp. 66-69.

Trust for Scotland for instance see themselves as Scottish first and foremost.⁴⁰

Having questioned the very centre and validity of identity scholars today are faced with the problem of understanding its construction. In that endeavour an awareness of various discourses and cultural representations can be crucial. When confronting questions of national identity one must be aware that political control, autonomy or statehood need not be overriding factors in the construction of an individual's national identity - his sense of himself belonging to a nation. In the interests of documenting and interpreting empirical ethnographic data this is an important negative cultural supposition. This supposition, that a nation does not come out of a "natural" process, coming into its own, does come with some complications. Having removed the constancy of identity it is a potentially porous concept- not least with increasing globalisation, commodification and in the European context – transnational institutionalisation. Scholars such as Roger D. Abrahams have speculated that with the movement of people and marketing of identity the term may become superfluous: "Identity will simply not hold up as a container of meaning under the condition of the post-industrial world in which people move or are moved at a moment's notice."⁴¹ Other scholars have even suggested that while non-academics may be preoccupied with issues of identity this is no reason for analysts to accept even the existence of identity. Brubaker and Cooper are among them and warn especially against the reification of identity politics.

We should seek to explain the processes... through which... the "political fiction" of the "nation", - or of the "ethnic group", "race", or other putative "identity". - can crystallise, at certain moments, as a powerful, compelling reality. But we should avoid unintentionally reproducing or reinforcing such reification by uncritically adopting categories of practice as

⁴⁰ McCrone, pp. 156-181.

⁴¹ Roger Abrahams, "Narratives of Location and Dislocation" in *Folklore, Heritage Politics and Ethnic Diversity, A Festschrift for Barbro Klein*, ed. by Perti. Anttonen and others (Botkyrka: Multicultural Centre, 2000), pp. 15 – 20

categories of analysis.⁴²

Brubaker and Cooper are furthermore unimpressed by reformulations of identity as multiple, fragmented and fluid. In place of an unclear term such as identity, they suggest analysts should alternatively use concepts such as identification, self-understanding and commonality or connectedness or “groupness.”⁴³ While these criticisms form a challenge to the usefulness and validity of the term (to say nothing of its popular application) I argue that the term must stand. Warranted as they are these criticisms may be answered both from a phenomenological perspective and an empirical one. The dangers of folklorising and facilitating certain force-relationships by accepting and validating identities are certainly real. But by failing to acknowledge the way in which people articulate and structure collective images of themselves as pertaining to a group would be to discard our knowledge of phenomenological experience. Another error is the presupposition that fluid identity is somehow weaker than a constant one. A dynamic and tentative identity might be easily overpowered and reshaped. The place of narrative and everyday verbal and sensorial activity as an empowering force, as will be demonstrated in this thesis, must not be overlooked. The study of folk narrative and performance in transnational communication will indeed shed light on the enduring aspect of identity.

2.2.1. Definitions and Orientations

While identity is a problematic, multi-faceted and fluid construction it is still a lived reality, negotiated within a given locality and between different actors. It is not only constructed vertically (from top to bottom) but also horizontally. Folkloric perspectives can do much to illuminate this horizontal movement in

⁴² Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, “Beyond Identity”, *Theory and Society* 29 (2000), 1-47 (p. 5.)

⁴³ Brubaker and Cooper, (p. 6).

identity-formations. Surely, in a historical context, the role of the intellectual elite in the forming of national identity is crucial to the forming of nation states or lack thereof. To look upon their cultural representations of nations as the sole or leading factor in forming the personal national identity of a general population is, on the other hand, a folly that greatly underestimates the elaborate processes of folklore, popular culture and everyday practices. The intellectual foundations of nationalist movements, such as national unity in history and the cultural phenomenon of national identity are not one and the same though they may be intrinsically woven together. In a contemporary context the research of identity-construction with regards to nationality could, on the other hand, well be considered incomplete without taking into account the practice of cultural representations with the everyday negotiation of identity.

With regard to the term's application within this thesis I offer the following qualified definition and orientation. National identity is an image of oneself belonging to one's image of the nation. In that sense, and from a phenomenological position, the nation cannot be other than, to quote Anderson, "imagined". While the body of people described as a nation are collectively and individually affected by various grand cultural and geo-political changes its image is also tentatively based on countless, and often seemingly insignificant, elements of everyday life. These elements include lifestyles, values, folklore, attitude and mannerisms that as an ever-changing whole are not unique or uniform; not singular in its parts but in its experience and practice as a whole. Furthermore I argue that national identity is not only expressed or represented through performance but formed and perpetuated by it. The performance of identity is therefore essential to its existence. For the purpose of this thesis a *nation* or Icelanders in particular will be approached as a folk group but not *merely* a folk group. This definition of the nation does not negate the various meanings of nationhood but is an orientation of how Icelanders or Icelanders abroad will be approached in this thesis: individuals that gain signification as a group through their shared experience, background and folklore.

But what is “folklore” and can Icelanders abroad be conceived as folk or folk group? All since its nationalistic origin 18th century Romanticism the concept’s connotations have varied greatly and it has undergone significant reformulation. Having surfaced in 18th century Germany, the study and exaltation of the *Volk* has also been seen as a response to increasing urbanization, which was perceived as a divorce from the natural and the spiritual. But as a result of that same urbanization, and where no ancestral peasant societies were represented (for example in the United States), the concept became highly problematic.⁴⁴ As the scholarship progressed in dealing with increasing variety and complexity of urban lore, the concept of folk was reformulated and sometimes simplified. In such an attempt the late eminent folklorist Alan Dundes suggests that: “Folk can refer to any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor.”⁴⁵ In a well-balanced essay on the concepts of folklore Elliot Oring soberly assesses that theoretically Dundes’s definition suggests that “the number and kinds of folk groups are limited only by the number and kinds of elements which can serve as the basis for group identities.”⁴⁶ Thus the contribution of the modifier “folk” perhaps loses its value and the semantic weight is shifted over to the notion of the “lore”. To complicate the matter further the notion of lore is more often articulated in such terms as verbal art,⁴⁷ traditional materials,⁴⁸ artistic communication,⁴⁹ or even as communicative processes and forms.⁵⁰ Oring, on the other hand, concedes that as folklorists often approach the study of forms, behaviours and events with two or more of these concepts in mind, an open orientation may be more productive

⁴⁴ See for example Elliot Oring, *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres: An Introduction* (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1990), p. 11.

⁴⁵ Alan Dundes, “What is Folklore?”, *the Study of Folklore* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965), p. 2.

⁴⁶ Oring, p. 1.

⁴⁷ McCarl, p. 76.

⁴⁸ Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1968), p. 5.

⁴⁹ Dan Ben-Amos, “Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context”, *Journal of American Folklore* 84 (1971), 13.

⁵⁰ Robert A. Georges, “Folklore”, in *Sound Archives: A Guide to Their Establishment and Development*, 4 (1983), 135.

than a restrictive definition.⁵¹ Although reformulations should go on and new comprehensive definitions of folklore be brought to light I would agree that one should think less of folklore as a collection of things “than as a perspective from which almost any number of forms, behaviours and events may be formed.”⁵² In line with this position I would articulate my orientation or working definition of folklore, specifically in relation to my informants as producers of images or Icelanders abroad, as an expressive culture, meaningfully communal but varied, to some extent artistic and/or traditional and most importantly culturally embedded in everyday life.

The “Dundesian” premise referred to earlier, that the folklore of a folk-group is indeed based on common factors that produce a collective identity, must not in all cases be considered putative. Many Icelanders abroad may not conceptualise themselves as sharing characteristic traits or self-image. But as I believe is evident in my field data a great deal of their experience and folklore may be considered significant for a number of my informants not only for its symbolic meaning but by its practice in discovering, negotiating and coping with shared social and cultural situations.

From this perspective the folklore can be viewed in light of the common social and cultural factors that the folk group encounters as well as the immediate narrative context of their in-group storytelling. These factors are furthermore significant in the interrelationship of contexts. It could then be argued that the narratives, customs, verbal expressions or techniques of Icelanders abroad may be studied as tactics in managing power relationships; inclusion and exclusion into host societies; and socialization with non-Icelanders and concurrently occupying a space with them. In addition, as will be exhibited, Icelanders may engage with this condition of liminality by asserting their identity and status in the low level politics of everyday life. In line with Michel de Certeau’s approach (which will be outlined in the next subchapter) the

⁵¹ Oring, p.18.

⁵² Oring, p.18.

relationships that link everyday pursuits to particular circumstances can only be understood in the context of locality and “in the local network of labour and recreation”.⁵³ Before understanding these folkloric practices in the case of narratives of Icelanders one must therefore first “locate” them within their various contexts of everyday life.

2.4. Everyday Practices

If the context of the folkloric performances presented here may be characterised as everyday, contemporary, and in some sense urban and transnational, how is that significant? What is the city and how may we approach it as a cultural entity and research subject? The elaborate process of functioning in an urban modern environment, forming identity and worldview and in turn expressing and representing these in everyday life calls for elaborate theory and research methodologies. A prolific attempt, among many, at a general theory and methodology of studying everyday life can be found in Michel de Certeau’s monumental work *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1988). Combining the often isolated research of representation on the one hand and the study of modes of behaviour on the other Certeau focuses on the subtle processes of people in the midst of cultural consumption and indeed on their own production and innovations in conducting their lives or what Certeau refers to as the art of living. An example of this would be complementing the research of representation through images of television broadcasting and of the time spent viewing them with the study of what the cultural consumer “makes” or “does” during this time and with these images. This approach includes the study of narration that Certeau describes as being “indissociable from the theory of practices, as its condition as well as its production.”⁵⁴ The problematics of studying these

⁵³ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (London: University of California Press, 1988), p. ix.

⁵⁴ Certeau, p. 78.

processes or this spatial narrative lie indeed in their “tactical” position in contemporary urban life that Certeau refers to as a “nowhere”.

His theories, which have received growing attention, are generally focused on the urban, perhaps not least for the reason that his perspective on much of everyday life is that of a reaction countering or evading a strategy of a civic authority. In this respect the ideal or official city referred to as the “concept city” is in a constant state of decay. Certeau suggests that the utopian and urban discourse is “deteriorating along with the procedures that organised them.”⁵⁵ Rather than focusing on this decay and therefore “speaking of catastrophe and no longer of progress” he suggests that one should “analyze the microbe-like, singular and plural practices which an urbanistic system was supposed to administer or suppress, but which have outlived its decay.”⁵⁶ In Certeau’s view this is the social condition that has slipped out of the grasp of social sciences whose statistical investigations have found only the homogenous.

To avoid this reduction of the operations of everyday life Certeau offers many approaches. One of the most interesting approaches, which is very relevant to my intended inquiry into the narratives, is distinguishing between everyday *strategy* and *tactics*. The former is defined as the actions of a holder of will and power (such as a city or an institution). The later are the actions of those that do not work on a spatial or institutional localization and therefore fragmentarily insinuates itself into “the other’s” place.⁵⁷ Ever reaching towards a theory of the relationship that links everyday pursuits to particular circumstances these tactics can only be understood in the context of locality:

And only in the local network of labour and recreation can one grasp how, within a grid of socioeconomic constraints, these pursuits unfailingly establish relational tactics (a struggle for life, artistic creations (an aesthetic)

⁵⁵ Certeau, p. 95.

⁵⁶ Certeau, p. 96.

⁵⁷ Certeau, p. xix.

and autonomous initiatives (an ethic)). The characteristically subtle logic of these “ordinary” activities comes to light only in the details.⁵⁸

These ideas therefore call for close examination in “the field”, a term clashing rather ironically with the immensely diverse and complicated behavioural modes and structures of urban life. In the open and often poetic style of *The Practice of Everyday Life* Certeau’s theories are not applied in any depth to case studies or stated fieldwork. It is in fact the intention of the book to provide a basis for theorizing, drawing from previous work and therefore making a certain kind of discussion possible. Regrettably Certeau died before he could draw to conclusion what has even been described as “blueprints for something still not constructed, not as maps of what already exists.”⁵⁹ Although other more detailed reflections of these “blueprints” can be examined, a recent application and modification of Certeau’s approach by another ethnologist has relevance to my research direction.

2.4.1.Liminal resistance: The Storytelling of Paramedics as Tactical Resistance

In his research article Timothy R. Tangherlini studies the elaborate negotiations of occupational strategy and tactics through the narrative of paramedics in the San Francisco Bay area⁶⁰. Contrary to the television image of the silent and heroic medic he found a tradition of cynical stories of sarcastic anti-heroes in the midst of horrific human situations. In line with Frank Kermode’s *explanatory*

⁵⁸ Certeau, p. ix.

⁵⁹ Ian Buchanan, *The Certeau Reader*, ed. by Graham Ward (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p. 97.

⁶⁰ Timothy R. Tangherlini, “Heroes and Lies: Storytelling Tactics among Paramedics”, *Folklore* 111 (2000), 43-66

*fictions*⁶¹ Tangherlini sees the narratives deriving from the need to “make sense” of human experience through a beginning, middle and ending thus exerting control over open-ended events.⁶² Stressing that this is not the only aspect of their narrative culture he finds that this function reveals a storytelling that is much more elaborate than “mere entertainment or a simple recounting of the day’s events. Rather, through their stories, they engage with the politics of life in the organization.”⁶³

These politics are characterised by the ambiguous status of the medic within the organization as he goes about his day rather autonomously albeit constantly under the supervision and surveillance of authority through telephone pagers and two-way radios. In studying this Tangherlini makes use of Certeau’s exploration of the low-level politics that structure everyday life. Working mainly with the notions of tactics and strategies Tangherlini interprets the storytelling as part of a “tactical resistance to the various groups with whom they come into contact on a daily basis...”⁶⁴ and with the organizational entity (the ambulance company) which devises strategies to deal with workers and to deliver its service. Through their tactics the medics situate themselves and redefine their environment to fit their own needs.⁶⁵

He also makes the point that the medics’ occupational storytelling does not fit Certeau’s model of being in a realm outside of competition. On the contrary the stories are told in the context of competing and can be the object of competition as well: “In a modification of de Certeau’s model of storytelling and tactics I propose not only that stories allow for the exploration of possible actions

⁶¹ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 36.

⁶² For other antecedents see: Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, Trans. by Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (London: Basic Books, 1963); Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, Trans. by Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960); Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (London: Cornell University Press, 1974).

⁶³ Tangherlini, 47.

⁶⁴ Tangherlini, 43.

⁶⁵ Tangherlini, 48.

in a given situation, but also that the telling of stories itself is a form of action.”⁶⁶ Thus drawing on his extensive fieldwork he introduces what may be called the contestual context of the storytelling performance. Thus, while modifying and adding to de Certeau’s work, Tangherlini underpins the relevance and application of these theories in contemporary urban narrative studies.

The relevance of this example, and the critical approaches introduced through it, will become clearer as it is applied to the primary case study (chapters 3 – 6). But in the interest of clarity the following subchapters will lay out a comprehensive exposition of how one may research and understand narrative and performance in the contexts of everyday life. Concurrently further examples will be given of how de Certeau’s approaches may be useful in the analysis of narrative and performance. This will lead to an ongoing thread discussing the relationship between ironic performances and ambiguous power relations in everyday life.

2.5. Narrative Research

Although I emphasise contextual and performance-centred scholarship, folk narrative studies play an extensive role in both my fieldwork and analysis. Therefore my research calls, to some extent, for narrative genres and an underlying understanding of their dynamics. To understand the practice of narratives, contextual and performance-centred approaches are central but the study of narrative genres is a useful albeit blunt tool in understanding and articulating the forms and functions of narrative. Drawing on the field of everyday narrative one may anticipate an array of narrative forms ranging from traditional legends to jokes and memorates. The most pervasive narrative form in contemporary western culture may, on the other hand, be classified under the genres of local anecdotes and personal experience narratives.

⁶⁶ Tangherlini, 48.

The scholarship of narrative genres has of course been continually re-evaluated ever since the Grimm brothers' threefold division into *myths* (Myter), *tales* (*Märchen*) and *legends* (Sagen). Working with these terms, largely based on believability, one of the leading Scandinavian folklorists, Carl Wilhelm von Sydow (1878-1952) questioned the finality of this division. Stressing the diversity of function and the numerous sub-categories he deduced that “[I translate] the old borders, the old boundary-lines, can no longer be upheld.”⁶⁷ With a more dynamic approach to tales and legends Sydow designated numerous sub-genres in relation to function and tradition, one of which is the *memorate*. These narrations of personal experience are differentiated in that they do not derive directly from a narrative tradition but may contribute to it whereas the narrative takes on other forms and functions.

Through examination of this process folklorists, such as the Norwegian Brynjulf Alver and the Finn Lauri Honko, developed further ideas and subcategories. Alver offers a threefold division: the i) *individual memorate*, based solely on the individual experience, ii) the *collective memorate*, which in addition to experience incorporates aspects of narrative traditions and iii) the experience legend, which is a memorate in form but derived from and narrated in a tradition.⁶⁸ Honko, on the other hand, stresses the relationship of the memorate with tradition, seeing as narratives in society can shape the way men evaluate and narrate their experience. The memorate may therefore be difficult to distinguish from experience legends although their transitional forms may be identified.⁶⁹ This endeavour, I would agree, is indeed one worthwhile given that the memorate, in its intimacy and situated character, can be a valuable source of such ethnographic structures as folk belief and values.

Perhaps as a more readily defined genre, anecdotes are generally

⁶⁷ “[I translate:] Den gamla gränslinjen, de gamla kännetecknen, ej längre upprätthålles.” Carl Wilhelm von Sydow, “Prosa-Folkdiktningens Kategorier”, *Folkdikt og Folkstro* (1978), 57-74 (p. 57).

⁶⁸ Brynjulf Alver, “Category and Function”, *Nordic Folklore* (1989), 137-149 (p. 9).

⁶⁹ Lauri Honko, “Memorates and the Study of Folk Belief”, *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 1 (1964), 5-19.

considered to be short personal legends, supposedly true but generally apocryphal, told about an episode in the life of either a famous individual or a local character.⁷⁰ As defined by Richard Bauman they tend to be “heavily dialogic in construction, often culminating in a kind of punch line, a striking, especially reportable statement rendered in direct discourse. That is to say, quoted speech is a significant stylistic feature of the genre.”⁷¹ The term is also sometimes loosely applied to any single-episode story about a place or event that commonly reflects on local characters emphasizing their presumed personality traits.⁷² The range of the term has also been contested such as in their relation to jokes⁷³ on the one hand and memorates or chronicates⁷⁴ on the other. In distinguishing them from jokes about personalities I will stress that anecdotes are to some degree presumed true in a given locality. With regard to memorates and chronicates as narrations of personal experience, such a distinction may not always be made. Yet one may further accentuate the singularity of anecdotal episodes as well as their striking dialogic features.

The increasing interest in the study of personal experience narrative within folkloristics and ethnology can be seen as a logical growth within the scholarship. Since this was first stressed in the 1970s by such folklorists as Sandra Stahl⁷⁵ it has established a firm basis in folkloristic research as it has indeed grown concurrently in other related fields of study. As perhaps the

⁷⁰ See for example Brunvand, p. 216.

⁷¹ Bauman, p. 55. See also Martha Blache, “The Anecdote as a Symbolic Expression of the Social and Cultural Milieu of Journalists” *Folklore* 110 (1999), 49.

⁷² Brunvand, p. 217.

⁷³ Aarne Antti and Stith Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale: A Classification and Bibliography* (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum, 1961-1987).

⁷⁴ See Lauri Honko, “Memorates and the Study of Folk Belief”, *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 1 (1964), 5-19; Lauri Honko, “Genre Theory Revisited”, *Studia Fennica* 20 (1976), 20-25 and Robin Gwyndaf, “Memorates, Chronicates and Anecdotes in Action: Some Remarks Toward a Definition of the Personal Narrative in Context”, *Papers 1: The 8th Congress for the International Society for Folk Narrative Research*, ed. by Reimund Kvideland and Torunn Selberg (Bergen: 1984), 217- 224.

⁷⁵ Sandra Stahl, “The Oral Personal Narrative in Its Generic Context”, *Fabula* 18 (1977), 18-39. See also by the same author: *Literary folkloristics and the personal narrative* (Bloomington, IN : Indiana University Press, 1989); “The Local Character Anecdote”, *Genre* 8 (1975), 283-302.; “The Personal Narrative as Folklore”, *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 14 (1977) 9 - 30.

earliest example, sociologist Erving Goffman looked at the “tale or anecdote” replaying “personal experience”⁷⁶ as a tool of ordering interaction, communicating a sense of situational reality and the presenting of self.⁷⁷ Within linguistics William Labov broke new ground with his study of “narratives of personal experience”⁷⁸ as extended forms of natural discourse, but in a folkloric vein, encompassing the narrative as a whole. He further proposed an evaluative model of narrative events, having the following dimensions: abstract, orientation (locating in time and place); complication (what happened); evaluation (how speaker views the events, conveying the point of narrative); result (resolution); and coda (optional- closing summary).

Unlike highly structured and dramatic tales and legends of heroes and their exploits personal experience narratives are generally more brief and loosely organised accounts. They are often embedded in conversation and heavily dependant on the contexts of interaction for their sense and meaning.⁷⁹ In folkloric scholarship personal narrative has often been examined in the context of the narrative tradition of folk groups (for example familiar or occupational), where they to some extent become “folklorised”. When groupings of tellers and listeners come together the narratives often fall into patterns centring on particular classes of reported events such as “embarrassing situations, coincidences, lucky occurrences, accidents, crimes directed against them, run-ins with government authorities, and a host of other topics common to everyday conversation.”⁸⁰ The form and function of these narratives may be examined in the context of these groups.

Some folklorists have pointed to the personal experience narrative as a coping strategy. Susan Kalçik’s found that the narratives in *women’s rap groups*,

⁷⁶ Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), p. 504.

⁷⁷ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1959).

⁷⁸ William Labov, “The Transformation of Experience in Narrative Syntax”, *Language in the Inner City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), 354-396.

⁷⁹ Barbara Allen, “Personal Experience Narratives: Use and Meaning in Interaction”, *Folklore and Mythology Studies* 2 (1978), 5-7.

⁸⁰ Brunvand, p. 215.

or discussion groups, were primarily strategies for coping with the oppression of women as well as being devices of self-discovery.⁸¹ Others have stressed the enactment of events for example Roger D. Abrahams, who has examined how “we represent, report or replay” activities.⁸² The strategic importance of representing the self has also been a central focus in the research of personal narrative. John A. Robinson has for example noted how in terms of skill, resourcefulness and morality, narrators may portray themselves in a more positive manner than they do their antagonists:

This attitude is not to be disparaged, for it is merely an attempt to exploit a social interaction to further one’s self esteem. It is a semi-ritualised means of reaffirming both one’s personal identity and socially sanctioned beliefs and values, particularly those that ascribe responsibility, hence blame or praise.⁸³

These representational and coping functions of personal experience narrative are to my mind highly characteristic of the genre and will be dealt with later in detail. But regarding its form in relation to function the more obvious characteristic of the genre, as is indeed assumed in the very term, is its point of view, indicating the personal involvement of the narrator. Stahl uses point of view as the basis for distinguishing two essential kinds of personal experience narratives and narrators: the *self-oriented* and the *other-oriented*. The former emphasise their own either exemplary or humorous actions and thus build upon their own self-image. Alternatively the other-oriented narrators (and thus the narratives themselves) “underplay their personal role in the story to emphasise

⁸¹ Susan Kalcik, ““... Like Ann’s Gynecologist or the Time I Was Almost Raped”: Personal Narratives in Women’s Rap Groups”, *The Journal of American Folklore*, 347 (1975), 3-11.

⁸² Roger D. Abrahams, “The Most Embarrassing Thing That Ever Happened: Conversational Stories in a Theory of Enactment,” *FF* 10 (1977), 9-15.

⁸³ John A. Robinson, “Personal Narratives Reconsidered,” *Journal of American Folklore* 94 (1981), 371.

the extraordinary nature of things that happen in the tale.”⁸⁴ The American folklorist Richard Bauman, who will be drawn on in greater detail in the next chapter, has pointed out the importance of point of view and the problematic of the management of personal perspective in actual narratives. Stressing the manipulation of point of view as a stylistic and literary device, he underpins the importance of the close examination of the interrelationships of narrative and event:

If we are to develop our understanding of those stories we have labelled personal experience narratives, thereby implicating the relationship between narrative and event and the management of point of view, then it is crucial that we set about investigating those dimensions of relationship directly, bolstering our social and linguistic insights with literary ones, toward a deeper and more nuanced comprehension of the forms and functions of this powerful expressive vehicle.⁸⁵

While working with genres and reaping the benefits of articulating narrative’s form and function, one must be aware that these boundaries are not final. Form and function are co-dependent and embedded in context. Therefore expectations of what constitutes a form of narrative need to be flexible and may not always accord with formalist aesthetics of narrative. In my orientation to the genre I will emphasise 1) how it is contextually situated in everyday life; 2) its stylistic management of point of view; and 3) the genre’s clear continuity within narrative scholarship of function such as making sense of human experience through a beginning, middle and ending thus exerting control over open-ended events or in a way framing “life”.⁸⁶ In essence the performed personal

⁸⁴ Sandra Stahl, “Personal Experience Stories”. In *Handbook of American Folklore*, ed. by Richard M. Dorson, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983) 268-275 (p. 270).

⁸⁵ Bauman (1986), p. 35.

⁸⁶ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 36. For other antecedents see: Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, Trans. by Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (London: Basic

experience narrative is, in its telling, directly connected with some event(s) considered worthy of being narrated and the performance context itself. To my mind it is precisely this worthiness, this value and signification, that calls for research methods centred on context and performance.

2.6. *Performance-centred Study*

Indeed, the power of performance to create, store, and transmit identity and cultures lies in its reflexive nature. Through performance, human beings not only present behaviour, as in Richard Schechner's notion that performance is "twice-behaved behaviour," but they reflexively comment on it and the values and situations it encompasses.⁸⁷

The close study of folklore in particular social contexts, gave rise to a focus on performance. Speakers of folklore frame their utterances to suggest that they are a special mode of communication. The frame signals that communications are not to be taken simply for their referential content, and that speakers are to be evaluated not merely for the substance of their communications but for their skill and effectiveness as well. Performance is a way of speaking indicating that communication is to be examined and appraised for its form and style—that is, as art. In choosing to perform, a performer, therefore, assumes responsibility for a communication and is held accountable for it by an audience.⁸⁸ "Keying" is the framing of words and actions as performance. Performance may be keyed by special codes and formulas, paralinguistic features, appeals to tradition, and

Books, 1963); Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, Trans. by Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960); Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (London: Cornell University Press, 1974).

⁸⁷ Jean Haskell Speer and Elizabeth C. Fine, *Performance, Culture, and Identity*, (London: Praeger Publishers, 1992), p. 8.

⁸⁸ Richard Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance*. (Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland, 1977) 7-14.

even disclaimers of performance.⁸⁹ In both formal and informal situations, analytic attention is directed to social roles, social structures, interactional rules, and institutional regimes that govern artistic production and the way that production feeds back into the structure and character of the event.⁹⁰

Within the ethnographical perspective of oral narrative the performance event has assumed a place alongside the actual text. As a fundamental unit of description and analysis the performance-centred approach provides a framework for understanding narrative, verbal expressions and everyday activities as social action as well as artistry. Various folklorists therefore began directing their attention to the actual conduct of artistic verbal performance in social life.⁹¹ Among those pioneering this approach is Richard Bauman. One of Bauman's central contributions, building on Del Hymes, was demonstrating the interrelationships that exist between the narrated events (the events recounted in the narratives), the narrative texts and the narrative events (the situations in which the narrative is told). He emphasises the significance of the narrator's performance in the interpretation of narratives, defining performance as a way of speaking and communicating, "the essence of which resides in the assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative skill, highlighting the way in which communication is carried out, above and beyond its referential content."⁹² To the participants of the narration, performance is open to evaluation, not only of the performer's skill and effectiveness of display (form) but also he enhances the participants' experience of the story (function).

In turn, the evaluation of the form, meaning and function of oral narrative is situated in culturally defined scenes or events where behaviour and

⁸⁹ Bauman (1977), p.16.

⁹⁰ Bauman (1986).

⁹¹ See for example Schechner; Dan Ben-Amos, *Sweet words: Storytelling Events in Benin* (Philadelphia: ISHI, 1975); Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance, and Social Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Roger D. Abrahams, "Storytelling Events: Wake Amusements and the Structure of Nonsense on St. Vincent", *Journal of American Folklore* 95 (1982), 389-414.; Charles L. Briggs, "Treasure Tales and Pedagogical Discourse in *Mexicano* New Mexico", *Journal of American Folklore* 98 (1985), 287-314.

⁹² Bauman (1986), p. 3.

experience constitute meaningful contexts. It is therefore an essential task in performance-centred study to identify these events given that they are consistent with local understanding. Furthermore an event constructed through narrative and its interpretation is dependent on the degree of signification it gains among the participants of the narration (the “audience”). „It is the structures of signification in narrative that give coherence to events in our understanding, that enable us to construct in the interdependent process of narration and interpretation a coherent set of interrelationships that we call an “event”.⁹³ The identification of events does therefore in part involve the expressive means employed in the performance as well as the systemic interplay of situational factors such as:

- 1) The sequence of actions making up the scenario of the event
- 2) The participants’ identities and roles; in which I will to some extent utilise the approaches of Linda Dégh and Annikki Kaivola-Bregenhøj to the narrating traits and abilities of the storyteller and their relation to tradition.
- 3) Interactional ground rules, norms and strategies used in performance and signification; in which my study will benefit from various ethnological approaches to everyday practices.

In studying the elaborate interplay of such factors in these events, attention should be paid to the various contexts present in each “level” of the narrative and the narrative event and essentially the *textual, situational, social* and *societal contexts* as outlined by Herman Bausinger.⁹⁴ The social context comprises the group within which the narratives circulate reflecting the social situations of the participants. The societal context more widely expresses the society as a whole and involves features such as authoritarian features and power struggles. The textual context in part comprises relevant linguistic and

⁹³ Bauman (1986), p. 5.

⁹⁴ Hermann Bausinger, *Folklore on Two Continents: Essays in Honor of Linda Dégh*, ed. by Nikolai Burlakoff and Carl Lindahl (Bloomington: Trickster Press, 1980).

formal structures. The situational context, or the narrative event, includes the means of communication between the narrator and other participants. Further contexts will also be taken into account such as the cultural context (which has a communal symbolic quality) as well as the sensory context that includes the visual, aural significance of performance and setting in the narrative event as well as sense of taste and smell.⁹⁵

A fine example of this research method, which draws on both Bauman's and Bausinger's approaches, can be seen in Martha Blache's research article "The Anecdote as a Symbolic Expression of the Social and Cultural Milieu of Journalists".⁹⁶ The anecdote can be considered a common narrative genre in contemporary culture. Drawing mainly on Bauman's definition Martha acknowledges the contested classification of anecdotes such as their relation to jokes⁹⁷ on the one hand and memorates or chronicates⁹⁸ on the other: "But, however they are classified, anecdotes are short stories, presumably veridical, generally centred on a single episode and on a single scene revolving around personalities or local figures. Often they are directly connected with some incident considered worthy of being narrated."⁹⁹

Blache's material revolves around the figure of the deposed president of Argentina Dr. Arturo Illia and is connected with the various distressing episodes that took place during his term. Although being serious events in the history of the country they are presented by the journalists in a spontaneous and informal style characterised by the inserting of verbatim expressions. This is a contrast to

⁹⁵ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1959).

⁹⁶ Martha Blache, "The Anecdote as a Symbolic Expression of the Social and Cultural Milieu of Journalists" *Folklore* 110 (1999), 49-55.

⁹⁷ Aarne Annti and Stith Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale: A Classification and Bibliography* (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum, 1961;1987).

⁹⁸ See Lauri Honko, "Memorates and the Study of Folk Belief", *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 1 (1964), 5-19; Lauri Honko, "Genre Theory Revisited", *Studia Fennica* 20 (1976), 20-25 and Robin Gwyndaf, "Memorates, Chronicates and Anecdotes in Action: Some Remarks Toward a Definition of the Personal Narrative in Context", *Papers 1: The 8th Congress for the International Society for Folk Narrative Research*, ed. by Reimund Kvideland and Torunn Selberg (Bergen: 1984), 217- 224.

⁹⁹ Blache, p. 49.

their occupational precision in the use of language. Blache emphasises this *textual context* and makes it an example for the necessity of verbatim, or almost verbatim, transcriptions of oral narratives. Other expressions reveal the *situational context* including the means of communication between the narrator and “his audience”. The *social* context comprises the group within which the anecdotes circulate and reflects the job-related situations of the journalists. The *societal* context more widely expresses the society as a whole such as authoritarian features and power struggles. Although Blache addresses in more detail such aspects as in what situations the stories emerge and how they are narrated and interpreted, she states that a basic analysis is made possible through one or all of these contexts: “As a whole, these four contexts reveal the patterns of social interaction that folklore produces.”¹⁰⁰

2.7. Cultural Contexts, Humorous Modes and Ironic Performance

The empirical data presented here to some extent takes the form of humorous narrative performances of the experience and negotiation of one’s own nationality or foreignness. This involves, as I will set out, all of Bausinger’s contexts discussed above: the situational context of the interviews, the social context of the group (for example Icelanders abroad); the societal context of insider-outsider (or native-foreigner power struggles); and the textual context or the form of communication or performance. While I will further elaborate on these contexts, some theoretical framework must first be set forth. Before one can understand why humour, and indeed irony, are so characteristic of this material one must clarify these terms and understand how they in general are practised in everyday life and folkloric communication.

¹⁰⁰ Blache, p. 53.

2.7.1. Humour

While humour does not have a long history as a research subject the two central theories of humour date far back. Still dominating in the conceptualization and analysis of humour is the psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud. His classic work, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*¹⁰¹ from 1905 was not unrelated to earlier ideas that laughter originates in either malice or a sense of superiority.¹⁰² But in accordance to his larger theory, which is primarily focused on the motives of behaviour, Freud stipulates that the motives of jokes are invariably sexual or aggressive - the first often resulting in the latter through societal inhibition. The most competitive theory, globally applied in the analysis of humour, has been called *incongruity theory*. Predating Freud's theory by two centuries the basic notions of this theory first appeared in the works of poet and essayist James Beattie. He stated that laughter arises from "two or more inconsistent, unsuitable or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage."¹⁰³

While numerous works have been based on Beattie's notion of incongruity they generally stop at demonstrating why particular expressions are humorous or not.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore Freud's theories have been criticised for mechanically applying old established paradigms to yield "reliable" results. One of these critics is Elliott Oring who challenges the assumption that humour is simply a species of aggression. He deems the "reduction of humour to a form of symbolic attack – often racist or sexist – on an individual or group as unnecessarily parochial."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Ed by James Strachey and Anna Freud (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953- 1974).

¹⁰² See for example Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: or the Matter, Form and Power of a Commonwealth, Ecclesiastical and Civil* (London: Routledge, 1907[1651]).

¹⁰³ James Beattie, *Essays: On Poetry and Music, as They Effect the Mind; On Laughter and Ludicrous Composition; On the Utility of Classical Learning* (Edinburgh: Creech and Dilly in London, 1778), p. 347.

¹⁰⁴ See for example Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (New York: Macmillan, 1964) and Victor Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor* (Dordrecht, Holland: Reidel, 1985).

¹⁰⁵ Elliott Oring, *Jokes and Their Relations* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of

As he notes, by overlooking the performative and contextual aspects of humour possible interpretations are neglected and “certainties” produced in their stead. While Oring also rejects some of the functional aspects of incongruity theory, the inclination to simplistically explain away humour, he draws on Beattie in his own terminology.

Oring’s *appropriate incongruity* denotes “the perception of an appropriate interrelationship of elements from domains that are generally regarded as incongruous.”¹⁰⁶ However, appropriateness is not necessarily rooted in logical validity but a psychological recognition of a connection. Oring takes the following riddle question as an example: “Q: When is a door not a door? A: When it’s ajar.” It is in the answer to the riddle that the incongruity is made appropriate. While a door is clearly not a jar the incongruity is recontextualised in terms of the homophonies of the English language. But while the incongruities of riddles are often transparent or explicit they are usually implicit in most forms of humour. Oring stresses the need to look at the performance of humour. The listener must, for example, register the incongruity, which in turn depends upon his own familiarity with the connotations framed or “keyed” by the performer. As Oring writes:

The interpretation of humour also demands an attention to the contexts of its expression. Humour does not exist in a vacuum. It succeeds or fails in particular social situations and specific interactions.¹⁰⁷

Like Bausinger Oring therefore stresses the contextual research of humour. Primarily he suggests four contexts to be taken into account in the interpretation of humour: cultural context, social context, individual context and comparative context. *Cultural context* refers to the cultural knowledge, concepts, values, and

Kentucky: 1992) p. ix. See also pp. 94 – 111 for an in-depth criticism of Freud’s humour theory.

¹⁰⁶ Oring 1992, p.2.

¹⁰⁷ Oring 1992, p. x.

attitudes necessary to understand a humorous expression. Even when a joke seems fully comprehensible, the sociocultural context necessary to grasp its import may be lacking.¹⁰⁸ *Social context* refers to the situation and circumstances in which humour is performed. Time, setting, personnel, the relationships among the participants, the nature of their conversation and interaction are relevant to the description of social context, because when, where, how, and with whom humour is shared bears significantly on how it is contextualised. *Individual context* refers to those aspects of individual experience and disposition that are likely to inform the understanding of humour produced or consumed by an individual. This introduces questions as to why certain jokes are adopted into the repertoires of particular individuals; why they change in content, shape, and style. Unlike the other contexts, *comparative context* does not itself bear on the real-time situation of humour. Rather it refers to those traditions of humour that are equivalent, analogous, or otherwise interconnected to those under investigation.¹⁰⁹

It is with these tools that the study of humour and identity may become viable. Not only is humour culturally specific but certain types of humour may also come to define nations and ethnic groups. Oring has written about how certain kinds of humour are attached to certain groups. Oring furthermore elaborates on some of the self-ridiculing aspects of Jewish humour and how it has come to define it.¹¹⁰ In so doing he also criticises the psychoanalytical

¹⁰⁸ As an example Oring stresses how important the image of Jews as spiritually and morally corrupt was to the understanding of many Jewish jokes, such as the ones Freud discussed in 1905. The awareness of the cultural context would suggest that they probably resonated quite differently for people of that time than they do today. Oring 1992, pp. 116-122.

¹⁰⁹ As an example Christie Davies compared Polish jokes with jokes about stupid populations in various countries, critically determining how they become the butt of the jokes. See Christie Davies, *Ethnic Humor Around the World: A Comparative Analysis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) Also, in his analysis of the Jewish-American Princess (J.A.P.), Alan Dundes compared the stereotype elaborated in these jokes with the stereotype underlying jokes about the Jewish-American mother. See Alan Dundes, *Cracking Jokes: Studies of Sick Humor Cycles and Stereotypes* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1987), 62-81. See also Simon Critchly, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002).

¹¹⁰ See particularly "The People of the Book" in *Jokes and Their Relations* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1992).

interpretation of self-ridiculing humour as a form self-hatred.¹¹¹ Both Oring and Dan Ben-Amos have criticised such interpretations by rejecting anything more than a tentative relationship of social identification between the narrator and the subject of the joke. Oring also points out that negative self-description can also be a form of aggression where the object of ridicule is reversed or made ambiguous (such as in the use the term “nigger” in African-American slang).

But Oring goes further in stressing the inverse and transcendent aspects of humour. Humorous communications tend to have an inverse relationship with truth because that which is untrue may produce appropriate incongruity but also because humorous communication is often framed as unserious and untrue. This is particularly common in what Oring calls *dyadic relationships* where intimacy allows certain types of otherwise unlicensed humour. Insults are for example often employed as a type of humorous communication between friends, siblings or between husband and wife: “Knowing the insults are false makes them funny and because intimates recognise such insults as false, humorous insulting serves as a sign of intimacy and affection, not of repress hatred.”¹¹² Self-ridicule may also licence the ridiculing of others particularly if the self-ridicule has already been framed as false.

Finally Oring states yet another argument against the assumption that self-ridicule is the result of self-hatred: That the negative images in question are precisely what are being transcended in the humour.¹¹³ Despite Oring’s disagreement with Freud’s general theory of humour they harmonise in the hypothesis that self-ridicule can be an assertion of invulnerability. In Freud’s terminology it is a refusal of the ego to be distressed by the provocations of reality, insisting that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world. The ego “shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than occasions to gain pleasure.... Look! Here is the world which seems so dangerous! It is nothing but

¹¹¹ See for example Sander L. Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1986).

¹¹² Oring 1992, p. 132.

¹¹³ Oring 1992, p. 133.

a game for children – just worth making a jest about!”¹¹⁴ Oring relates this to Jewish and African-American jokes that may serve as a means to transcend the pain and humiliation imposed by others:

Perhaps these jokes even betray a willingness to admit that as a group and as individuals they have flaws. Thus that recognition comes with the insight that all humans are flawed. Flaws make us human, and the ability to recognise those flaws, frame them, display them, and laugh at them makes us more human still.¹¹⁵

In the face of the gross negative stereotyping involved with the many injustices inflicted upon Jews and African-Americans throughout history, the images of Icelanders discussed in this thesis pale in comparison. But, as will be demonstrated, these theories of interpretation may be applied to many of the self-ironic aspects of the humorous communication of Icelanders within my case study. While my aim is not to designate a certain type of humour to the Icelandic nation my fieldwork does indicate that self-irony and ridicule are certainly a common form of humour among Icelanders abroad and not least when it pertains to traditional foodstuffs. One may also note at this point, while it is carefully examined later in this thesis, that modern food was also ironised as well as the presence of foreign food brands within the canon of Icelandic traditional food such as Coca Cola or the Polish made chocolate biscuit Prince Polo.¹¹⁶ Adding to that many Icelanders described themselves or their compatriots as being self-ironic.

¹¹⁴ Sigmund Freud, “Humour” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Eds, James Strachey and Anna Freud (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis 1953- 1974), 21:162, 166.

¹¹⁵ Oring 1992, p. 133.

¹¹⁶ This ironised food are contextualised further within the chapter on Icelanders abroad. Other examples include the heavy application of mayonnaise; the “cocktail sauce” (mainly mayonnaise and tomato ketchup); Icelandic salty sweets; alcoholic beverages; and the hotdog.

2.7.2. Irony

According to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* irony is, at its simplest, a discrepancy between what is said and what is really meant, as in sarcasm and various other figures of speech.¹¹⁷ But irony is many things and is scarcely contained under the definition of humour. Nor is it simply a figure of speech. It can rather be recognised as a major mode of human experience and one that has come to define what has been called *the postmodern condition* or *the ironic age*. As a cultural signature of relativism, which formerly characterised artists and intellectuals, this ironic and playful stance toward real or imagined certainties may be noted throughout “high” and popular culture. Irony has become a commercial commodity through entertainment and advertising evidenced through self-referencing and even self-deprecating films and adverts.

The growing prominence of irony in public life has even reached such levels that groups within new generations have gone so far as attempting to re-establish their identity through its rejection - opting for sincerity in its stead.¹¹⁸ Anti-relativism has also become a force to be reckoned with in academia and the media.¹¹⁹ World events such as the attacks of September 11th 2001 have also resulted in such claims (albeit unsubstantiated) that “the age of irony is coming to an end.”¹²⁰ Trends in media, music and art also reflect this somewhat hesitant resistance. In Iceland, an emergent generation of Icelandic artists and musicians have grappled with issues of irony and sincerity and acquired the label the “krútt kynslóð” or the “cuddly” or “cute generation”. Often claims and

¹¹⁷ Chris Baldick, *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p.114

¹¹⁸ See A. O. Scott, “*The Panic of Influence*. Review of Brief Interviews with Hideous Men, by David Foster Wallace” *New York Review of Books*, 10 February 2000, 39 - 43.

¹¹⁹ See Clifford Geertz, 1984 “Anti Anti-Relativism”, *The American Anthropologist* 86 (2), 263-278.

¹²⁰ Roger Rosenblatt, “The Age Of Irony Comes To An End”, *Time*, 16 September 2001.

labels such as these prove superficial on examination. Although sincerity, naiveté and minimalism may well be attributed to some of their works their complexities and ironic undertones are often overlooked. Indeed the fact that some within this generation have embraced the infantilizing term “krútt” can be seen as ironic evasion from other unwelcome categorization.¹²¹ Indeed these negations of irony only exhibit how central it has become in contemporary times.

Irony is far from being exclusively modern. Yet while ironic tropes and style may be found throughout world literature and classical philosophy it is only in the 19th century that it becomes a subject of critical enquiry. One of the most critical and creative of these inquiries was Søren Kierkegaard's dissertation *The Concept of Irony With Continual Reference to Socrates*¹²² After arguing that it was Aristophanes' play *The Clouds* that best captured the true irony of Socrates, rather than the works of Plato and Xenophon, he designates these writings as a historical turning point where subjectivity made its appearance for the first time. For Socrates he states: “the whole given actuality had entirely lost its validity; he had become alien to the actuality of the whole substantial world.” While stressing this alienation from actuality as one side of irony Kierkegaard saw another side, and one he claims that Plato had missed. He argues that the ironies and idiosyncrasies of Socrates, best portrayed by Aristophanes, were a tactic against “Greek culture” but one that would not only destroy its target but also himself:

His conduct toward it [Greek culture] was at all times ironic; he was ignorant and knew nothing but was continually seeking information from others; yet as he let the existing go on existing, it foundered. He kept on using this tactic until the very last, as was especially evident when he was

¹²¹ On the “krútt generation” see also Jón Proppé: “Krútt and its Discontents, *List - Icelandic Art News* Nr. 4. August 2005.

¹²² Søren Kierkegaard, “The concept of irony, with continual reference to Socrates :together with notes of Schelling’s Berlin lectures” *Kierkegaard's Writings, Vol. 2*, ed. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton :Princeton University Press, [1841] 1989).

accused. But his fervor in this service consumed him, and in the end irony overwhelmed; he became dizzy, and everything lost its reality.¹²³

While this Faustian narrative perhaps overindulges in the character of Socrates, Kierkegaard offers an insightful ontological description of the practice of irony as engaging with subjectivity on the one hand and as resistance to power on the other. This lies in what he calls the “infinite absolute negativity” of irony because it only negates; it is infinite, because it does not only negate this or that phenomenon but also established nothing, because that which is to be established lies behind it and therefore irony is a qualification of subjectivity but also a suspension within it. Kierkegaard describes this suspension as a negative freedom “since the actuality that is supposed to give the subject content is not there”. He is therefore free from the constraint in which the given actuality holds the subject, but negatively, as there is nothing that holds him.

But this very freedom, this suspension, gives the ironist a certain enthusiasm, because he becomes intoxicated, so to speak, in the infinity of possibilities... But if irony is a qualification of subjectivity, then it must manifest itself the first time subjectivity makes its appearance in world history. Irony is, namely, the first and most abstract qualification of subjectivity.¹²⁴

In essence Kierkegaard, through Socrates, is mapping a particular way of engaging in public activity through verbal irony. The ironist rejects convention as illusory and acts on his rejection by following it without any true engagement. But by only playing at practice the actor gains sufficient distance from the immediacy of the ordinary and thus awakens his subjectivity and the conception of oneself as a subject. While describing this explosion of meaning-making

¹²³ Kierkegaard, p. 262.

¹²⁴ Kierkegaard, p. 262.

possibilities as an ontological cul-de-sac Kierkegaard does not hide his ambiguity towards the usefulness of this tactic. In a postscript, five years after publishing his thesis, he even argued that the ironist could achieve self-contentment, or a way out of the cul-de-sac, if he “relates himself not just negatively toward human existence but positively toward an absolute that is of qualitatively different kind from the ideals that shape the ordinary person's life”.¹²⁵

Kierkegaard's model of irony maps a successful or unsuccessful way of practising culture, in his case the conventions of a 19th Century Christian bourgeoisie, without true conviction or engagement. In the post-modern contexts of my own ethnography among Icelanders such conventions were not central to their experience nor did many moral absolutes present themselves as meaningful. His fundamentally moral exercise may therefore not be wholly applicable. But this model continues to show how in any given situation irony has the power to resist, blur, or redefine preconceived categories. In their introduction to a seminal anthology of the anthropology of irony the editors James W. Fernandez and Mary Taylor Huber agree on this fundamental aspect:

Very often and perhaps most fundamentally, irony is a questioning of established categories of inclusion and exclusion, and the ironiser is he or she or that group who has been detrimentally categorised, and bound thereby to contest through irony the adequacy of such categories.¹²⁶

As will be demonstrated through the case study of transcultural identity negotiations verbal irony plays an important part in questioning categories of inclusion and exclusion. It will also be argued that such performances can only

¹²⁵From Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* published in 1846. Quoted from Andrew Cross, “Neither Either nor Or: The Perils of Reflexive Irony” *Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hanney and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 140-41.

¹²⁶James W. Fernandez and Mary Taylor Huber, *Irony in Action: Anthropology, Practice and the Moral Imagination* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 9.

lead these individuals, transcending the authenticity of their identity, to an ironist standpoint. But while Kierkegaard's model may shed light on just those modern day identity practices his ironist is an elite one in an environment he deems lacking in self-criticism when today's culture is conversely seeped with irony and self-conscious subjectivity.

Indeed scholars have increasingly turned their attention to irony as a "weapon of the weak" rather than the strategy of the elite. In these cases irony provides space for subordinated persons to "voice resistance, imagine alternatives, build community, and mobilise for better times."¹²⁷ Often this involves the recognition of contradictions in one's plight or in those that hold power. One recent ethnography describes how impoverished vineyard labourers ironise about those who appear to control their lives.¹²⁸ Another case in point is the study of self-irony in both Irish literature and daily life by Laurence J. Taylor.¹²⁹ Looking at, among others, the genre of the "American Joke" in Ireland Taylor considers the roles irony and self-irony have played, and continue to play in the Irish construction of a national self in historically changing contexts and transnational relations with both England and the United States of America. He sees the function of the jokes not only to expose the ambiguous notions of self but to protect the self from the investigative American and his attempts to capture the Irish through analysis. He also makes the point that while ironic satire makes sense as a weapon of those either in power or at least in a culturally dominant position, self-satire is even more fitting for those on the bottom who already suffer as the butt of the jokes:

Thus, while irony is often the tool of the powerful, self-irony can be nearly irresistible for those who find themselves at the opposite end of the stick

¹²⁷ Fernandez and Huber, p. 17.

¹²⁸ Gabriel Torres, *The Force of Irony: Power in the Everyday Life of Mexican Tomato Workers* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1997).

¹²⁹ Laurence J. Taylor, "Paddy's Pig: Irony and Self-Irony in Irish Culture" : *Irony in Action: Anthropology, Practice and the Moral Imagination*, ed. by James W. Fernandez and Mary Taylor Huber (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), pp. 172 – 187.

and who have the wit to use it as a manner of seizing the situation, if not in one way, than in another.¹³⁰

Anthropologists James Fernandez and Mary Taylor Huber are among those who question the true force of the irony in contexts such as these. While acknowledging that subordinate ironies may psychologically alleviate suffering and discomfort they doubt whether this weapon can indeed do anything to change their objective situation. Whereas the ironies in question may in effect be moral or intellectual exercises this doubt is somewhat warranted. But one may also find case studies where verbal ironies go beyond imagological identity negotiations. As will be demonstrated in my own case studies objective circumstances can indeed be affected by irony. This is particularly true when one looks beyond rigidly defined in-group communications to the liminal folklore that takes place when identity boundaries collide, are threatened or temporarily set aside for various interests.

A case in point is Phyllis Pease Chock's research on the "Constrained Use of Irony in U.S. Congressional Hearings on Immigration."¹³¹ Her essay examines ironic insertions of ethnic stereotypes into the seriousness of legal discourse. Chock adheres to Alan Wilde's notion of irony as "visions of disparity" between competing, partial, and interested versions of the world embedded in different discourses. Speakers using irony call attention to the frame of interpretation in place by stipulating a competing one. Drawing also on Pierre Bourdieu's examination of class relations and cultural practices¹³² Chock comes to the conclusion that the irony in the hearings "created a pause – a discursive semicolon, perhaps - that draws our attention to the power that is not

¹³⁰ Taylor, 184.

¹³¹ Phyllis Pease Chock: "Constrained Use of Irony in U.S. Congressional Hearings on Immigration": *Irony in Action: Anthropology, Practice and the Moral Imagination*, ed by James W. Fernandez and Mary Taylor Huber (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 41-62.

¹³² Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. by John B. Thompson, trans. by Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

so much in the discourse as around it.”¹³³ These pauses identify realities that are otherwise denied or delegitimised by those who claim to speak with authority. And they create spaces of continuing struggle to define nationhood and citizenship.

This research therefore offers an example of irony as a tool that in some way penetrates the repressive Foucauldian functions of social power¹³⁴ and transcends the inequalities inherent in language and cultural capital.¹³⁵ Using the different resources they had, participants brought them to bear in their speaking “and stipulated, hedged, and contested hierarchies of social value – uniform or different legal subjects, legislators or witnesses, racialised or non-racialised citizens, citizens or aliens.”¹³⁶ Yet while this proved somewhat successful the verdict is not out on the how liberating a tool irony is. Irony can for example also be countered with irony.

Akin to Bourdieu, Certeau’s conception of discourse is very different from Foucault’s hegemonic one and chiefly with regards to people’s agency in society. Going even further than Bourdieu he recognises that discursive activity is a form of social activity - an activity in which we attempt to apply the roles of the discourses that we assume.¹³⁷ In his work on the storytelling of paramedics (discussed earlier) Tangherlini draws on these notions and makes a point of the fluidity of power relations between alleged superordinates and subordinates. Building on Certeau’s model of force relationships he stresses that while paramedics may utilise various narratives as ironic and tactical resistance towards regulatory agents and superiors they also act with strategic and

¹³³ Chock, 59.

¹³⁴ Michel Foucault has had much influence on critical discourse analysis through his perspective of social power as being both productive and repressive. See for example Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1980).

¹³⁵ Pierre Bourdieu saw language as a form of linguistic capital, where linguistic exchanges between “competent” and “incompetent” speakers are expressions of power. Scholars such as Anthony Giddens have since brought forward the notion of cultural capital – as discourses to be inherited and mastered in order for social actors to “get ahead in life”. See for example Anthony Giddens, *Sociology* (Oxford, Polity Press. 2001)

¹³⁶ Chock, 59.

¹³⁷ See for example Michel de Certeau: *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

institutionalised authority toward patients and other “civilians” in their day-to-day occupational dealings. So while they situate themselves and redefine their environment to fit their own needs they also apply strategy and so doing become agents of control.¹³⁸

One could therefore put forward the theorem that within fluid and seemingly ambiguous power relations the force of verbal irony may indeed be a social activity that affects one’s objective reality. That statement might be qualified by saying that within highly structured contexts irony is an unpredictable force and can very well result in a confirmation of prior and unequal power structures. This theorem will be thoroughly tested in my case study on how Icelanders abroad negotiate their identities.

2.7.3. The Tartan Taxi: Ironic Expression of National Identity as Tactical Resistance to Local Authorities

To give another example of the unpredictability of ironic performance and how de Certeau’s models may be used to understand them I wish to present one of my earlier case studies. This example also foreshadows how narrative can be used as tactical resistance to figures of authority in liminal contexts – such as those of the foreigner in his host country. Prior to my current case studies on the production and practice of Icelandic identities and images my fieldwork was conducted, primarily, on the folk narratives of Edinburgh taxi drivers.¹³⁹ Many in-group narratives describe and encompass the liminal social context of the trade and the ambiguous status of the taxi driver within it. Furthermore the context is transient although the driver is constantly between two points: moving from one location to another and one passenger to another. While some drivers describe these factors as stress-inducing obstacles to their job satisfaction¹⁴⁰ this state of

¹³⁸ Tangherlini, p. 48.

¹³⁹ The empirical data from this fieldwork formed the basis of my MScR dissertation *Negotiating the City: Oral and Visual Narrative* 2004.

¹⁴⁰ Other stress factors mentioned are, for example, long unsociable hours, working on holidays

being in-between also constitutes a state of marginality in occupational role and in social behaviour. The transition is often approached as a period of license where social norms are broken for example in the intimacy of conversation on the one hand (what one taxi driver referred to as the “confessional”) and, on the other hand, the more challenging, aggressive or sexual behaviour.

Complication by the degree of direct interaction with their passengers enhances the marginality they experience during their work, particularly in dealing with offensive and condescending passengers, explicit sexuality and crime. While this liminal context is to some extent dealt with through the performance of the occupational role it is also replayed and redefined in the in-group narratives of taxi drivers. In understanding these marginal and liminal features one may make use of Certeau’s exploration of low-level politics structuring everyday life. This in fact offers abundant possibilities in examining the ambiguous status of taxi drivers in the force relationships of their occupational culture. Working with the strategies and tactics characterizing the seemingly autonomous workday albeit under the authoritarian surveillance of the city and the liminal situational context inside the cab, one may interpret in-group cabbie narrative as part of a tactical resistance directed towards the various groups in question. Through their tactics the cabbies, to use the vernacular, situate themselves and redefine their environment to fit their own needs. In line with their ambiguous status one may also recognise taxi drivers as agents of control in a collective strategy constituted through their performance of occupational role (being literally “in the driver’s seat”) and collective narrative. Many of the narratives I documented among cabbies revolve around heroic or anti-heroic protagonists reacting to the transient and liminal experience of their occupation. They are in many ways consistent with Richard Dorson’s description of a folk hero as a “local character, a wag, an eccentric, talked about in close-knit circles for feats of strength or of eating or drinking or for knavish tricks and

and the sometimes isolated in-group social life of cabbies and subsequent distrust contributing to a strain on marriages. Many mentioned a high divorce rate among taxi drivers for these reasons particularly among those having trouble dealing with the stress of the job.

clever sayings.”¹⁴¹ In an innovative article on occupational narratives within this genre, Jack Santino exhibits the rewards that extensive collecting and analysis of contemporary occupational narrative can bear. He focuses on two job levels within the industry of commercial flight: the subordinate and superordinate, and on those stories that feature strong, heroic protagonists. As well as examining their actions and attributes he suggests the social and occupational factors that account for the similarities and the differences of these heroes. Santino presents examples of various prank narratives featuring occupational heroes as tricksters who on the subordinate level break their status barrier by assuming privileges allowed to superordinates. On the superordinate level, the heroes are practical jokers who rebel against social norms and restraints, extending their privileges of authority into areas forbidden to them by society. By challenging and breaking these rules, the heroes demonstrate transcendence and control over them,¹⁴²

“They achieve a notoriety that is usually limited to their home base or domicile [...] although occasionally, a particularly flamboyant character will be well known throughout the entire industry. These stories circulate orally, are widespread, and are well known among members of the occupational group.”¹⁴³

This work presents an interesting perspective on the more ambiguous status of the taxi driver who as a “constant” in the locus of the cab, and an authoritarian owner and/or operator of the vehicle, conducting his trade and service with the transient customer. Active, as are both the narrated pilots and flight attendants, the taxi driving protagonists are often depicted as take-charge individuals whose sense of themselves is transcendent and whose actions and practical jokes are directed at passengers and authority figures.

¹⁴¹ Richard M. Dorson, *America in Legend* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973), p. 170.

¹⁴² Jack Santino, “Flew the Ocean in a Plane”: an Investigation of Airline Occupational Narrative”, *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 3 (1978), 189-209.

¹⁴³ Santino, 192.

While many of the in-group narratives of Edinburgh taxi drivers were directed at passengers other narratives are directed at local authorities and the “superordinate” agents in the civic hierarchy. This may take the form of sarcastic critiques of the Council’s offers of “courses on anger management” for example. They may also encompass resistance to the introduction of dress codes, the taxi drivers having been already forbidden to wear jeans during their working hours. One personal experience narrative recounts when the taxi driver picked up a councilman outside Council offices. Realizing that the councilman himself is wearing jeans he quickly orders him out of the cab with subsequent accusations of hypocrisy. Numerous related, although more ambiguous, narratives have circulated about an eccentric and notorious taxi driver known as “the tartan taxi” (as well as usually being mentioned by name). In these following examples one may see how this individual transcends his normative and “official” occupational role in the narratives told about him. Moreover these narratives play on the iconic and official status of the Blacks (the signature British cab), the taxi drivers’ identity and the popular national and representational significance of tartan:

1. Excerpt:

[Setting: Canonmills garage in Edinburgh CM, TA and JA. Three night shift taxi drivers are gathered around a table standing, in conversation with the researcher (and his camera)]

KS: We were talking about I think his name was *Tim Johnson*¹⁴⁴ (.) [no response] do you know him (.) the tartan cabbie

CM: Oh Tim Johnson. He’s retired now.

TA: Yes. Timothy Johnson.

CM: He was a he was a bit - he was in the trade what 35 years

JA: His whole life.

KS: Is he in good health.

JA: Don’t know.

CM: Ah you would have heard

He was infamous because (.) the tourist liked him

¹⁴⁴ A pseudonym.

he was like , another icon I'd say [looks at JA]

JA: [nods] Uhummm.

Some of the guys didn't like him because he drove at 15 mile an hour.

TA: I didn't mind him.

But if were you stuck behind him he wouldn't bother.

He just wouldn't bother.

CM: No, he wouldn't bother.

JA: Usually it was cause he couldn't hear them.

KS: Sorry?

JA: Couldn't hear them. Cause he was playing music. His favourite music.

Usually Scottish.

CM: Yeah, and at Christmas it was Christmas music. And he'd dress up as Santa Claus.

TA: Santa. That's what he'd use to do.

JA: started

KS: How did you (.) how did you like him?

TA: He was a character.

CM: Yeah.

TA: A harmless old soul. He wouldn't do anybody harm.

With his black moustache and all [laughs], he just looked a bit strange.

2. Excerpt:

[Setting: Sandy Bell's pub in Edinburgh ca. 11 pm. Asked about "the tartan taxi" Mr. Kevin Docherty a taxi driver in his 50s replies to having been in his cab.]

KS: So when have you been in his cab?

KD: Only drunk at Christmas

KS: OK.

KD: And do you know that one they play, eh, for Lethal Weapon?

KS: Sorry?

KD: You know that music they play for Lethal Weapon? [Sings] Jingle Bell Jingle Bell (Rock). He's playing that and I'm thinking what am I doing in this cab?

The boy was a nutter. He was a nice nutter - he entertained the tourists. Scared the fuck out of me.

KS: So was it uncomfortable.

KD: For me? No, he took me home. But for that 5 minutes to take me home yes. Sitting there thinking I'm in a cab, that's decorated. I'm being driven home by Santa Claus. The guys a nutcase. I'm in the middle of a bad movie.

KS: How was his driving?

KD: Sound.

KS: So you quickly saw perhaps.

KD: Pardon

KS: So was that reassuring? Or wasn't that the worry?

KD: No, the worry is all the decoration and the music. Thinking I don't need this when I'm in my forties, what do the wee girlies feel like. But maybe that's the point which is why it was worrying for me?

KS: You think so?

KD: Well I think so.

KS: Well what was the point?

KD: I" don't know. I don't know. [.] He's got a white cab.

KS: He had a white cab?

KD: He had a white cab. He dresses it all in fairy lights. Of course himself in a costume and plays Jingle Bell Rock or Santa Claus is coming to town, you know. It's just as well he didn't know the blues version to Back Door Santa [a Tom Waits song] cause that's lethal. "I'm your backdoor Santa, I'll come wherever you man can't." [laughter]

KS: I suppose that would have been scary.

KD: Well if that would have come on the tape I would have been out the door.

KS: Was that the first time you had a ride with him?

KD: A lift home [laughter]

KS: A lift home I see I see.

KD: Luckily my wife was there.

KS: Have you heard about him at all from other people?

[KD nods]

KS: And what did they say?

KD: They said he's a fucking nutter?

KS: And what about the tartan, sort of, had you heard any comments on that?

KD: No. See Tim used to do the tartan. During the summer he would do the tartan [.] on the back seats. He would lay all the tartan rugs on the back seats so as all the tourist would be sitting on tartan. This exact same nutter that was doing Christmas was doing the tartan. And during the summer he'd be running about with fucking bits of heather sticking everywhere.

KS: Heather?

KD: Yeah, heather. Fuckin heather on the meter, on the front the cab, heather on his right mirrors, heather on the bumpers. In fact you would (think) am I driving in a cow that

has just eaten a load of heather. It's true. Don't just believe me.

3. Excerpt:

[Setting: Inside a cab outside Canonmills garage, ca. 11 pm.]

NN: He was a real character. I can't remember his first name. But he was a sewing machine.

KS: Sorry?

NN: He was some cabbie.

KS: Where have you heard about him? Through (.), where have you heard about him?

NN: He was in the trade when I was in the trade. He retired about a year ago or two year ago. Tartan taxi. Wore a Santa Claus suit on Christmas. And an Easter bunny suit. He also wore the kilt on some occasions and he was told by the local authorities that he couldn't wear a kilt. And he took it (.) he took a lawyer up with him. And the lawyer said: Well nobody, no shit, no court is gonna tell him to take his kilt off if it's his national costume. And so the local authority backed off.

In this ensemble of occupational critiques and personal experience narratives the participants, with their varying backgrounds and opinions, affectionately and ironically present the protagonist's "legendary" status within the occupation. His transcendence of occupational norms manipulates calendar customs and national icons culminating, as in the last narrative, in his victory over the Council's attempt to limit his expression. Considering the diversity and change in the discourse of Scottish nationalism (see chapter 2.2.) one will find difficulty in accommodating a convincingly "singular" collective national identity to the complex social and cultural contexts of these narratives. As constituted in the contexts of the last narrative, it can hardly be considered an endorsement of Scottish nationalism through exalting tartanry. As indeed is apparent in the "text" (for example: "he entertained the tourists"), but more so in the audio/visual data, this perhaps excessive use of tartan is ironically represented. In turn one cannot but notice the heroic aspects of the narratives' protagonist. Through his performance he transcends the norms of the customary cabbie-passenger relationships. The "tartan taxi", while under the tourists' gaze, also resists and

successfully challenges organizational control of his expression of identity.

Although the various approaches presented in the above literature originated from geographically and in some cases theoretically disparate scholarships they are in no way incompatible and can all be useful in the strategy of a single study of narrative and performance. They all address how attention to performance and context is vital in the study of such subjective aspects of culture as identity, image and representation. The way these aspects are determined or interpreted, in their various contexts, motives and meaning, is a process sometimes hidden, or non-existent, in field notes and often based on an audio-visual identification on behalf of the fieldworker at the moment of his fieldwork. This must be kept in mind as I expand the scope and explore the theory and practice of accessing and documenting everyday life. What must also be emphasised is that verbal expression, oral narrative and performance in everyday life is no less a spatial and sensorial exercise than a linguistic one carried out within elaborate power-structures.

2.8. Accessing Everyday Life – Reflexive Ethnography and Audio-Visual Documentation

Having set forth theory that addresses the dynamics, agency and ironies involved with performing one's identity in both narrative and everyday behaviour, a corresponding methodology of fieldwork and audio-visual documentation of everyday life is called for. The mere mention of “the everyday” implies a virginity of sorts, untouched by the design or contamination of authority or indeed “the scientific eye”. However one wishes to dramatise this implication it is a serious concern to the researcher and must be addressed. Is the fieldworker, for example, to discern “everyday life” from performance? Do these terms imply two

distinct “modes of behaviour” that are in effect mutually exclusive? Folklore and performance studies have predominately answered these questions in the negative. Performance and everyday behaviour are not mutually exclusive modes of behaviour if we consider the conclusions of years of performance studies – of which a sub-tradition looks at the practice of everyday life, whether familial, social or occupational as performance. But how may one research identity performances in the field and document them audio-visually? Does the use of audio-visual technology further accentuate the role of the researcher and thus induce performance from the research participant?

Within this thesis I explicitly contextualise most of my fieldwork data as “performance within everyday life”. But whether researching performance or the more non-performed aspects of everyday life a reflexive approach is instrumental to the credibility of fieldwork “data” and its analysis. Researching identity and performance involves of course the study of meaning. A central aspect of the qualitative approach is the concern with the meaning that people attach to objects, situations and other people in their lives. In studying these meanings researchers may to some effect attempt to suspend, “or set aside, their own perspectives and taken-for-granted views of the world.”¹⁴⁵ This notion, a potentially dangerous one, calls for considerable elaboration of fundamental theories. Underlying a significant part of qualitative approaches, and central to my take on them, are their roots in phenomenology and certain features of postmodernism. The goal of phenomenology itself is to some extent that the researcher acquires the perspective of the researched or, to put it plainly, he attempts to “see things from other people’s point of view”. In the wide range of social and cultural research that can be attributed to phenomenology this involves a focus on how people construct their realities and viewing their actions and cultural exchange as a product of that construction.¹⁴⁶

A fertile sub-tradition of this school of thought is *symbolic interactionism*

¹⁴⁵ Taylor and Bogdan, p. 7.

¹⁴⁶ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1967).

of which two of the most influential scholars are George Herbert Mead, with his emphasis on the social meaning people attach to the world,¹⁴⁷ and later Herbert Blumer. It is Blumer who lays down a threefold premise of the theory: i) one that meaning determines action and people act towards things and other people on the basis of those meanings, ii) that meanings are not inherent in objects but are social products of interaction iii) and that social actors attach meaning to situations, people and objects through the process of interpretation.¹⁴⁸ This interpretation is in turn a dynamic process that depends on a person's use of available meanings and situations.

Closely related to this sub-tradition is the study of how people maintain a sense of external reality, or *ethnomethodology*,¹⁴⁹ and the close examination of how people negotiate and construct meanings in conversation known as *conversational analysis*.¹⁵⁰ While these are very productive areas of research some of its approaches, like those of ethnomethodologist Alfred Schutz,¹⁵¹ suggest the bracketing or suspension of the researcher's own reality in his effort to study the reality of everyday life. Although perhaps a viable aim on some levels this is in sharp contrast with the challenges to the authority of science, and of the positivist voice, that were later brought to bear through postmodern writing.¹⁵² Breaking out of the philosophical era of modernism in fact consisted largely of deconstructing the assumptions and subterranean ideology within social sciences and especially any claims to the authority of "all-knowing observation of the field".¹⁵³ Under the influence of these perspectives, which emerge alongside post-structuralism, feminist research and critical ethnography, more attention has been paid to the researchers' own identities and traits (for

¹⁴⁷ George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self and Society* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1934).

¹⁴⁸ Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969).

¹⁴⁹ Alain Coulon, *Ethnomethodology* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1995).

¹⁵⁰ See for example Harvey Sacks, *Lectures on Conversation*, 2 vols (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

¹⁵¹ Alfred Schutz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1967).

¹⁵² It must be iterated that early on Blumer himself identified the interpretive subjectivity of the "so called "objective" observer". Blumer, p. 86.

¹⁵³ Taylor and Bogdan, p. 15.

example race, gender and class).¹⁵⁴ In light of these postmodern perspectives the prospect of objectifying one's own beliefs has become less viable if not wholly impossible. Therefore I would argue that the phenomenological perspective is only beneficial if it is acknowledged that the goal of "seeing things from other people's points of view" will never be fully achieved but that the attempt itself may give prolific results. In less mystical terms a close and intimate study of "the other", if it is to have any legitimacy, must be carried out and represented not with feigned objectivity but through engaging with this relationship and a process of self-reference known as *reflexivity*.

In a productive guide to reflexive ethnography Charlotte Aull Davies defines the term in the context of social research as referring to "the ways in which the products of research are affected by the personnel and process of doing research."¹⁵⁵ In the purpose of reaping the benefits of postmodern perspectives, such as the exposure of the intellectual tyranny of meta-narratives and recognizing the authorial voice, without submitting to the "extreme pessimism of their epistemological critiques"¹⁵⁶ Davies proposes their integration with pragmatism and realist perspectives. Drawing mainly on the philosophical foundations of Roy Bhaskar's *critical realism* Davies maintains that the nature of the social world may be explored as transcendently real.¹⁵⁷ This provides a basis for gaining knowledge but advocates a form of analysis "that is built upon the creative tension between abstract explanation and grounded description".¹⁵⁸ Suggesting both quantitative and qualitative strategies she accentuates both

¹⁵⁴ Some key texts of these perspectives: Norman K. Denzin, *The Research Act: a Theoretical Introduction to Sociological Methods* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978); Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, "Transforming Qualitative Research Methods: Is It a Revolution?", *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 24 (1995), 349-357 ; Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1980); Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

¹⁵⁵ Charlotte Aull Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography: a Guide to Researching Selves and Others* (London: Routledge, 1999) p. 4.

¹⁵⁶ Davies, p. 5.

¹⁵⁷ Roy Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism: a Philosophical Critique of the Contemporary Human Sciences*, 2nd edn (New York, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989). See also: George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934).

¹⁵⁸ Davies, p. 229.

cognitive analysis and *mediation*: the process of mediating between the various tensions representing different frames of reference such as insider-outsider statuses or the expectations for the products of research. As a whole Davies's contribution offers a sound philosophical foundation along with practical strategies although she, to some degree, gives excessive prominence to descriptive methods as opposed to interpretive analysis.

Dealing more directly, although along similar lines as Davies, with the issue of "self" in fieldwork Beverly J. Stoeltje, Christie L. Fox and Stephen Olbrys shed light on the growing awareness of the concept of reflexivity and postcolonial perspectives. They illustrate how folklore theory had to undergo considerable changes before acknowledging the significance of the fieldworker in research methods. In the face of problems such as authority, legitimacy, identity and intimacy the static structural models of folklore and anthropology were, arguably, rendered obsolete: "These changes have altered the topics of research, the theories that frame the enterprise, and the methods of fieldwork used by folklorists and anthropologists alike. However, few features have proven to be more consequential than the identity of the researcher or, more specifically, the issue of the self."¹⁵⁹ Considering this as a ripe and ever problematic topic Stoeltje, Fox and Olbrys focus on the actual negotiation and construction of self as a methodological concern. In their view focusing on the dynamics of the self in the field and one's own identity and relation to the other heightens the awareness of their influence of the significant relationship between the researcher and the research.

This leads to the exploration of the interpretive challenges of globalization and how intimacy is produced and reproduced by ethnographers "in a world of postlocalities".¹⁶⁰ Haven taken into account such variables as gender, ethnicity, age, class, marital status and purpose of research we must also be aware of the subjectivities each individual brings into the experience. While acknowledging

¹⁵⁹ Beverly J. Stoeltje, Christie L. Fox and Stephen Olbrys, "The Self in "Fieldwork: a Methodological Concern", *Journal of American Folklore*, 112 (1999), 158-182 (p. 159).

¹⁶⁰ Stoeltje et. al., p. 177.

the ambiguity of the terms *insider* and *outsider* (the research itself accentuating the latter regardless of background) ethnographers should use facets of their own identity and background to pursue their research agendas, create and utilise relationships and elicit cooperation. By presenting the complications involved in negotiating a way through the maze of communications or “the mysteries of intimacy”¹⁶¹ that characterises fieldwork the self is integrated into the research model, recognised and accounted for in its complexity. While the benefits of integrating the self into research may of course be debated I would point out in agreement with these writers that “it is the self that ultimately accounts for the data, the representations, and the theoretical interpretation of the ethnographic work.”¹⁶²

While attempts to meet the reflexive features of field research vary, and are in some cases scarcely visible, a promising attempt at a systematic and interpretive approach to that goal can be seen in the *dialogic methodology* recently introduced by Maria Vasenkari and Armi Pekkala in the interest of producing what is referred to as *thick data*.¹⁶³ The term itself is intended to include both the beginning and end of the research process from the initial field encounters to the written study and representation while facilitating an appreciation of the researcher as an active subject in the process as well as its situational and contextual elements. In the aim of *intersubjectivity*, a term closely related to reflexivity but implying an indispensable interpretive as well as contextual knowledge, dialogic methodology seeks to analyze and understand the *triadic dialogue* consisting of: i) the primary dialogue or the interactional encounter of the researcher and the researched, ii) the dialogical engagement of the researcher with the primary dialogue while writing about it, in conjunction with iii) the readers dialogical engagement with the written study.¹⁶⁴ The fruit of

¹⁶¹ Arjun Appadurai, “Fieldwork in the Era of Globalization” *Anthropology and Humanism*, 22 (1997), 115-118 (p. 116).

¹⁶² Stoeltje et. al., p. 179

¹⁶³ See Clifford Geertz, “Thick description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture”, in *The Interpretation of Cultures. Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 3 -30.

¹⁶⁴ Maria Vasenkari & Armi Pekkala, “Dialogic methodology”, in *Thick Corpus, Organic Variation*

this seemingly laborious process is potentially a full appreciation of the interpretive and situated character of the data. In addition various practical methods are combined such as an emphasis on preserving and presenting the chronology of the primary dialogue as a means of appreciating the recursive structure of meaning. In Vasenkari's and Pekkala's words: "Only when the data is explicitly interpreted and contextualised, brought into writing, does it become thick with meaning."¹⁶⁵ With some reservations about the full problematic of this method the prospects in approaching the research experience holistically seem more reachable through such a methodology that offers an apparently viable interpretive approach to subjective realities.

Another innovative approach at a holistic reflexivity is a form of qualitative approaches known as autoethnography that encourages self-inclusive narrative. Although the term has been generally used to describe the research of "one's own" culture, communication scholars such as Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner have developed a more specific menu of auto-ethnographic research, emphasizing the interpretive and impressionistic. This orientation blends the practices and emphases of social science with the aesthetic sensibility and expressive forms of art and aims to narrate the physical, cognitive, emotional experience. The goal of auto-ethnography is therefore to 1) evoke this experience in the reader, 2) give voice to stories and groups of people traditionally left out of social scientific inquiry; 3) producing writing of high literary/artistic quality; and 4) improving readers', participants' and authors' lives. This line of inquiry, as practised by Ellis in her *methodological novel*, also has the distinguishing features of the author writing in first person, making himself the object of research; the narrative text focusing on a single case extended over time and presented as a story replete with a narrator, characterization and plot line.

and Textuality in Oral Tradition, ed. by Lauri Honko (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2000).

¹⁶⁵ Vasenkari & Pekkala, 253.

In defence of the integration of methodologies such as these I would argue that despite the inductive and flexible nature of qualitative research methods, for instance the common emphasis on a lack of hypothesis, a number of theoretical and methodological aspects should be present and influential in the research design from the onset. A wide range of accumulated scholarship in fact expels any notion of a *tabula rasa* or truly blank page of the fieldworker's metaphorical notebook. Methodological developments of both fieldwork and analysis offer a cross-fertilising contribution to the effectiveness and appropriateness of the fieldwork. These include researching the functions and meanings of narrative,¹⁶⁶ the identification of narrative genres and variations,¹⁶⁷ annotation¹⁶⁸ and the study of intertextuality and performance.¹⁶⁹ In the interests of specialised research on cultural constructions casting various elements of this scholarship aside in the interest of either complying to one body of theory or evading *grand theories* altogether is simply counterproductive. It is therefore my opinion that they must to some degree be employed in fieldwork selectivity, identification and focus as well in analysis and conceptualisation.

2.8.1. Representation and Ethical Issues

While studying the representations of identity and folklore it must be made clear

¹⁶⁶ This approach derives mainly from functional theory. See for example Bronislaw Malinowski, "Magic, Science and Religion (New York, 1954.) pp. 93-148.

¹⁶⁷ See for example Alan Dundes, "The Study of Folklore in Literature and Culture: Identification and Interpretation", *Journal of American Folklore*, 78 (1965), 136-142.

¹⁶⁸ See Elliot Oring, "Documenting Folklore: The Annotation" in *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres: a Reader*, ed. by Elliot Oring (Logan, Utah State University Press, 1989), pp. 358-374.

¹⁶⁹ Within both structuralism and post-structural theories see for example Richard Bauman, "Verbal Art as Performance", *American Anthropologist*, 77 (1975), 290-311; Richard Bauman, *Story, Performance and Event: Contextual Studies of Oral Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (London: Cornell University Press, 1974); Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: a Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

that the study's dissemination is in itself a representation positioned and located in a specific time, space, culture and discourse. This thesis is of course no exception. In some aspects it can be even be seen as especially representational because in addition to text it incorporates my own documentation through text and accompanying photographs and audio/video corresponding with relevant qualitative evidence. Until other arrangements are made this audio-visual presentation is meant solely for the appraisal of my supervisors and examiners and may only be accessed in the form of an *E-thesis* on the website < <http://www.icef.is/ethesis/ethesis.htm> >.

Most current ethnographical theory indeed stresses that in their representation the researcher, as any other narrator, does not speak from a position of neutrality but from within a discourse embedded in power relationships and complex social and cultural perceptions. A reflexive approach in no way nullifies this position although it may be an adequate reaction to the research strategy. But is the term research *strategy* perhaps misleading? Inverting Michel de Certeau's analysis of everyday situations and power struggles¹⁷⁰ it could be argued that the researcher's endeavour is not a strategy at all but a tactic where the researcher imposes himself into the other's institutional space with his own cultural baggage, representations of self, his research questions, skill and other ingredients of his academic "bag of tricks". While audio-visual technology can indeed be conscribed to the same tactics, its reflexive uses should not be dismissed. At the risk of sounding too ideological it may be said that when handled reflexively recording technology may well be considered to serve a strategy of social sciences and the humanities in their attempt to shed light on social and cultural constructions. This aim, on the other hand, will not be reached if these constructions are kept out of sight - in both the literal and figurative sense.

¹⁷⁰ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (London: University of California Press, 1988), p. xix. This link will be broken after the examination of thesis until other arrangements are made.

2.8.2. Collecting and Representing Audio/Visually

In examining my visual data, I try to be mindful of the notions of *thick data*¹⁷¹ in relation to the visual image. Aware of the potentially illusive nature of the medium I nonetheless seek to identify those miniscule movements and everyday constructions made obtainable through the alleged consistency of the visual technology: In the same sense that audio-visuality may be considered an evident component in oral narrative the use of audio-visual technology as a research tool may seem an obvious strategy. The documentation of visual culture through visual technology can then presumably add to the “thickness” of the ethnographic description. And yet a revealing example of the epistemological problem of visual documentation may be found in Clifford Geertz’s prolific use of Gilbert Ryle’s notion of a thick description where the photographic image is to all practical purposes referred to as “thin”. Quoting Ryle’s example of the difference between a wink and a twitch it is stated that “from an I-am-a-camera, “phenomenalistic” observation of them alone, one could not tell which was twitch or which was wink, or indeed whether both or either was twitch or wink.”¹⁷² This, combined, with the problem of the intrusive effects of “the camera’s gaze”, gives urgency to a paradigm where visual data, like that of other cultural formations, can only become “thick with meaning” when explicitly interpreted and contextualised.¹⁷³

Consequently one must also concede that the same thickness, derived from visual documentation, may well be illusory. When reviewing the conflicting approaches, as well as common assumptions, to these problems, I will argue for the validity of a reflexive approach to visual research (through such media as

¹⁷¹ See for example Maria Vasenkari & Armi Pekkala, “Dialogic methodology”, in *Thick Corpus, Organic Variation and Textuality in Oral Tradition*, ed. by Lauri Honko (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2000).

¹⁷² Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), p. 6.

¹⁷³ Maria Vasenkari & Armi Pekkala, “Dialogic methodology”, in *Thick Corpus, Organic Variation and Textuality in Oral Tradition*, ed. by Lauri Honko (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2000), p. 575.

video or film) in theory and practice and with examples from my own fieldwork. Primarily I will argue that the involvement of the video-researcher need not be looked upon as contamination of the fieldwork data but as an illumination and in fact a constitution of the interaction taking place in the field and that this interaction may subsequently be analyzed from the visual-text.

2.8.3. Beauty Beyond Recovery and the Destructive Gaze

In the broad scope of social and humanistic research viewpoints vary as to the effect of the camera/researcher's gaze on the accumulated data. In both ethnographic and sociological film research one can, on the other hand, point to two main and conflicting approaches to this issue.¹⁷⁴ At one end of the spectrum there is the denial of any significant effect of the researcher and camera on the researched, thus leaving an epistemologically sound and preserved interaction to be studied in different contexts.¹⁷⁵ At the other end there is the claim that the intrusion of the visual recording process so alters the "representation of reality" that the data is either useless, must be obtained covertly or supported by triangular research and comparative validation.¹⁷⁶

This wide range of divergence should come as no surprise in the face of recent epistemological arguments characterised by attacks on the objective credibility in these "postmodern times" of discontinuity in cultural formations.¹⁷⁷ It

¹⁷⁴ See Mark Gottdeiner "Field Research and Video Tape", *Sociological Inquiry*, 49 (1979), 59 - 66; Alan Grimshaw, "Sound-Image Data Records for Research on Social Interaction: Some Questions Answered", *Sociological Methods and Research*, 11 (1982), pp. 121 - 144.

¹⁷⁵ See for example Margaret Mead's comment on Gregory Bateson's work on the Balinese, and particularly her confidence that they were "unselfconscious about photography, accepting it as part of life, a life which was in many ways always lived on stage." In Karl G. Heider, *Ethnographic Film* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1976), p. 51. For an example within the School of Scottish studies see Donald A. MacDonald, "Collecting Oral Literature", *Folklore and Folklife: an Introduction* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1972) pp. 407-430.

¹⁷⁶ Heider, p. 51; Gottdeiner, p. 61.

¹⁷⁷ George E. Marcus, "The Uses of Complicity in the Changing Mise-en-Scène of Anthropological Fieldwork", *Representations*, 59 (1997), 85-108 (p. 96).

can certainly be argued that the last quarter of the 20th century constituted a break in ethnographic epistemology especially with regards to fieldwork documentation and its representation and certainly visual documentation was an integral part of that.¹⁷⁸ But what must not be overlooked is it that “before the fall” so to speak a number of questions concerning the utilization of recording technology in fieldwork, although falling short of the problematic of video research, had been addressed in one way or another. While engaging with the technical difficulties of the sound recorder, consideration of its effect on fieldwork situations was set forth. Although not always intentionally these writings often bring to light in what way researchers had experienced the social constructions they were faced with.

An excellent example is Donald A. MacDonald’s widely read article from 1972 “Collecting Oral Literature”. Illuminating the subtle functions and personal relations of fieldwork, MacDonald gives many practical examples of the technological complications involved. While mentioning the unethical but perhaps “tempting” practice of covert research MacDonald gives a telling account of attitudes towards the fieldworker’s recording. When asked by storytellers to turn off the equipment in order to “run through” the material MacDonald admits to having occasionally continued recording “as this first performance can often be the better of the two.”¹⁷⁹ Using this example to stress that the informant should have the final word on what is to remain on record this reflexive fieldwork interaction is none the less an important clarification of the fieldwork context. While repeating performances might indicate the informant’s, at least partial, unfamiliarity to the material it is also indicative of both the fieldworker’s and the informant’s attempt at elevating the context of recounting to the context of self assured performance. Pertaining to some important

¹⁷⁸ See also the publication from the Santa Fe seminar of the School of American Research in 1984 in *Writing Culture*, ed. by James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1986). For related publications see *After Writing Culture*, ed. by Allison James, Jenny Hockey and Andrew Dawson (London: Routledge, 1997).

¹⁷⁹ MacDonald, p. 419.

technical practicalities of fieldwork such as these he also addresses the issue of how recording equipment, in his case an open reel sound recorder, potentially affects the informant:

Arguments as to the interference of machinery with the spontaneity of the recital are often overstated. If machinery can be used at all, the distraction is obviously less than in the case of the dictation. In general, I have found that a good informant, who knows that he has a contribution to make, will become almost totally oblivious to the presence of the machine.¹⁸⁰

Although a rather subjective dismissal of the machine's effects on the informant MacDonald's approach is grounded in his experience of the reflexivity of dictation and note-taking as well as his perhaps aesthetic assessment of well performed "spontaneous" oral literature. MacDonald accentuates the necessity of the fieldworker's familiarization of the field and placing oral texts in their "social ambience".¹⁸¹ Interesting in this respect is his observation of how "a truly functional situation is rarely encountered nowadays in a "modern" society."¹⁸² But it is in fact this now "all but disappearing functional" storytelling that he takes as example for the importance of documenting aspects such as function, style and ambience. Through one case in point, MacEdward Leache's documentation of storytelling in Jamaica,¹⁸³ MacDonald stresses the daunting but necessary task of placing "the total situation on record as he observes it"¹⁸⁴ whereas in the "in the Hebridean situation the tradition-bearer must be encouraged to fill in these details, to recreate for us this functional setting from his memory."¹⁸⁵ To

¹⁸⁰ MacDonald, p. 412.

¹⁸¹ MacDonald, p. 408.

¹⁸² MacDonald, p. 408.

¹⁸³ MacEdward Leach, "Problems of Collecting Oral Literature", *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 77 (1962), 336.

¹⁸⁴ MacDonald, p. 410.

¹⁸⁵ MacDonald, p. 410.

this end he mentions a set of observational questions for the fieldworker to bear in mind particularly pertaining to function, style and ambience. And when it comes to the question of recording machinery MacDonald is unequivocal of its importance and accuracy stating that all paper work should be left to the documentation of that which is impossible to incorporate in the sound record.¹⁸⁶ He also stresses the importance of photography and talks with great enthusiasm about the possibilities of filming, although lamenting its cost:

Another important item of equipment is the camera, not nearly so widely used hitherto in oral literature situations as it ought to be. The camera should, of course, be capable of taking flashlight photographs as most recording sessions are conducted indoors and often in artificial light. The use of the cine-camera for this type of work is still in its infancy, though obviously it has a most important contribution to make. Cine-film synchronised with a sound recording can supply many of the details of style that hitherto, even at best, have been all too inadequately handled by the pen, and often not at all. The expense of professional quality equipment, and the need for trained technicians, of course constitutes major problems.¹⁸⁷

While anticipating the development of filming in the School of Scottish Studies MacDonald had specific ideas on its potential in documentation. To illustrate them he refers to his sound recordings in Barra of the waulking songs performed by a group of women led by Mary Morrison. Having attempted to induce a form of “natural context” he proclaims that quickly this became a success. He describes the conducive atmosphere transformed to a point where it was “no longer a staged performance”, with the performers themselves becoming “totally

¹⁸⁶ MacDonald, p. 411.

¹⁸⁷ MacDonald, pp. 412-413.

involved again in the real process”.¹⁸⁸ Furthermore, while quelling an impulse to throw the microphone away, he declares never in a lifetime of scholarship to have learned more about the function of labour songs:

I shall never forget those integrated, precise, intense, flying hands. Nor shall I ever be able to describe them. Here was style, here was function, here was an artistically total fact. Some of the sound recordings made that night are of stunning quality, but they cannot possibly hope to convey the whole situation to anyone who was not actually there. How often have we wished since that it could have been filmed. The possibilities of filming are actually being investigated by the school at the moment, but it may be impossible now to recreate that setting to the full. The women are that little bit older. They have not been practicing; Mary Morrison herself has been unwell. Something beautiful may be beyond recovery.¹⁸⁹

It is certainly interesting to wonder if, had it been filmed, this “beauty” now beyond “recovery” would have translated to the screen along with the subtle connotations of the alleged recreation of context. But in light of this engagement and battle with time it is difficult to fully register the subjective description MacDonald gives of the artistic event. It is, on the other hand, obvious from which camp of visual validity MacDonald is speaking, in his view that the use of a “cine-film camera”, like the sound recorder, would not likely have jeopardised the realization of the “real process” of the artistry. This, and his statement that it is “no longer a staged performance”, is of course highly questionable, subjective and difficult to take at face value. But perhaps this is part of his point: that the subjective “reality” of a given event is beyond description; That it is an artistry only to be fully experienced subjectively. For although the rhetoric of salvaging heritage is very apparent in MacDonald’s article it is also implied that recording

¹⁸⁸ MacDonald, p. 427.

¹⁸⁹ MacDonald, p. 428.

the ambience and relevant features of the narrative environments of modernity is no less a daunting and difficult task, but a task he anticipated would be well met with the aid of film.

2.8.5. Visual Scholarship, Professional Filmmaking and Common Assumptions

Although visual methods, film and later video, have held a significant part in late 20th century ethnographic scholarship, many fields and sub-traditions have shied away from either its application or engaging with its methodology. All the same visual research of individual researchers and archives has slowly been on the increase through interest and such practicalities as affordability of video and digital equipment. Regardless of this increase contemporary views in scholarship on video documentation and representation often seem matter-of-fact and commonsensical. But when examined in the context of visual scholarship one finds that these views seem often to be based, whether implicitly or explicitly, on hasty, albeit common, assumptions pertaining to the nature of film.

An example of this can be seen in a recent article on documentation and research by Dr Anders Salomonsson of the Lund University Folklife Archives. In his observations on the process of collecting and research, in relation to technology, he deduces that one way to include as much as possible is to enlist the aid of technology. Taking the sound recorder as an example, considering its possibilities in transcribing and recalling the situation in the moment of documentation, he cautions against the excessive use of transcriptions, a concern he also relates to the interpretation of video.

They [sound recordings] should not always be cited verbatim in a text, since spoken and written language are two completely different forms of

expression. The result can - at worst - make the informant look ridiculous. The same caution should be exercised in the interpretation of videotaped material. Videos should never be made without professional film-making competence.¹⁹⁰

While being adequately sensitive to the adverse effect of transcription from one form to another I believe Salomonsson, like many others, places quite too much faith in “professional film-making competence”. His comments, straightforward as they may seem, appear to imply that “professional film-making competence” is a condition for either i) representing the informants in a presentable matter (in a way that it is fit to be seen) or ii) conveying a reality. The first interpretation is of course in line with the Salomonsson’s take on the use of verbatim. Weary of the connotations of broken or grammatically erred written text and with an ethical concern for the subjects of research he cites the established lesson of folkloristics that written text can be a poor representation of speech and oral performance. Textual representation can therefore be argued to be reliant on the context of publication or other distribution and with consideration to the informants’ wishes. But considering the second possible meaning, that “professional film-making competence” is a requirement for conveying actuality, one cannot but recall some of the earliest critical commentary on photographic technology that quite to the contrary saw it not as authenticating but as the end of authenticity.

In Walter Benjamin’s monumental essay on visual scholarship “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936) a workable context is given to the study of a wide range of visual arts and sciences from their use in occupational psychology to the feature film. In the former Benjamin recognises enormous potential of “the testing capacity of the equipment”¹⁹¹ and specifically

¹⁹⁰ Anders Salomonsson, “Documentation and Research”, *Thick Corpus, Organic Variation and Textuality in Oral Tradition, Studia Fennica, Folkloristica 7*, ed. by Lauri Honko (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2000), pp. 197-213 (p. 210).

¹⁹¹ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, from

in conjunction with Freudian theory. While quoting *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*¹⁹² he points out how, in a situation of visual isolation, filmed behaviour lends itself more readily to analysis. Thus, in a sociological vein, he describes how the film “extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives.”¹⁹³ Yet when it comes to the illusory capacity of both filming and editing he pulls no punches:

The shooting of a film, especially of a sound film, affords a spectacle unimaginable anywhere at any time before this. It presents a process in which it is impossible to assign to a spectator a viewpoint which would exclude from the actual scene such extraneous accessories as camera equipment, lighting machinery, staff assistants, etc. - unless his eye were on a line parallel with the lens. [...] Its illusory nature is that of the second degree, the result of cutting.¹⁹⁴

Benjamin therefore underlines the illusory nature of film. But the idea, expressed by Salomonsson, that professional filmmaking is a conveyor of actuality is also based on a misunderstanding in which contemporary mainstream forms of filmmaking are canonised as “the nature” of the form. This notion disregards the difficult relationship between film and perceived actuality. One might even say that professional filmmaking, as opposed to more basic or experimental filmmaking, indeed relies on deception and manipulation to reach its end product – in effect a fiction. And while one may find truth in fiction, then fiction it remains.

In the dawn of professional so-called “non-fiction” film-making the moving image was employed to a greater degree in the same way as the fiction or feature film. From the perspective of behavioural and phenomenological

Illuminations, reprinted in *Culture: Critical Concepts of Sociology*, Vol. 2. ed. by Chris Jenks (London: Routledge, 2003), 3 - 27 (p. 16).

¹⁹² Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (London : Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, [1901] 1960).

¹⁹³ Benjamin, p. 17.

¹⁹⁴ Benjamin, p. 14.

reliability it could in fact be considered highly contestable to suggest that much “actuality” is left in the vast majority of documentaries whether their illusory agents are sophisticated technology, selectivity, staging or editing. In many ways the same can be, and has been, said about various other ethnographic claims to the real, in film or any other medium, leaving it (for many uncomfortably) situated in a limbo between empirical objectivity and descriptive subjectivity.¹⁹⁵ It could therefore be said with relative assertiveness that from as far back as the 1930’s the epistemological significance of the photograph and moving image had already received the critical attention that has characterised the humanities and social sciences in recent decades. Mindful of these disparate approaches and assumptions within visual scholarship and without, I will set generalizations on visuality aside, in favour of a working theory and a more focused exploration of a viable and reflexive visual research method.

2.8.5. Reflexive Audio-Visual Research

The sociologists and video-researchers Helen Lomax and Neil Casey lay out a reflexive approach, acknowledging that the researcher is an inevitable part of the social world that is being studied.¹⁹⁶ They propose the active (to some degree) participation of the researcher in the situated activity that is being recorded with full consideration of the social significance of the camera. An important part of this significance is the participant’s awareness of the ability of the camera to preserve interaction and represent it. But it is that same ability which gives validity to video research as a reflexive research method in that it enables an analysis of the contribution of the research process to the production

¹⁹⁵ See for example Norman K. Denzin, “The Facts and Fictions of Qualitative Inquiry”, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 2 (1996), 230-241.

¹⁹⁶ Helen Lomax and Neil Casey, “Recording Social Life: Reflexivity and Video Methodology”, *Sociological Research Online*, 3 (1998), <<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/socresonline/3/2/1.html>> [accessed 23 April 2004] (para. 1.1 - 8.5).

of the data: the video text.

It is therefore a primary condition of Lomax's and Casey's approach to acknowledge "that the video text (i.e. the collection of visual and aural images evident on a monitor) is a product of the occasioned activities of the researchers and participants."¹⁹⁷ Only in so doing can one look at the video-text as an important resource for exploring the interactional production of those activities. Furthermore Lomax and Casey stress "that the participants themselves display an orientation to the research process and the recording equipment and its properties. That is, at any given moment they are both midwives or clients *and* research participants."¹⁹⁸ As can be seen in examples from their own research this approach does not rely on the skill of professional film production but in what is added to a "thick description" and made available in the basic video text. Of course the video text can only in fact offer a partial description of the research interaction: bound by factors such as technical capability and what might be deemed appropriate in the social context (for example where and when to start recording). But it is often in the face of these limitations that that very telling interaction takes place.

In their video-research of midwifery Lomax and Casey pay close attention to how the researcher makes choices of how and when to film and how this aspect of "being a researcher" contributes to the videotaped definition of the midwife-client interaction. The benefits of this emphasis are clear in their example of midwives' gestures and utterances when indicating the beginning and end of the examinations of their clients and thus suggesting when to film and not film. In spite of having wished to record the midwife-client relationship in both its formal and informal context the researchers were met with the midwives' own understandings of its beginning and end which primarily coincided with the medical examination itself. While analyzing the available data of this interaction Lomax and Casey concluded that in order to maintain an amenable research

¹⁹⁷Lomax, (para. 4.2).

¹⁹⁸Lomax, (para. 4.3).

context they were obliged to accept the midwives' definition of the encounter. While recognizing the importance of this conceptualization Lomax and Casey also found it in itself methodologically interesting:

In the context of visual research it is of further interest, not least because this insight is a direct result of the data collection process; that is, the researcher's use (and non-use) of a video camera. It is doubtful that taking notes would have elicited the same commentary from participants. Of further methodological interest is that the process by which researcher and midwife negotiate what may or may not be recorded is captured on video and available for reflection and analysis.¹⁹⁹

What is also interesting, and seemingly integral to their reflexive approach, is that Lomax and Casey do not view the phenomenon of this negotiation around the opening and closure of the encounter as either insignificant or as an "unnatural" intrusion of the researcher. On the contrary they find a reflexive analysis of this interaction to be highly beneficial and in line with their goal of researching the interactional accomplishment of the midwives' work. This is also in line with further examples given on how the research process helps constitute the data while suggesting that the participants' talk and activity exhibits a self-awareness and orientation to themselves as both the objects of research and to the preservability of the encounter. Another important part in their approach is how researcher self-management can be handled reflexively in the field as well as analyzed and understood from the video-text.

2.8.6. Audio-Visual Reflexivity

From early on in my postgraduate research I have experimented with the

¹⁹⁹Lomax, (para. 5.14).

practical use and influence of the camera in the fieldwork situation. Research methods, such as those of Lomax and Casy, made me aware of how the intrusive aspects of recording technologies, lamented in much of ethnographic scholarship, may in some cases become an asset. One could, in a sense, replace the metaphor of an ethnographic field with that of a still pond. Undisturbed one knows little of what lies beneath its surface. But if disturbed, by a pebble thrown, it is no longer the same as before. But the very ripples one has caused may inform on the attributes of the pond: its state or density; colour and texture; mineral composition; or indeed the life forms it harbours. Likewise reactions to the cameraman or researcher can inform on the very cultural subject of research. Where and when one is allowed to film, for example, informs on issues of privacy and how events are framed and structured. Many fieldworkers are also often quick to discover that they acquire more interesting material before or after you are allowed to record. Why is this? Rather than giving into frustration one may also ask what it reveals.

In addition to revealing structures within the fieldwork situation, filming can grant one licence and access to locations and people that are otherwise unattainable. While I will later elaborate on such methods in relation to the case studies of this thesis another example from my post-graduate fieldwork may also illustrate the usefulness of these methods. In my fieldwork on the narratives of Edinburgh taxi drivers, I used intrusive elements of film to capture the constructions, liminalities and restrictions that frame the often elaborate storytelling in and outside of the taxi cab. One of the venues was the taxi ranks. Often containing more than a dozen drivers waiting on their punters, they offered a chance to gather round the “jar of jam” as a good storyteller was described. They also gave me an opportunity to access the drivers in the taxis, which I did by entering the last car in the row, exiting only when we had reached the front of the line and a passenger arrived. As most people know, if you do not take the first taxi in the taxi rank, this will cause a huge fuss and you will be ejected from the taxi. But in my case wielding the camera clarified my liminal position within

this context and so gave me easy access and license to break these rules. The oddity of the encounter would also reveal whom in the groups of taxi drivers shared dyadic relationships that would otherwise not have been brought forth.

2.8.7. Folklore, Film and Performance

While reflexive filming goes far in constituting the researcher within the research the “filmed folklore” must also be contextualised. Sharon Sherman, an independent filmmaker and folklorist at the University of Oregon, defined *folklore films* as a form combining the goals of recording non-staged events with the goal of providing information about culture focusing on expressive and traditional behaviour.²⁰⁰ Conversely there are also approaches to understand the folklore that exists exclusively on the silver screen. Juwen Zhang defined *filmic folklore* as an imagined folklore or folklore-like performance that is represented, created, or hybridised in fictional film. Taken out of the original context it functions in similar ways to folklore films as Sherman defines them, but often imposes or reinforces cultural stereotypes.²⁰¹

These definitions rely heavily on the dichotomy of staged and non-staged, but where do the boundaries lie? What is authentic, earnest or ironic, what is banal and what is performed or of artistic value? Since the products of documentary film movement, and later direct cinema or cinema vérité, were of dubious empirical value, can the ethnological or folklore film do any better in dealing with these question or even go beyond them? Or is there something in the nature of the technology that prevents this?

The answers put forth here are only a hypothesis but it would suggest that that the meaning of film as a form depends on time, space and cultural context. The professional filmmaking techniques prevailing today are not based

²⁰⁰Sharon R. Sherman, *Documenting Ourselves: Film, Video and Culture* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1998), p. 63.

²⁰¹Juwen Zhang, “Filmic folklore and Chinese Cultural Identity”, *Western Folklore* 64 (2005), 263–280 (p. 267).

on some alleged nature of film but a result of its cultural practice. But at the same time the practice of filming orders its environment in different ways. We react to the lens often in quite structured ways, we perform according to our understanding of the purpose of the filming, and how it serves the producer's/cameraman's interests and our own interests, respectively. In this vein one can approach filming as a subtle practice of force-relationships; an arena where strategies and tactics are played out, to use Certeau's model of cultural practices as reactions evading or countering a strategy of authority. These notions are quite useful in taking into account that the filmed subjects actually have agency in the filming process - something that is often overlooked in the all-to-common naturalistic approach to film.

These are among the theories, notions and considerations that have been applied in my research, for benefit of my fieldwork, its archival preservation and the fuller understanding of how one may research identity performances. Filming something that falls so readily under the concept of cultural heritage involves a certain number of dangerous pitfalls. The irony of filming heritage is that while the purpose may be to keep the subject infinitely "alive" there is something finite about fixing an image to film: these are actions, events and speech never to be fully recovered, which can yet be replayed again and again. In the process of this heritage-making, or elevating performance to a status of cultural heritage, lies the pitfall of closing and metaphorically killing the heritage by recording it in one synchronic, fixed form instead of as process of variation.

In my works I try to accentuate variation as opposed to seeking uniformity. As an example I do not attempt to differentiate which performance of food heritage (in chapters 3 and 4) is more authentic than the other. The narrations therefore form multi-vocal, and sometimes contradictory, representations of current heritage practices. I also attempt reflexive representation - taking into the frame not only myself but other actors within the event. In any edited representation of the fieldwork I also try to be faithful to time sequences as they have developed on-site and to convey the cultural context of the interview

situation – an atmosphere that is sometimes charged and licensed to preserve heritage. In this way I'm seeking the cultural context of the practice of the filmmaking and the folklore-recording event. I am seeking clarity and transparency – admitting my role in this meaning-making process and making it explicit within the film – as well as the force-relationships taking shape in the field. I take into account the agency of my filmed subjects – which can from this perspective be called performers. Only by appreciating the performative value of the filmed subjects can one begin to transcend questions of the staged and the non-staged. Performance, as artistic communication directed towards an audience of some sort, encompasses varying levels of earnestness, irony, gloom or hilarity, which can to some extent be recorded and conveyed through audio-visual recording. The resulting folklore-film therefore becomes a viewpoint and extension on this performance event and a variation in itself.

As discussed above Donald A. MacDonald had the foresight and hope that through film one could capture and convey something beautiful, a functional authenticity shared by the participants within a specific event: a performance of folklore. While I have indeed problematised that venture, I, myself, conversely attempt to convey, perhaps not authenticity, but a sense of performed irony through film. Not just because irony is an elusive but often integral part of oral narrative or any other cultural performance – which can be easily overlooked in folkloric research - but because within my own case studies, irony seems to form the integral part of identity: a shared identity rooted in ironic performances. There in lies the importance of being ironic.

From a methodological and archival standpoint I hold that film is a dynamic yet problematic tool with the potential to thicken and deepen the ethnographical description, preserve its partial image for a period of time, and convey a certain vision of experience and cultural events. It also reveals structures, brings forth performances but suffice to say it prompts responses as any reflexive performer would depend on. But an overemphasis on the need for professional filmmaking competence based on the supposed “nature “of film can

be misleading and detrimental to the research. Film has no nature to speak of. Its practice is varied through its relative cultural contexts. Professional filmmaking, particularly in its contemporary mainstream form, is based on the manipulation of its subject, whether it be an experience or cultural phenomenon, not just in its framing but in its on-site filming. This ordering quality of film can, on the other hand, be made an asset, if it is contextualised and made explicit. But perhaps most importantly film is a limited record of a performance, based on the reflexivity and agency of all participating. In this folkloric sense, ethnological filmmaking and folklore film, is a collaborative performance in itself. It should be approached as such, be it professional or non-professional, within the archive or without.

3. Borealism: Representations of Iceland and the North

The role of produced and distributed images in the presentation of self in everyday life is imminent yet allusive. While most would agree that films, art, tourism, advertisements and international news coverage influence how people view people of a different origin and nationality any generalisation as to how this happens would be suspect. Although context-specific reception studies would lend credibility to such research they can form a mere intellectual exercise rather than an exposition of how identity is negotiated in complicated everyday interaction. While this thesis does not present a reception study (in the strictest sense) of such images it does present a case study on how people, in their everyday lives, *practise* such images. This chapter lays the foundation for such a case study in revealing how images of the North, and exotic representations of Iceland in particular, have been prevailing in transnational discourses.

While the production of literary texts and media images is not the primary focus of my thesis the fact remains that this production is a form of cultural practice. Indeed when it comes to the vernacular cultures of the distant past then images and texts are often, in the absence of archaeology or oral tradition, all that remains. Looking at the representation of the North since Greco-Roman history but particularly on the produced and widespread images of Icelanders this chapter therefore attempts to shed light on the dynamics behind these representations.²⁰² Progressing more or less chronologically through time this chapter will conclude in the midst of contemporary public discourse on the representation of Iceland in a globalised world. But a fuller understanding will then be sought of the dynamics of these representations by elaborating on contemporary discourse among some of those most influential in contemporary

²⁰² To better understand these dynamics I believe one must study a coalescence of personal experience, everyday cultural expression and folkloric contexts from which many of these images emerge. While this, more imagological than ethnographical, chapter does this to some extent the following chapter features such a case study.

representations of Icelanders. These are primarily media professionals and filmmakers as well as policy makers and politicians. This producer-oriented study casts some light on the role of identities and oral and visual narrative of “image-makers” of Icelandic culture (for example writers, film directors) in the production of Borealistic imagery. The main emphasis is however not on the content of professional, commercial or artistic representations but on the interface and intertextuality between these producers, their creative processes and the everyday cultural expression of their surrounding culture. This is therefore not solely a producer-oriented case study but focuses on the folklore of this study group in relation to their identity in its cultural context.

3.1. Iceland and Images of the North

A considerable part of my research relating to the North as an important concept in relation to representations of Icelanders has been informed by my participation in the research project *Iceland and images of the North*. The *INOR* group, as it is called, is an interdisciplinary group of Icelandic and non-Icelandic scholars who have in recent years conducted research on images of Iceland and the North in the present and past with the goal of analyzing the form which these images assume, their function and dynamics. This group includes representatives of most fields of the humanities and social sciences, in many instances individuals who are leading experts in their fields. The research project is lead by principal investigators Sumarliði Ísleifsson of the *Reykjavík Academy*, where many of the participants are based, and Daniel Chartier of the *International Laboratory for the Comparative Multidisciplinary Study of Representations of the North*, based in Québec. The group has also brought about extensive collaboration with research groups and scholars involved in similar projects in neighbouring countries. The project's general objectives may be summed up as follows:

- to elucidate diverse representations of Iceland as part of the North, the function of such images in the present and their historical emergence.
- to study images in general: their nature; different definitions of images as a phenomenon; the functions they serve; and not least their connection with hegemony. Is their role negative, or can they also serve a positive and constructive function? How is the dialectic between self-images and images of alterity configured? To what extent do structural constraints influence the emergence and form of images?
- to study the idea of the North, how it has evolved and changed and what function such ideas serve.
- to promote research in this area of study in Iceland and to incorporate images of Iceland and its closest neighbours into the current theoretical discourse on images and the North.

While only some of these questions will be addressed here they have informed my understanding of the cross-disciplinary research of images or what has been referred to as imagology. This study of images divides the concept into *self-images* and *images of the other*.²⁰³ Within this dichotomy self-image comes into being as a reflection of the other, and for this reason, the concepts are in an interactive relationship with each other. These concepts are also closely related to the pair of concepts *identity/otherness*. In this sense images are manifestations of people's ideas about themselves (identity) and about others (otherness). Research on images of nations and other groups suggest that more often than not national images serve a negative function. One's own environment (the self) is believed to be that which is natural, which is superior to the comparison group (the Other). While the inherent negativity of images will not be argued here I hold that the Other is often viewed as belonging to the

²⁰³ See for example Raymond Corbey and Joep Leerssen , *Alterity, Identity, Image, Selves and Others in Society and Scholarship* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1991)

margin of what is natural or even beyond it.²⁰⁴

Images often have deep historical roots and “form their own sphere of reality, created in an empirically hazy mental landscape where historical facts, rhetoric, legends and intentional or unintentional misunderstandings are mixed in a seemingly chaotic way”.²⁰⁵ Although images can have great longevity, they often change, sometimes very quickly. Sometimes, however, the change is primarily a matter of emphasis: a kind of metamorphosis in which they appear to change but are in fact fundamentally unchanged. Various imagologists have pointed out that it is even possible to define a frame of reference which determines how images come about, develop and are maintained: as “structural constants in the stereotypical imagination.”²⁰⁶ With the help of these “rules”, it is, for instance, possible to explain and to understand why descriptions of different regions may be similar even though the areas themselves are completely different.²⁰⁷

Research on images proceeds from the assumption that ideas about nations and national characteristics are an artificial formation and not “presences behind the self or the other, but changeable products of the ongoing process of constituting a self-image”.²⁰⁸ This, however, does not change the fact that images are a part of people's everyday experience “if they are thought, felt, spoken and written in order to define *the other*”.²⁰⁹ These views are presented in opposition to essentialist ideas about central characteristics of groups and nations which are believed to be inherent to the existence of primordial or innate features of cultural community”.²¹⁰ Overall imagologists do not view statements about national characteristics as an interpretation of a

²⁰⁴ See Said, p. 54.

²⁰⁵ Peter Stadius, *Southern Perspectives on the North: Legends, Stereotypes, Images and Models* (Berlin: Gdansk, 2001), p. 5.

²⁰⁶ Corbey and Leerssen, p. xvi.

²⁰⁷ Corbey and Leerssen, p. 133.

²⁰⁸ Diana Petkova, “Cultural Identity in a Pluralistic World”, *Cultural Identity in an Intercultural Context* (Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä, 2005), p. 17; 44.

²⁰⁹ Stadius, p. 5.

²¹⁰ Petkova, p. 16–17.

reality, but the formulation of an ideal, desired identity. The object is thus not to study “texts” with reference to whether they are “right” or “wrong”: “not in their mimetic pretence but as constructs; to bring to light their underlying power relationships”.²¹¹

Central concepts in postcolonial discussion of attitudes toward “others” include *discourse*, *knowledge* and *power*. This discussion is based on the theories of two pioneers of the late twentieth century, Edward Said and Michel Foucault.²¹² In these theories, it is assumed that texts do not only transmit knowledge but also “create” the reality and traditions that are described and are coloured by the power and domination (superiority and hegemony) of one culture over another. It is a central tenet of these theories “that texts of all kinds, discourse of all kinds, are representations and that representations have great power”.²¹³ It is on this basis that Edward Said developed his discussion of the Orient, i.e., how the West shaped the East for its own convenience and created a whole system of ideas for that purpose.²¹⁴ A precondition for such a system is “a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony”.²¹⁵ A text which is written about exotic phenomena/reality appears, in other words, to describe it, but in reality it is assuming power over it and constructing it on its own terms, often either as “starry-eyed exoticism” or as “wholesale denigration and inferiorization”.²¹⁶

Examining power in representations of Icelanders, whether in text, visual mediums or daily life various ontological distinctions come into play. The binaries of gender (male or female), class and cultural capital (for example high or low culture) are of course central aspects of the intricate power-relations of transnational folkloric encounters. While such dichotomies are questionable

²¹¹ Corbey and Leerssen, p. 129–130.

²¹² See for example Michel Foucault, “Governmentality”, *The Foucault Effect. Studies in Governmentality*, ed. by Graham Burchell et al. London 1991.

²¹³ Sherrill Grace, *Canada and the Idea of North* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), p. xiii.

²¹⁴ Said, p. 3.

²¹⁵ Said, p. 7.

²¹⁶ Corbey and Leerssen, p. 221–222.

ethnographic categories, and often form the basis of prejudice, stereotyping, subjugation and colonization, they are nonetheless a part of historical and contemporary worldviews and experience. Yet another ontological dichotomy, which has not gained deserved attention but is of great importance in this research, is the geographical dichotomy of North and South. As I will demonstrate in this chapter this distinction is a significant one that has characterised and influenced the internal as well as external communication of Icelanders and other groups of people associated with the North.

In describing the cultural practices involved with this distinction I will make use of the term *Borealism*. Originating in the Latin *Borealis* (the North), the term is an appropriation of Edward Said's term *Orientalism* which refers to the ontological and epistemological distinction between East and West.²¹⁷ Said defined the term as a style of thought based on the distinction between "the East" or "the Orient" and "the West" or "Occident". Said dealt chiefly with the literary accounts of a plethora of poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators who had clearly accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point describing the Orient, its people, customs, "mind," and destiny. While acknowledging the inherent injustices and prejudice involved with this style of thought Said did not intend to correct or even compare accounts with "reality": "the phenomenon of Orientalism as I study it here deals principally, not with a correspondence between Orientalism and Orient, but with the internal consistency of Orientalism and its ideas about the Orient, despite or beyond any correspondence, or lack thereof, with a "real" Orientalism."²¹⁸ His study, as are aspects of my own, is therefore in a sense textual or imagological and yet reveals underlying assumptions and power relations.

One may in fact draw many parallels between Orientalism and the discourses of the North. Through a discursive examination exoticism,

²¹⁷ Said, p. 5.

²¹⁸ Said, p. 5.

denigration and inferiorization could arguably be seen as reoccurring practices in the representation of the “Northern fringes” be they the British Isles, Scandinavia, or further North: to Iceland, Greenland and Sapmi (the Sami-populated area ranging from Russia to Norway). Yet the parallel has not been widely drawn to describe these processes. What few mentions of the term are usually dismissive or tentative at best, quickly pointing out that the colonialization of and within the North are in no way equal that of the East. One can find few mentions of the term *Borealism* in the post-colonial sense. The transnational construction of the Nordic nations has also been a peripheral question outside of post-colonial studies. Within political science it is usually used either tentatively or dismissively. Dr. Norbert Götz is associate professor of Political History at the Centre for Nordic Studies, Renvall Institute, University of Helsinki. In answering in what way the outside world has been decisive in the construction of *Norden*, a problematic Scandinavian term used to describe the Nordic region ranging from Greenland to Finland and south to Denmark) but yet a problematic construct, Götz is dismissive of the colonial experience within the Nordic countries:

However, Nordic territories have been colonised solely from within Norden; only for short periods and to a limited extent has Norden been subject to domination and dependency on the outside. Consequently, no experience exists that would nurture a narrative of “Borealism” paralleling that of “Orientalism” (Stadius 2005: 10). On the contrary, there has been a noticeable and profound tendency by the rest of the world to apotheosise Norden; this tendency exaggerates Nordic independence and self-containment in addition to disregarding the fact that core parts of Norden, Denmark in particular, participate in the European heritage of being a colonial power.²¹⁹

²¹⁹ Norbert Götz, “Blue-eyed angels” at the League of Nations: the Genevese construction of Norden”, *Regional Cooperation and International Organizations: Transnational Alignment and*

What Götz, on the other hand, underestimates is the North – South discourse within *Norden*. Albeit that the colonial experience is “limited” in the strictest sense marginal areas within the Nordic countries experience in essence the appropriation of colonised countries. While Iceland is quite a modest counterpart to the gross colonial and post-colonial appropriation of the east in terms of governance, oppression, cultural identity and wealth, marginalism in everyday transnational communication should not be underestimated. In my definition Borealism is the signification, practice and performance of the ontological and epistemological distinction in power between North and South. Whether it should be discussed in post-colonial terms may be debated but without a doubt it is applicable in describing the discrepancies and cross-communication between centres and margins of power. On that basis this thesis supports the term’s validity and application regarding transnational power relations within everyday culture.

Making sense of the image of Iceland is in many ways a study of relations between the centres and margins of power. These power relations reveal the fluctuating agency and appropriation that is the experience of people on the margins of power bases. It is in many cases difficult to discern the images of Iceland as they appear through contemporary media from historical images of the North in general. The concept of the North is full of extremes and ambiguities. As revealed in Peter Davidson's exploration of the concept in art, legend and literature, two opposing ideas of North repeat and contradict each other from antiquity and well into the 19th century. First of all “a place of darkness and dearth, the seat of evil. Or, conversely, [...] a place of austere felicity where virtuous peoples live behind the North wind and are happy.”²²⁰ From savage dystopia to enlightened utopia, the pendulum has swung back and

the Nordic States (New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 25-47 (p. 26).

²²⁰Davidson, p. 21.

forth between the civilised and the wild. Researchers have nonetheless discerned patterns in this dynamic construct, claiming for example that the ancient Greeks, Romans and Christian church associated the North with barbarism while the South was considered the cradle of civilization.

The exotic images of Iceland and its inhabitants are therefore in themselves anything but new. Iceland, as well as other North Atlantic islands, have long been associated with “Ultima Thule” the strange island of the far North depicted as early as 140 BC in Polybius's *Histories*.²²¹ This is only the first known example in a plethora of, often obscure, geographies of the North, an iconography that can be traced back to the ancient inhabitants of the Mediterranean, the antiquity of Homeric poems, ancient Greek tragedy and Greco-Roman geography.²²²

From Iceland's earliest recorded history, and arguably even before its settlement, the barbaric and exotic has also been related to the food culture of this “outermost” northern isle. This seems to be the case even within what we now call the “Nordic” countries where, only a few centuries from the settlement of Iceland, its settlers were ridiculed for their consumption of fatty foods and named the *mörlandar* or fatlanders. In the thirteenth century text *Morkinskinna* the eloquent, yet endearingly crass anti-hero Sneglu Halli called upon himself the wrath of a Norwegian king by spending too much time eating gruel and too little time singing the king's praises.²²³

Imagologists such as Sumarliði Ísleifsson²²⁴ have for example pointed out that the “inhabitants of Scandinavia in particular were often viewed as savages “who for several ages under the names of Danes and Normans, ravaged the

²²¹ Polybius, *Histories*, transl. by Evelyn S. Shuckburgh (London: Macmillan, 1889).

²²² See for example Sumarliði Ísleifsson: *Iceland: Descriptions of Iceland and Icelanders Written by Foreign Writers of Previous Centuries* (Reykjavík: Landsbókasafn Íslands, 2003).

²²³ Ármann Jakobsson, “Food and Images of the North,” in *Images of the North Studia Imagologica*, ed. by Sverrir Jakobsen (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009) pp. 69-81.

²²⁴ Note on patronymics: In the main text, footnotes and bibliography, Icelanders who bare patronymics, rather than family names, are referred to by their full name (in the right order) for example “Sumarliði Ísleifsson” or their given name only: “Sumarliði” (if repeated in main text).

different countries of Europe”.²²⁵ Such ideas about the North are known from around the world; similar ideas are found, for example, in China and Japan. Since ancient times, however, there have also been positive descriptions of the northernmost regions of the earth, not least in connection with the so-called Hyperboreans, who enjoyed life with the blessings of the gods. In addition it was believed that various treasures that people in the South most desired could be found in the Far North that included Greenland, and the northernmost parts of Scandinavia and Russia and in some cases Ireland and later northern Canada. Descriptions of these areas suggest that no civilisation could flourish there and inhabitants were almost inhuman: that they copulated like animals and ate and drank like beasts – even resorting to cannibalism.²²⁶

After the Reformation these roles were in many ways reversed in North European discourse and many saw the light of reason and progress shine brightest in the North. Yet negative images of peripheral areas such as Iceland persisted as can be seen in the 17th travelogue of the Frenchman La Martinière. He writes in an old tradition of describing Icelanders as primitively dressed half-humans dabbling in sorcery in their miserable huts. He describes both sexes as being “very disagreeable persons: they are swarthy, and dress like Norwegians [...] They live by fishing, are very brutal and slovenly, and most of them pretend to necromancy”.²²⁷ Sumarliði Ísleifsson makes the point that the Enlightenment brought an increased interest in the margins of Europe. People began to gather knowledge about these regions, climate, natural history, migration, clothes, language, physiological appearance and diet. Again the exotic, if crass, food image of Iceland is seen to be going strong as suggested by Dutch Captain C.G. Zorgdrager who visited Iceland in 1699.²²⁸ An illustration based on his

²²⁵ Alexander Adam, *A Summary of Geography and History* (Edinburgh: The High School of Edinburgh, 1802), p. 584.

²²⁶ See also Sumarliði Ísleifsson and others in *Images of the North. Studia Imagologica 14* (Amsterdam: Rodopi 2009).

²²⁷ Pierre Martin de La Martinière, “A Voyage to the North of Europe” in *A New Universal Collection of Authentic and Entertaining Voyages and Travels* (London: 1769).

²²⁸ Cornelis Zorgdrager, C. G. Zorgdragers alte und neue Grönländsche Fischerei und

description, and published soon after his visit, depicts a bizarre form of cookery in the north of Iceland where, apparently, a leg of lamb is boiled at the end of a rope in a gushing hot spring. This can be seen as one of the post-Enlightenment explorations of Iceland. Consecutive journeys were also attempts to explore the possibilities of some shared cultural ancestry amongst populations at different areas in the European frontier. One of the goals was to distinguish degrees of European-ness:

Such currents also reached Iceland, and in the wake of this, interest in Icelandic cultural heritage and language increased greatly and attitudes toward Icelanders changed. They came to be viewed as the guardians of the proto-language and ancient culture of Northern peoples. The country became part of the discourse on the most important values of the leading nations of Western Europe. It became a destination for “pilgrimages”, including some made by eminent scholars in Europe and North America in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as William Morris and W.H. Auden. These pilgrims sought what was original and unspoiled by industrialization and big cities and were enchanted by the magnificent nature, endless void, hot springs and volcanoes.²²⁹

3.2. Borealism and early modern nationalism

The appeal of the North, particularly under the influence of Romanticism, had much to do with ideas of freedom, purity and the sublime. It was increasingly seen as progressive, educated, technologically advanced and strong compared

Wallfischfang mit einer kurzen historischen Beschreibung von Grönland, Island, Spissbergen, Nova Zembla, Jan Mayen Eiland, der Strsse Davis u.a. [etc.] (Leipzig: Bei Peter Conrad Monath, 1723)

²²⁹ Sumarliði Ísleifsson, *Iceland and Images of the North* (Reykjavík: ReykjavíkAkademían, 2010) (forthcoming).

to what was increasingly seen as a reactionary, uneducated and inconsistent south. Race typologies within the late 19th and early 20th century only solidified these ideas of superiority. The Romantic and Nationalistic period preceding Icelandic sovereignty in 1918 have had a major effect on the Icelandic national image and identity. These images and myths revolve around nature, cultural purity and uniqueness and “masculinity-related” themes. They include what we may call the Viking-myth and the widespread Icelandic image of a wild and exotic countryside along with a hardworking and strong people.²³⁰

The themes of purity, nature and uniqueness were prominent in arguments for independence. In the late 19th and early 20th century the Icelandic nation, with intellectuals and poets in the forefront, started to develop arguments to justify their demand for independence from the Kingdom of Denmark. The Icelandic language was presented as the mother tongue of other Nordic languages and the Icelandic Sagas were represented as the one of the main foundations for the whole European literary tradition.

The emphasis on language and culture, according to Icelandic historian Guðmundur Hálfðánarson, were always well received by the Danes - they were at the time quite familiar with the German nationalistic ideologies of Herder, Fichte and Kant. On the other hand, they were rarely aware of the wonders of Icelandic nature. Additionally, in Hálfðánarson's opinion, the Icelandic nation has always been rather divided in their views on nature. In the views reflected in the writings of the poets, intellectuals and politicians of the time there seem to be

²³⁰ On the Viking myth and its modern representation see Katla Kjartansdóttir, “Remote Rough and Romantic: Contemporary Images of Iceland in Visual, Oral and Textual Narrations,” in *Images of the North, Studia Imagologica* 14. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008) pp. 271-280; Katla Kjartansdóttir and Kristinn Schram, “Re-Negotiating Identity in the National Museum of Iceland”. *Scandinavian Museums and Cultural Diversity* (London: UNESCO/Museum of London, 2008) pp. 221-230.

For more general sources on the impact of Romanticism and Nationalism on Icelandic national identity see Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, *Hinn sanni Íslendingur: Þjóðerni, kyngervi og vald á Íslandi 1900-1930*. (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2004); Gísli Sigurðsson, “Icelandic national identity: From romanticism to tourism”. In *Making Europe in Nordic contexts*, ed. by Pertti J Anttonen (Turku: NIF Publications, 1996); Guðmundur Hálfðánarson, *Íslenska þjóðríkið - uppruni og endimörk*. (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag og Reykjavíkúakademían, 2001).

two quite opposite points of emphasis. On one hand there were those who wanted to preserve as much of the Icelandic nature as possible and thus marvelled at all the natural wonders phrased in highly romantic terms. On the other hand, there were those who wanted to make use of nature to build up the country's economy. Often you could find these two, in a sense opposing, views reflected by the same man and this self-contradictory view is apparent even to this day.

According to Hálfðánarson the main change, in relation to the nationalist discourse, is that the major contemporary emphasis is now on nature, both with regards to economy and preservation, with a lesser focus on language or cultural heritage. This development, he argues, can be explained by the fact that the Icelandic nature can very easily be seen as a unifying symbol. A symbol that the whole nation should be able to relate to in one way or the other and the task of preserving it serves well as a unifying element. Environmentalists frequently use nationalistic quotes from the Romantic period while their opponents often use similar statements to support their arguments. So although the general Icelandic view on nature, as elsewhere, has shifted towards preservation it is quite unique, as Hálfðánarson points out, that the Icelandic environmental discourse is still in many ways affected by romantic nationalist ideas.

While Iceland's nationalistic movement rode the waves of these more empowering images, it is nonetheless clear that the hetero-images of the primitive North persisted, even among Iceland's Nordic neighbours. A largely successful nationalistic movement, nationhood was claimed on the bases of an ancient literary culture, language and historical identity (see Guðmundur Hálfðánarson 2001; Gunnar Karlsson 1995). The interconnectedness of the nation to the land and the supposed "purity" of its language were also regularly stressed and later encapsulated in a sonnet beginning: "Land, nation and language, a trinity pure and true" (Snorri Hjartarson 1952; see also Gísli Sigurðsson 1999:42-48).

While this process was well under way on the eve of the 20th century, the

Copenhagen-based Icelandic intelligentsia nonetheless found itself grossly offended. The offence had come in an announcement in 1904 that Icelanders, hitherto enjoying a status they considered somewhat higher than that of Danish colonial subjects, were to be exhibited alongside them in the “Dansk Koloniudstilling”, a Danish Colonial Exhibition to be held in the Tivoli amusement park in Copenhagen a year later. Tivoli exhibitions such as these were a Nordic offshoot of a long tradition of “world fairs”, involving the gross objectification and detrimental treatment of “the other”, usually colonial subjects or indigenous populations of the “new world”, represented with artefacts and animals. Each race was placed on the scale from the wild to the most civilized, underlining where they seemed to fit on the scale of evolution. The Caucasian was furthermore the standard against which other races were to be measured. The hegemonic character of these fairs are evident in how they naturalised colonial dominance by separating the civilized “us” from the exotic and primitive “other” (see Said 1978; Greenblatt 1991 on aspects of Nordic Orientalism see for example Oxfeldt 2005).

Judging from the flurry of angry protest this hegemony was not lost on the Icelanders. The ensuing debate on the prospect was published in the Danish press. While they themselves evidently had no protests against the treatment of “the others” on exhibition, they were furious at the prospect of being seen as on a par with “negro ladies and Eskimos”²³¹, as one Icelandic commentator put it. In a special statement, the Icelandic Student Association, made a clear distinction between the category of *cultural nations* (*Kulturnationer*) to which Iceland belonged and the primitive *nature folk* (*Naturfolk*). In his thorough analysis of this debate Jón Yngvi Jóhannsson points out that the Icelanders had no problem with the objectification of these alleged “nature folk”. Furthermore: “they never expressed any doubt as to there being a defining line between culture and savagery, between us and them. The debate revolved around which

²³¹ Vilhjálmur Finsen, *Hvað landinn sagði erlendis* (Norðri: Akureyri, 1958), 12.

side Iceland belonged on, how developed Icelandic nationality was”.²³² The overt use of this dichotomy reveals with unsettling clarity a facet of Icelandic self-image at the time of rising Icelandic nationalism. It also reveals an image within Denmark, of Iceland as an exotic colony on the northern periphery. But being well acquainted with the discourses of nationalism and colonialism, these Icelanders (not quite “abroad” being subjects to the Danish king) had caught on and were not about to be “othered”.

3.3. Contemporary Exoticism

These representations, and the reactions to them are quite interesting when juxtaposed with the emergent exoticism in contemporary media a century later. To this day an exotic image of Icelanders is perpetuated, and increasingly so, through the medium of books of photography and film. An archaic, bearded and weatherworn farmer in rustic garb sees the last of his sheep; burly seal hunters draw their prey from the midst of a menacing sea; sullen fleece-clad Icelanders with “Nordic” features stand defiantly in adverse weather amid barren landscapes; wool-clad ancients explore the boundaries of past and present, nature and the supernatural. These are among the images of Icelanders represented through contemporary mediums, literature, film and art in recent years.

But these images of course did come out of a vacuum. As Sumarliði Ísleifsson has pointed out a changed attitude toward Iceland as the Other had a profound influence on the self-image of Icelanders in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries:

Roughly speaking, it may be said that Icelandic leaders adopted the attitudes of the outside world as their own, both in relation to nature and

²³² [I translate:] “Þeir draga aldrei í efa línuna á milli siðmenningar og villimennsku, milli okkar og hinna. Deilan snýst um það hvar Ísland eigi heima, hversu þróað íslenskt þjóðerni sé” Jón Ingvi Jóhannsson, *Þjóðerni í þúsund ár?* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan 2003) pp. 135-151 (p.140).

to society, but at the same time, the outside world opened its doors to Icelandic viewpoints. These views formed the basis for Icelanders' insistence that they had a right to existence as an independent nation and a central argument in the struggle for independence. This self-image remained largely unchanged for decades despite tremendous changes in society; it might be said that the Icelandic struggle for independence lasted all the way until the 1970s. According to this conception, Iceland's position in the world was clear, and it was also clear with which countries it had the most in common, in general and in the North.²³³

The Icelandic historian Sigríður Matthíasdóttir has described how Icelandic nationalism was redefined and reshaped in the period of 1900-1930 establishing two important aspects of the 20th century nationalist myth – homogeneity and connections to the past. The Icelandic nationalist movement promoted, according to Sigríður:

First the cultural understanding that the nation, based on the national language, resembles a living organism, a national person with one identity, one will and the same interests applying to each and every Icelander. Second, an historical understanding where a national Golden-Age is constructed as the primary model for the modern nation-state.²³⁴

What can also be traced back to the myth of the Golden Age and the heritage of the Sagas is the Viking image, a well-known and much used theme within Icelandic tourism and a prominent, albeit contested, part of official administrative policy. An ongoing debate between Icelandic scholars and the tourist industry has focused on the term “Viking” and its use in describing the Icelandic settlers, something many think both crass and erroneous. When the Icelandic National

²³³ Sumarliði Ísleifsson (2010).

²³⁴ Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, p. 372.

Museum was re-opened in September 2004, for example, there was much debate about whether a giant replica of a Viking sword should be erected on a nearby square. While this idea did not gain sufficient support a so-called “Viking Village” operated (notably without state support) for many years in Hafnarfjörður, a small town in the outskirts of the Reykjavík area, where people can experience “Viking” festivals and various other “Viking” events. Recently the Minister of Education has announced the establishment of a new “Viking village”, now with state funding, conveniently positioned near to Iceland's sole international airport.

The Icelandic president, Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, has also recently emphasised the importance of the Viking heritage. In a speech that he held in a public meeting of historians on the 10th of January 2006, the president attempted to explain why a group of Icelandic businessmen, sometimes called “new Icelandic Vikings”, have been so successful in their investments abroad.²³⁵ In his speech the president noted ten characteristics and qualities of the businessman as the primary reasons for their success. According to him, all these traits could be traced back to Icelandic cultural heritage, the foundations of Icelandic society or simply the “true” nature of Icelandic national identity. These were characteristics such as the trust and courage of “our forefathers” the Vikings, along with various other so-called “especially Icelandic” elements. He went on to say that “the Icelandic settlers were certainly a part of the whole Viking community that indeed had a similar spirit of looking outward for new opportunities”. Along similar lines he emphasised that “it was not least through the stories of these people that a shared sense of Icelandic national identity was created and thus during the struggles for national independence this particular period was given a somewhat idyllic glow.”

Defining a whole generation of settlers by the raiding and pillaging from which the few actual Vikings took their name is, at best, contentious. Defining all

²³⁵ Pres. Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, “Icelandic Ventures”, *Lecture by the President of Iceland Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson in the Series of Lectures presented by the Icelandic Historians Society. 10 January 2006* <http://www.forseti.is/media/files/06.01.10.Sagnfrfel.utras.enska.pdf> [accessed 31. May 2010)

of the settlers' ancestors by this term and its connoted attributes is something else entirely. Here we are dealing with collective memory, or *the creation* of collective memory as the president himself alluded to: "It is this *collective* experience that has created *our* thought and attitudes and that has given *us* a great advance to seize the various new opportunities of the global era." We are therefore to understand, in a very Herderian sense, that the reasons for the great success of a few Icelandic businessmen abroad are mainly to be found in the nature of the Icelandic past and in the lifestyle of "our forefathers" the Vikings. The president rounded off by saying that "the *key* to this success is mainly to be found in the culture, in the *collective* heritage and in the nature of the society that has been formed by the struggles of preceding generations, their views and their traditions, which are at the core of Icelandic civilization."

Relating this speech to the social and cultural formation of Icelandic identity in the public sphere, little seems to have changed since the late 19th and early 20th century. The same traditional themes and threads are repeatedly revived in order to fuse a collective sense of cultural continuity and cohesion. These themes can be traced back to the exclusive ideology of Herder and Fichte and their emphasis on nature, the language and cultural heritage as an inherent parts the national soul. Consequently this ideology inherently downplays the visibility and values of cultural diversity that ought to be taken into account when coming to grips with contemporary Iceland.

Yet contemporary Iceland is, as a result of the upheaval of recent decades, a very changed place. As the INOR research project has stressed, the images of Iceland and of the North are not stable and unchanging: "North is multiple, shifting and elastic; it is a *process*, not an eternal fixed goal or condition" (Grace, 16), as the Canadian scholar Sherrill Grace writes in relation to her research on Northern Canada. These words also apply to Iceland, and the great changes that have taken place there. To say the least of its most recent economic boom and bust the country has for example lost its status as one of the most important areas in the world in military terms, a status it had held for half a century, and it

is now generally regarded as having little military significance. Climate change also alters the face of the North and lifestyles there, in addition to which, new priorities emerge when the distinctive characteristics of the region are threatened. At the same time collaboration among the Nordic countries and attitudes toward it have changed following the expansion of the European Union. Globalization has opened the doors to foreign labour, and large foreign corporations have made their presence felt. Here in Iceland, controversy about these issues has appeared in many forms, for instance, in relation to environmental issues, foreign policy, official national images, immigration issues and publicity issues in the travel industry. However, deep-rooted self-images based on the images of the independence movement have long held their ground.²³⁶

National representations within Iceland have indeed, through most of the 20th century, also focused on modernization but did not yield in its references to deep-rooted literary culture and saga-cultivated landscape. To take a few examples, photo subtexts often underline the connections between a given landscape and “history of the much romanticised Commonwealth or Saga Age, the period in which most of the Icelandic Sagas take place. So-called “pearls of nature” are a reoccurring theme on postcards, art and tourist literature, also featuring *söguslóðir*: the places of the Sagas. The pearls are alternatively the vast “untouched” wilderness of the highland interior considered, by many Icelanders, as their common land and responsibility.²³⁷ Indeed Sunday television broadcasts always ended with a showcase of the most “national” of Icelandic landscapes” with a soundtrack of the national anthem. Some people even regarded it as improper to turn off the television before the anthem had played out. This Herdian emphasis on the inter-dependency of nature and culture is an still dominating feature in the representation of Icelanders whether we come across it in a presidential address to the nation or in a magazine interview with

²³⁶ Sumarliði Ísleifsson (2010).

²³⁷ Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson “Fjallmyndin: sjónarhorn íslenskra landsagsljósmynda,” *Ímynd Íslands* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1994).

the musical artist Björk. Images of the primitive survival of the Icelandic nation in a harsh and barren land, simultaneously preserving an ancient culture of language and literature, is commonly conjured up as a means of getting to the heart of what being an Icelander is. Nature, and those who are seen as living in close contact with it, have nonetheless been increasingly presented in a more primal and even ironic light.

Examples of this abound in visual images, especially in advertisements, film and art, centring on and manipulating an iconography of rugged Northerness. The idea that photos indeed can represent Iceland seems to be accepted. This at least suggested by the Icelandic Photopress Society that has in recent years awarded the most *þjóðleg* or “national” photo that tends to favour motifs including old farmers or displays of ruggedness in a cold climate. Awarded with this title in 2006 is a photo of elderly man sitting outside a steam bath surrounded by snow. In 2005 the motif was Icelanders bathing in the freezing sea and in 2004 a photo by Ragnar Axelsson, one of Iceland’s leading photojournalists, was awarded the title for a depiction of the sole remaining farmer of a valley in Westfjords, as his last sheep are taken to slaughter. The jury’s appraisal was as follows: “The Icelandic sheep, a farm, steep slopes, rough landscape, dark clouds and farmers who have lived in close communion with harsh natural forces. Can it be more Icelandic?”²³⁸

Representations, such as two recent books/exhibitions, *Icelanders*²³⁹ and *Faces of the North*²⁴⁰, directly evoke images of a characteristically sub-arctic culture, concentrating on those who allegedly have not fully crossed the threshold of modernity. In the latter a leading Icelandic photographer, Ragnar Axelsson, does just what so infuriated the Copenhagen-based Icelanders a century before, by juxtaposing Iceland with Greenland as well as the Faroe

²³⁸ Icelandic Photopress Society Website <<http://pressphoto.is/myndir-arsins>> [accessed March 31 2010]. See also *Bæjarins besta* online edition, <http://www.bb.is/Pages/26?NewsID=51372>, [accessed March 31 2010].

²³⁹ Sigurgeir Sigurjónsson and Unnur Þóra Jökulsdóttir, *Icelanders* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2004).

²⁴⁰ Ragnar Axelsson, *Faces of the North* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2004).

Islands. A common trend in these images is the emphasis on people in the midst of a challenging and cold climate silhouetted against a rugged and barren Icelandic wilderness. This is a contrast to the more subtle aesthetics and sublime representations of landscapes in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

To better understand the production of these images I interviewed Unnur Jökulsdóttir, the co-author of the photo-essay book and exhibition *Icelanders*. Already a best seller and translated into many languages the photos of *Icelanders* were prominently exhibited in an area adjacent to the Icelandic parliament. Partly a travel narrative and partly an exposition of rural people in various parts of the country the working title of the book, *Portrait of a Nation*, reveals its guiding principle. The authors sought to represent Icelanders, and “capture the core of the nation” through persons who lived “disappearing lifestyles”. The group of informants/models chosen was entirely made up of people who lived, at least partially, in rural areas. The selection process was dynamic, relying on snowballing (going from one to the other) and without any particular pre-made questions. Based on conversations meant to “get to the heart” of each person the informants were carefully positioned, firstly in the comfort of their home with their personal belongings, and then in their rural surroundings. Judging by Unnur’s response in the interview the urban aspects of the nation, let alone an urban “core”, had never occurred to the authors until their work was done:

Then afterwards we realised that we had left out people in the city and that we had focused on the countryside. But in the end we were happy with that. Some said: you have been chasing the strange and unusual but we don’t think that after you have gotten to know the people we were talking to. They were just different (laughs). Or it’s influenced by the region they live in and isn’t necessarily strange. But of course many people are very strange just as you and I.

([I translate:] En síðan áttuðum við okkur á því að við höfðum algjörlega skilið útanand fólkið í borginni og bara einbeitt okkur að landsbyggðinni. Og vorum alveg sátt við það

þegar upp var staðið. Sumir sögðu nátturlega að þið eruð búin að vera elta uppi það skrítna og óvenjulega en manni bara finnst það ekki eftir að maður er búin að kynna fólkinu sem maður var að tala við. Það er bara öðruvísi. Það bara ber keim af þeim landssvæðum sem býr á en er ekkert endilega skrítið. En náttúrulega er margt af því stórskrítið bara eins og ég og þú.)

Here Unnur, in defence of her assumed exotic representation of rural life, expresses a somewhat ironic disposition towards her subject: while she claims that an acquired familiarity with her models negates their alleged rural eccentricity she simultaneously embraces their strangeness. She further qualifies this by the reflexive statement that “we” are all strange from a certain perspective. Despite this awareness of the author a rural-urban dichotomy is very present in the book where the “close connection to nature” is set forth as national feature lacking in the lives of inhabitants of the city. Unnur expresses the same view on spirituality in terms of the rural and the urban. She remarks on the ability to sense the supernatural in nature as something thought to be diminishing among those that live in the city. She takes the *hidden people* as an example and voices what she believes is a prevailing “urban” view on the matter:

It existed once (a drawn out sceptical tonation). Our grandfathers and grandmothers knew about this and believed it but that’s somehow stopped.” But these people out in the countryside, that somehow cohabit with the hidden people today, that tells us , you see, that people in the city don’t have time to see this. Because we are never, for long periods of time, in communion with nature. We may go to the countryside but we’re in cars at a 100km/ph. We briefly get out sheltered in outdoor clothing and hiking boots. We don’t take the time to go out into the nature and sense and see what is there to be seen.

([I translate] Þetta var til. Afar okkar og ömmur vissu um þetta og trúðu á þetta en nú er þetta einhvernveginn hætt.” En þetta fólk út á landi það segir að, sem að lifir einhvernveginn með huldufólki í dag, það segir, sko, að við fólkið í borginni megum ekki vera að því að sjá þetta. Af því að við erum aldrei í tengslum langtímum saman við

náttúruna. Við förum kannski út á land en erum þá inni bílum á 100 km hraða. Við rétt skreppum út í skjólfötunum og gönguskónum. Við gefum okkar ekki tíma til að fara út í náttúruna og skynja og sjá það sem þar er að sjá.)

Unnur seems therefore to have built her work on the familiar pillars of romantic Icelandic nationalism in a Borealistic vein: one that exults an intimate, if not primal, relationship with nature; the rural; folk belief; and past generations. But yet this is a reflexive national identity that exhibits a subjectivity and awareness of transnational perspectives. The “tourist gaze” of the outside world is all-pervading in the production of the book. The authors meant to publish the book in a number of languages from the beginning. The final title of the book, *Icelanders*, also reflects the transnational aspect of the publication. Unnur’s ideas on a title had developed into the more locally understood and artistic title, *Vísitasía* or *Visitation*, referring to regular visits paid by priests and bishops to rural areas. But, for marketing reasons, the title *Icelanders* was decided upon in the final stages of publication. It was in fact the layout designer that came up with the title. At the time Unnur was against this change and found *Icelanders* to be too definitive, strong and far reaching a title. But eventually Unnur put her trust in this “professional” decision: “The layout artist was market-educated and was surely right. It was a sellable title and a title, she said, should contain what the book is about. But I thought this was a very strong title and far-reaching. “Icelanders”, as if it were the final say in the matter. But it worked and the book has sold really well.”²⁴¹

Furthermore Unnur describes her main drive in writing the book as deriving from her transnational experiences - which are considerable. During her twelve years as an expatriate Unnur spent five years sailing around the world as well as living in Australia and travelling throughout Asia. Unnur states that she

²⁴¹ “[I translate:] En útlitshönnuðurinn er svona markaðslærður og hafði örugglega rétt fyrir sér. Þetta var söluvænlegur titill og titill á, sagði hún, á að innibera það sem bókin er um. Og mér fannst þetta svona ofsalega sterkur titill og mikill, héti bara Íslendingar eins og það væri bara afgreitt mál í þessari bók. En hann hefur allavega reynt vel því að bókin hefur selst mjög vel.”

feels her “wandering and encounters with exotic nations have in some way inspired my interest and desire to understand us, to understand one nation to the core. To understand the core of Icelanders; what it is to be an Icelander. Not that I can answer it in a few sentences but maybe with a book like this – a little bit.”²⁴²

The interview with Unnur Jökulsdóttir on the whole suggests that the production of commercial ethnocentric artwork should be looked at as a complicated negotiation between personal artistic expression, folklore and market-focused decisions. Unnur expressed a highly emotive and apparently earnest national identity focused on nature and an interrelationship with it, as well as with a sense of spirituality and connection with rustic agricultural life. But the reflexive and sometimes ironic element must also be understood. Fishing for answers to this question I asked her if any of her informants had expressed a sense of self-irony about their own eccentricity or rural life. Unnur replied that this was not uncommon among middle-aged people who had made an informed decision to live in the country and had even lived in the city or abroad for some time: “They sometimes had a certain humorous view on their own eccentricity; that they were not city people; that they shut down when in the city and felt bad after two days there. Some said this earnestly while others with a sense of self-humour.”²⁴³ Unnur therefore not only shared a sense of the rural-urban and transnational reflexivity with some of her informants but discerned carefully which eccentricities were ironic or earnest.

²⁴² “[I translate:] Og mér finnst stundum eins og allt þetta flakk og öll þessi kynni við framandi þjóðir hafi á einhvern hátt ýtt undir áhuga minn og þrá mina við að skilja okkur, skilja einhverja eina þjóð ofan í grunninn. Að skilja það hvað er kjarninn í Íslendingum; hvað er það að vera Íslendingur. Ekki það að ég geti svarað því í nokkrum setningum en kannski með svona bók – þínu lítið.”

²⁴³ “[I translate:] Það gat haft svolítið húnóríska sýn á hvað það væri sérlundað og; hvað það væri ekki borgarbúar; talað um að það færi í baklás í borginni og liði illa eftir tvo sólarhringa þar. Það bæði sagt það í einlægni og kannski aðrir í einhverjum sjálfshumor. En sumar meintu það bara innilega frá hjartanu.”

3.4. Ironic Borealism

Can it be that romantic nationalism must be qualified with irony in today's global culture? Is this reflected, for example, in the increase in ironic presentations of the nation in the contemporary mediums?²⁴⁴ The Icelandic language, nature and culture, the holy trinity of the Icelandic identity, can no longer be presented as pure and unique as it perhaps once was believed to be. There is an emerging ironic accent on eccentricity in rural culture. Recent examples may be found in an advertisement campaign for fleece clothing depicting Icelanders against the backdrop of desolate landscapes and small towns across the country. The 66° North advertising campaign by Jónsson & Le'macks (photography by Ari Magnússon) has been ongoing since 2004. Their interchangeable Icelandic and English texts, rather than referring to sagas, often contain ironic messages which refers to a remote airport: "Welcome to Kaldárbotnsflugvöllur, only one of many airports in Iceland. Expect delays"²⁴⁵. In a statement from the advertising agency it is stated that these advertisements are meant to create the company's unique profile as part of Icelandic history and the national spirit or "þjóðarsál" – a common concept in everyday speech. Their slogan "Dress well", is said to have "obvious references to the past and is above all very Icelandic. The advertisements show Icelanders in a cold, almost hostile environment. And there is much drama in the facial expressions as well as in the landscape."²⁴⁶

Commonly these eccentricities are ironically expressed through traditional Icelandic food. An interesting example of this is an advertisement for *Icelandair* (the major Icelandic airline): a group of French businessmen are interrupted by their boss, while enjoying some Icelandic dried fish after a meeting with an Icelandic business associate. The Icelandic is though nowhere to be seen,

²⁴⁴ Examples of this can be drawn from various advertisements such as the Icelandic *Thule* beer advertisements parodying overblown Icelandic national pride or the 66° North advertisement campaign which accentuates humorous rural eccentricity.

²⁴⁵ The 66° North campaign of 2004 and 2005 by Jónsson & Le'macks. Photography by Ari Magnússon.

²⁴⁶ The Jónsson & Le'macks website <<http://www.jl.is/verkefni/nr/8>> [accessed 2.2006]

having left with one of the frequent evening flights. He has apparently closed the deal and left a whiff of dried fish in the air, to the disgust and dismay of a late-coming French business executive. He is dismayed, not because of the fine print in the contract, but because of the exotic odour of dried fish in the air – an attack on the senses within the sterile office space.

The internationalism, irony, and stylish posturing could perhaps be related to an edgy, modern and “cool” image of Icelanders spearheaded by business ventures abroad (such as *Icelandair's* promotion of Reykjavík nightlife or the *Laundromat* café in Copenhagen) and film directors (see for example Baltasar Kormákur's depiction of downtown life in *101 Reykjavík*). The Icelandic art world has also long been preoccupied with the eccentric image of Iceland. Birgir Andrússon, for example, reflects on the eccentricity of Icelandic identity, nature, tradition and folklore with old objects, texts and photographs as a source. Among his exhibitions is an assortment of old photographs of famed town drunks and vagabonds, which can indeed be considered “odd characters”.²⁴⁷

Icelandic artists have also, on a grand scale and on an international level, incorporated Icelandic folklore and national image into their artwork. Often it is difficult to discern irony and earnestness in these exhibitions although one could expect a “mixed bag”. An example of this is Steingrímur Eyfjörð's Exhibition at the Venice Biennale 2007 entitled “Lóan er komin / The Golden Plover Has Arrived”. While the exhibition is put across in the Biennale catalogue as a deconstruction of prevailing interpretations of the creation of modernity in Iceland then various supernatural aspects of Eyfjörð's work centred on the Icelandic folk belief. This involved the purchase, through a medium, of an invisible elf sheep for the exhibition's central work *The Sheep Pen*. While this reflects to an extent the artist's reported interest in the function of consciousness in the construction of physical reality it also plays on the image of the nation in a transnational context.

²⁴⁷ Exhibited at the Hoffmans Gallery, The Reykjavík Academy.

3.5. *Filmic Borealism*

One of the chief exporters of these exotic representations are Icelandic films. Indeed the craft and social worlds of advertisement, art and film are closely related. Professionals move regularly between the fields. Artists, professional filmmakers and advertisers, in their everyday occupational context, can, in the Dundesian understanding, in fact be studied as a folk group as they share common factors that create a sense of collective identity.²⁴⁸ Those common factors include subject matter, occupational traditions and narratives (such as those shared on a film set). Their products can in turn reflect both their individual world as well as the communal artistic and folkloric worldview of their folk group. Furthermore nationality can figure strongly into both their folkloric communication as well as their products themselves. Films, even more than artwork, is often presented in a national light prompting such concepts as *national cinema*.

Before entering the obscure paths of film in a national context a general theory in how, if at all, films actually reflect nations, must be briefly discussed. It is a common enough view that people reflect on themselves through texts such as novels, television programs and films. Indeed many governmental institutions spend great sums of money on “indigenous” production based on the notion that a nation's sustainability, its language and culture, depends on its ability to look upon itself in a “national cinema’.²⁴⁹ It is also a commonly held view that films are cultural products that form and exhibit certain national identities. Yet, in recent literature on the subject one may get the impression that “national cinema” is an arbitrary term, a remnant of dated nationalistic discourse, no

²⁴⁸ Alan Dundes, “What is Folklore?”, *the Study of Folklore* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965), p. 2.

²⁴⁹The former Icelandic minister of education Vilhjálmur Hjálmarsson received the 2005 honorary *Edda* (the Icelandic equivalent of the BAFTA or Oscar) for acknowledging film as an art form and for establishing a film fund.

longer useful in the analysis of film in a time of rapid international, cultural and economic exchange. Looking more closely at this literature one realises the disparities in how the concept of national cinema is acquired and how it has changed in tune with recent “developments” such as globalization and trends in nationalistic discourse. An examination of the concept can lead to a deeper understanding of the relationship between film and national identity.

From the beginnings of film theory, surprisingly as early as 1900, the discourse of film “histories” had already become nationalistic and the familiar dualism of national cinema and Hollywood is evident in France of the 1920’s where calls were being made for a “truly national cinema as a defence against the American hegemony.”²⁵⁰ From these times the discussion of national cinema was raised on the basis of difference from “the other”. This notion may be based on the meaning (of course only one of many definitions) of “nation” in the concept of nation as identity. The function being that nationhood gives people a secure sense of identity in relation to “the other”. The problematic of such concepts of nation are many and arise in part because the subject viewing the “other” (the “us”) is often a contradictory and imagined unified collectivity.²⁵¹

The way in which a film may relate to this collectivity, in effect a nation, is, on the other hand, ambiguous and gives rise to many questions. Even in its most basic sense, that of territorial boundaries, national cinema poses conceptual difficulties. This approach refers to national cinema as an indigenous product or one that is produced within the nation state. But even before today’s increasing globalisation, production companies have cut cost by filming in different parts of the world. Many *Westerns*, an often nationalistic historical icon of the American frontier, are quite often shot outside of the USA. The Spaghetti Western, widely acknowledged as Italian, features famous American and international actors and were furthermore often shot in Spain. Looking beyond shooting location one may centre on the nationality of the production company

²⁵⁰Susan Hayward, “Questions of National Cinema”, *National Identity*, ed. by Keith Cameron, (Exeter: Intellect Books, 1999) pp. 92–106 (p. 95).

²⁵¹Hayward, p. 95.

or studio that in effect has the rights to the film. But determining ownership over a film in terms of nationality poses difficulties in cases of co-production. Co-production strategies whether between nations or corporations have been in use since the 1920's but recently regional co-production has become a popular strategy in competing with Hollywood. Indeed if this is a disqualifier there would hardly be any Icelandic cinema whereas the Icelandic Film Centre favours those grant applications that have external funding – which is mainly from abroad. Also corporations are increasingly multinational (or could one say “anational”), investing across borders and exchanging hands frequently, which leaves little room for national significance. These two aspects of the territorial approach leave us, to put it mildly, with a faulty concept of national cinema.

An alternative approach to the concept focuses on its function within a nation state. This approach identifies instances of national cinema based on what a film embodies at the level of text and the function of this text in society. Thus national cinema can be seen as reflecting the national identity of the nation. Although this is a diverse approach it has two main challenges. One, what has been called the anti-essentialist challenge argues in its most extreme standpoint that there is no national culture independent of texts, constructions and competing representations. Two, the reception challenge which denies a predictable homogenous experience by any audience. Although the functional approach may be defended from these challenges (by disclaiming homogeneity and modernist standards) they do point out the danger of assigning national identity to films without giving due consideration to differing theories of nation and heterogeneous reception.

Speaking from the perspective of Film Studies Jinhee Choi finds use in the functional approach but also criticises its limits on the filmic category of national cinema. She offers what she calls the relational account that focuses on how a national cinema differs from Hollywood cinema and other national cinemas. Choi therefore permanently situates national cinema in its historical context. A relational approach therefore does not conceive of national cinema as

a means to an end: i.e., a vehicle to embody national identity or cultural heritage. A national cinema's association with its national history or heritage is only one of the many ways in which national cinema can assert itself. Choi puts emphasis on the scope of the term dividing it into a supra-category, which encompass both nation-bound and transnational practices and the sub-category which is formed when combined with other filmic categories such as genre or filmic mode (for example Hong Kong Gangster Noir, Italian Westerns).

With regards to national identity Choi proposes the use of philosophical terms *prototype* and *exemplar*. A prototype is a set of typical features that characterise a category. (Bachelor not as “unmarried man” but as “afraid of commitment”, “loves to party”, “is into sports”). Typical features of national cinema, unlike defining features, can vary between national cinemas but include the mode of production, film style, narrative structure or theme, and film genre. New Iranian cinema shares certain characteristics at the level of narrative, (for example a minimalist plot structure based on children pursuing trivial goals). Hong Kong cinema is often associated with specific film genres such as martial arts. Exemplars, on the other hand, are individual instances of a category (not *vehicle* but *bicycle*, *car* or *bus*. Exemplars are often used to determine the membership of an object by comparing it with sets of examples in memory. When viewing national cinema as supra-category viewers may characterise the film in light of a limited number of other films (exemplars) they have come across in the same vein.

These terms are therefore helpful in enabling us to explain how national cinema can function both as a supra-category, loosely associated with a nation state and a subcategory, when combined with a genre, a film movement, or a phenomenon. They also function to help us avoid the pitfalls of restricting the value of national cinema to a vehicle for exemplifying national identity. Choi's conclusions as to the relation between film and nation is that knowledge of the cultural heritage of a nation state can help us to understand the compositional/transtextual motivations of a film and can also influence artistic

motivation. But the relation between film and national identity are contingent and one of probability but not of essence. National and local identity figure in the understanding of cinema but in an indirect and sometimes abstract way: “National cinema does not reflect or reveal an “essence” of nationality or its culture. Rather, the latter provides the former with ingredients to explore.”²⁵²

Although a potentially useful approach, which escapes the false dichotomy of national and transnational cinema, the relational account is perhaps uncomfortably and unnecessarily based on a dichotomy of Hollywood versus national cinema. In her “article” “Questions of National Cinema” Susan Hayward rejects such fundamental approaches of difference in her attempt at “mapping” and conceptualising national cinema. National cinemas as she explains, may be based in difference and unity but because there is no single national cinema but rather a plurality of cinemas that make up the national product, national cinemas are also based in the concept of pluralism (something nationalism often tries to conceal): “Thus to go down the route (of difference and unity) exclusively is too limiting and other ways have to be found to resolve how to enunciate a national cinema.” She introduces a set of typologies that would enable discourse and enunciation of the ever changing “national” in cinema. Of these six typologies: narratives, genres, codes and conventions, gesturality and morphology, the star as sign and finally cinema of the centre and cinema of the periphery, it is narrative that is most relevant to the focus of thesis and namely the expression of identity through narrative.

In this typology Hayward sites Graeme Turner’s study of national fictions where he argues that a country’s narratives are “produced by the indigenous culture and these narratives serve a reflexive role in that a culture uses them in order to understand its own signification and meaning.”²⁵³ Narratives are therefore a nation’s way of making sense of itself. While building on this premise Hayward adds the importance of specific articulation. Nations may and do have

²⁵² Jinhee Choi, “National Cinema, the Very Idea”, *The Philosophy of Film and Motion Pictures* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p. 319.

²⁵³ Hayward, p. 99.

narratives in common but the specificity of their articulation is determined by the particular culture. She takes the Greco-Indian myth *Beauty and the Beast* as an example of this and how its theme of sexual awakening is absent from its more contemporary versions which tend to focus more on the morality of a “marriage of reason”: “It is in its specificity, therefore, that a filmic narrative can be perceived as a reflection of the nation. This reflexivity can occur in two ways (at least), neither one of which excludes the other. First, the filmic narrative can be based on a literary adaptation of an indigenous text. Second, the filmic narrative can confront the spectator with an explicit or implicit construction of the nation.”

²⁵⁴ Hayward defines explicit textual constructions as those films that set out to signify the nation by constructing moments in a nation’s history. They are explicit in the sense that they are propagandistic in their narratives. Implicit textual constructions of the nation, on the other hand, refer to those films, which are closer to the idea of reflecting the dominant ideology of a nation.²⁵⁵

3.5.1. Film Production, Folklore and Public Discourse

Film theory has therefore done much to further our understanding of the significance and complication, historical and contemporary, of nationality in film. While these are useful methods and epistemological studies, folkloristic research and ethnography can deepen the understanding of how the national figures into film through the study of folklore, folk groups and the individual producers’ negotiation of identity. The variability and adaptability of national identity, images and disparate world-views within any mass-distributed visual narrative, such as advertisements or films, is considerable and can be seen as part of national discourse at any given time. It must be emphasised that visual

²⁵⁴ Hayward, p. 99

²⁵⁵ Hayward, p. 100.

narrative is neither consumed nor produced literally or “wholesale”. Qualitative interviews and context-specific research into phenomenological perspectives can to an extent reveal some of the complex dynamics behind filmic representations of identity and folklore - be they implicit or explicit.

Many Icelandic films, especially after the so-called spring of Icelandic cinema in the 1980s, can well be considered explicit and implicit representations of the Icelandic nation. Films since this time, such as those of Friðrik Þór Friðriksson, have mainly depicted rural Iceland essentially as a wonderland of colourful characters; archaic customs and mannerisms; traditional ghosts and magic.²⁵⁶ Friðrik had early on in his career ironically depicted a rural “country-western” festival in north Iceland, complete with drunken, wild and silly behaviour (*Kúrekar norðursins* or *Cowboys of the North* (1984)). But he began his career in the field of concept film. In my interview with him, Friðrik claims never to have taken himself seriously as an artist but came to film through conceptual art and the Icelandic avant-garde movement of the 60s and 70s.²⁵⁷ He nonetheless states that this was very creative environment to come out of and also very provocative.

His films from this time were in many ways provocative and had a humorous element focusing on the country and its traditional culture. They include *Brennu-njálssaga* (*The Saga of Burnt Njal* (1980)) which features a man’s hand turning pages of a publication of the Saga of Njáll.²⁵⁸ The pages are turned until we reach the part of the Saga where the famous burning of Njáll takes place. The book is then promptly lit on fire and seen burning to ashes with an appropriate soundtrack in the background. Many saw this as an ironic

²⁵⁶ See for example *Börn náttúrunnar/ Children of Nature* (1991), *Bíodagar/ Movie Days* (1994) and *Á köldum klaka/ Cold Fever* (1995)).

²⁵⁷ The interview was conducted at the director’s home in downtown Reykjavík, by chance on his 50th birthday, May 12th. 2006.

²⁵⁸ This publication, edited by the Nobel Laureate Halldór Laxness in 1945, was itself seen as being provocative as the Saga was rendered into modern spelling which was not the custom at the time. *Brennunjálssaga*, ed. by Halldór Kiljan Laxness (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1945).

critique on the Sagas” centrality in Icelandic culture²⁵⁹ and certainly the production had elements of a practical joke as the film had been hyped with reports of a grand on-location production. Asked if *Brennu-njálssaga* was a conscious provocation he replied: “I am first and foremost a humorist teasing people. But *Brennu-njálssaga* is a certain statement without going into that any further. But I guess I was marking my territory. Like a cat pissing.”²⁶⁰

Now, in his early fifties, Friðrik is respected as one of the most prolific of Icelandic film directors and has marked his territory as a somewhat ironic commentator on Icelandic cultural heritage. Yet his films marked a distinctive transcultural shift in Icelandic film with a cultural transparency that made his films particularly apt for international distribution. His films have elements of independent European Cinema and magical realism.²⁶¹ But in my interview with him Friðrik avoids any arbitrary categorisation. His responses revealed a strong relation of his films to oral narratives, local experiences and folklore. Friðrik therefore seems to have both an ironic “voice” and an earnest one. Friðrik also uses the term cultural heritage in a way meaningful to him and explicitly represents it as “the way things are” complete with ghosts and rural eccentrics. Friðrik seems to draw naturally from traditional narratives and even expresses contemporary experience such as the Cold War, crime and transnational encounters through subtle reference to folk belief or the Sagas or folk belief. Friðrik says he has “gone many circles in his stance towards the Sagas.”²⁶² He frequently references them through anecdote and some characters, like the outlaw-whalehunters in *Skyttarnar* (*White Whales* (1987)), “are fresh out of the

²⁵⁹ See for example Benedikt Hjartarson: „Sjón er sögu ríkari. Um tilraunamyndir Friðriks Þórs Friðrikssonar.“ *Kúreki Norðursins* (Cowboy of the North) *Kvikmyndaskáldið Friðrik Þór Friðriksson*, ed. by Guðni Elísson (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2005) pp. 54-92.

²⁶⁰ “[I translate:] Ég er nú bara fyrst og fremst húmoristi að stríða fólki. En í Brennu-njálssögu er gefin út yfirlýsing. Það er statement sem er fölgð í þeirri mynd án þess að ég útskýri það neitt nánar. En ætli ég hafi ekki líka verið að marka mér bás. Svona eins og köttur að pissa.”

²⁶¹ See an anthology on his work in *Kúreki Norðursins* (Cowboy of the North) *Kvikmyndaskáldið Friðrik Þór Friðriksson*, ed. by Guðni Elísson (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2005).

²⁶² “[I translate:] Ég hef náttúrlega farið í marga hringi í afstöðu minni til sagnanna.”

Icelandic sagas.”²⁶³

Like Sherman’s *folklore films* many of Friðrik’s films offer information about culture and focus on expressive and traditional behaviour²⁶⁴ but they are obviously staged, filmed and fictionalised and could better fit Juwen Zhang’s definition of *filmic folklore*: an imagined folklore or folklore-like performance that is represented, created, or hybridised in fictional film. Taken out of the original context it functions in similar ways to folklore films as Sherman defines them, but often imposes or reinforces cultural stereotypes.²⁶⁵ Friðrik himself would be unlikely to agree to this categorization of his films. Asked if his characters represent contemporary Icelanders in some way Friðrik was visibly amused and stated that he never thinks of drawing up an image of Icelanders or that he even thinks of his audience in his filmmaking. He was well aware nonetheless of the critique that his characters present Icelanders as backward eccentrics particularly in relation to his film *Cold Fever* (1995). He puts this down to an inferiority complex on behalf of his critics “because they knew that the film would screen all over the world and that this would be a image drawn of Icelanders. I never think like that.” Friðrik emphasised that his characters are co-created by his scriptwriters. But he goes further in the counter-critique of his films’ alleged exoticism and claims that they are in fact a realistic depiction of his experiences and those of his fellow-countrymen. A character in *Cold Fever*, prone to supernatural experiences, “is just a normal guy relatively well in tune with the spirit world like most Icelanders.”²⁶⁶ Friðrik furthermore challenges the materialistic point of view underlying the critique that his films use exaggerations and the supernatural as a “selling point”:

²⁶³ “[I translate:] Karakterarnir í *Skyttunum* eru bara nýkomnar út úr Íslendingasögunum.”

²⁶⁴ Sharon R. Sherman, *Documenting Ourselves: Film, Video and Culture* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1998), p. 63.

²⁶⁵ Juwen Zhang, “Filmic folklore and Chinese Cultural Identity”, *Western Folklore* 64 (2005), 263–280 (p. 267).

²⁶⁶ “[I translate:] “Hann er bara normal maður sem er bara í mátulega miklu sambandi við andaheiminn eins og bara flestir Íslendingar hafa.”

I don't agree with that. I have said that. Like these supernatural elements in my films. I think they are quite natural. I mean no one can doubt that ghosts exist – everyone has had experience with ghosts. For example in *Bíó dagar* [*Movie Days*(1994)] everything is true and correct in that film. It's all happened to me – I have experienced it. Like the pervert in that film, Steingrímur Njálsson, that I encountered as a child. So I can't see how I could have exaggerated these people. [...] Of course I am playing around with the cultural heritage in that film and trying to see how that figures into the perspective of a child. How he sees the conditions, the occupation, and the aspects that were prominent in my youth.

([I translate:] Ég er ekki sammála þessu. Ég hef líka sagt eins og með þessi yfirnátturulegu element í myndunum mínum. Mér finnst þau bara mjög náttúruleg. Ég meina að það getur enginn efast um að það eru til draugar – hafa allir einhverju reynslu af draugum. Til dæmis eins og í *Bíó dögum* það er bara allt satt og rétt – það hefur allt komið fyrir mig- - ég hef upplifað það. Eins og pervertinn þar, það er bara Steingrímur Njálsson, sem ég lenti í þegar ég var ungur. Þannig að ég kannast ekki við að ég hafi eitthvað ýkt þetta fólk [...] Ég er náttúrulega að leika mér að sagnaarfinum og menningararfinum í þeirri mynd og reyna að sjá hvernig hann blandast sjónarhóli barns. Hvernig hann sér ástandið, hernámið og hlutir sem voru mjög áberandi í minni æsku.)

As a young lad Friðrik Þór spent a considerable time on farms and had a lot of experience with people born in the late 19th Century. Friðrik Þór puts emphasis on the fact he was influenced by individuals in the countryside that were born well before the turn of the 19th Century. “I think I was documenting this generation in a way. As they appeared to me. As I saw these people and their vision on life.”²⁶⁷ Friðrik Þór sees himself as a storyteller who uses both film and oral narrative. His style of direction can in some ways be affected by his own folk belief. He seems to describe folk belief in terms of the unexplained and the unexpected. He sometimes makes decisions based on dreams or strange occurrences, such as when a set light falls down – which can have a

²⁶⁷ “[I translate:] Í sveitinni þar sem ég var var mikið af gömlu fólki, eða nokkrar mannssekju sem stóðu mjög nálægt mér og tilheyrðu kynslóð, tveimur kynslóðum á undan þessari svokölluðu aldamótakynslóð. Ég held ég bara hafi verið að dökumentera það eða þannig. Eins og það kom fyrir. Eins og ég sá þetta fólk og þeirra lífsýn.”

transforming element: “sometimes something special happens and you have to have the guts to use it.”²⁶⁸ The film set is also a venue for storytelling and even singing. Friðrik describes many of his colleagues as great storytellers (he used the terms “sagnaþulir” and “sagnamenn”) and that a “special atmosphere” exists around the crew. During the many hours waiting they tell “all kinds of stories from everyday life.”²⁶⁹ Many of them personal experience narratives, “a bit unbelievable but fun stories”²⁷⁰ that Friðrik has often used in his films.

Friðrik does not entirely negate the responsibility of the filmmaker in representing Iceland to the world. He goes as far as to state that national cinema has a role of showing the world the humanity and culture of the nation. He takes Iraq as an example of a country lacking in cinematic representation. Such nations are easier to demonise, he holds, even though, like Iraq, the country is one of the oldest civilisations of the world. He relates this to Iceland in the form of narrative about a chance encounter he had with a Soviet submarine captain. During the Cold War the captain was positioned just off the coast of South-West Iceland for three years pointing nuclear missiles at Reykjavík and Keflavik airports:

But then I started thinking what the submarine captain told me. He was so surprised that I was an Icelander. He had always thought that they were just Eskimos because he had been told that we were Eskimos. It wouldn't matter if they blasted a bomb on the capital, in the middle of the Capitol. They were always talking about it he said, that they didn't like the idea of killing Eskimos. Innocent Eskimos. So he was surprised that I looked like a Russian. Then he had a shock thinking if he would have pulled the trigger then he would have destroyed a whole Russian cultural region. Or that's how he looked at it. He found a connection - the Russians being an old Viking nation like us. So he was pretty shocked while I took it lightly because I thought he was joking around. But he could prove his case. He said that they had always been forced to listen to *Óskalög sjúklinga* and *Lög unga fólksins* [song-by-request radio programmes] because they had to listen

²⁶⁸ “[I translate:] Stundum gerist eitthvað sérstakt og þá verður maður að hafa þor til þess að nota það.”

²⁶⁹ “[I translate:] Alls konar sögur úr daglega lífinu.”

²⁷⁰ “[I translate:] Svolítið svona ótrúlegar, skemmtilegar sögur.”

to the same music and the radio stations as the boat above them, that was usually a netboat or a trawler or they just small boats. They had to listen to the same because otherwise the radar would see that they were listening to the BBC you see. Then they would spot them out with these submarine-searching planes and the radar in Keflavík because they were so close to the shore. You couldn't fire these things long distance. They could see to land for example. So they guy started singing "Svífur yfir Esjuna" [an old Icelandic crooner standard called *Vorkvöld í Reykjavík (Spring in Reykjavík)*] and lots of other Icelandic songs in the finest Icelandic. Because they had heard it all so often before so I believed him. And then I had the same shock that he had. And he was actually quite angry probably".

([I translate] En þá fór ég að hugsa um það út af því að kafbátaskipstjórinn hann sagði mér, hann var svo hissa sko, ég hitti hann í Braselú, hann var svo hissa að ég væri Íslendingur. Hann hafði alltaf haldið að þetta væru bara Eskimóar af því að honum var sagt að þetta væru bara Eskimóar. Skipti engu máli þótt þeir dúndruðu einni sprengju inn í höfuðborgina – miðja höfuðborgina. Þeir voru alltaf að tala um þetta, sagði hann, að þeim væri nú illa við að fara að drepa Eskimóa. Blásaklausa Eskimóa. Svo var hann svo hissa að ég leit út eins og Rússi. Þá fékk hann bara sjokk ef hann hefði ýtt á gikkinn að þá hefði hann bara lagt rússneskt menningarsvæði í rust. Eða hann leit svoleiðis á það því hann hafði verið að horfa á myndirnar mínar líka og það gat alveg Rússi hafa gert þær. Fann alveg þessi tengsl. Enda eru Rússar gömul víkingaþjóð bara eins og við. Þannig að hann var í miklu sjokki.

En ég tók þessu bara létt því ég hélt að maðurinn væri bara að ljúga þessu. En hann gat sannað mál sitt því hann sagði að þeir hafi alltaf verið neyddir til að hlusta á *Óskalög sjúklinga* við vinnuna og *Lög unga fólksins* því þeir hlusta alltaf að hlusta á sömu tónlist og sömu útvarpsstöð og báturinn sem var fyrir ofan þá sem var yfirleitt bara netabátur eða togari eða eflaust voru það bara litlir bátar. Þyrftu að hlusta á það sama því að annars gæti radarinn séð að þeir væru að hlusta á BBC sko. Þá gæti þeir spottað þá út þessar kjarnorkukafbátaleitarvélar, flugvélar eða radarinn í Keflavík því að þeir voru alltaf mjög nálægt ströndinni. Það var ekkert hægt að skjóta þessu langt. Þeir sáu í land og svona. Þannig að þegar maðurinn fór að syngja "Svífur yfir Esjuna" og bara fullt af íslenskum lögum á finni íslensku út af því að þeir voru búnir að heyra þetta svo oft áður að þá trúði ég honum. Og þá fékk ég þetta sama sjokk og hann var með. Og hann var nánast reiður líklega.)

It is clear in the audio-visual data that Friðrik keys a performative storytelling

context where actuality is not sacrosanct. But through this narrative Friðrik expresses that while he may not consciously represent Iceland than he sees his films in a transnational context. Like the colonial exhibition in Copenhagen a century before the captain's story juxtaposes Icelanders with the racial stereotype of the "Eskimo" connoting the savage as opposed to the civilized. On the whole his answers suggest that the images of the North, expressed in his films, are not deliberate selling points or hegemonic devices, in the formation of national identity but expressions and performances of an identity he's sees as his own. Again we see the production of ethnocentric work in the commercial world is no simple project based on state hegemony. As in the case of Unnur Jökulsdóttir's *Icelanders* the production of borealistic images should be looked at as a complicated negotiation between personal artistic expression, professional traditions, folklore and market-focused decisions. Like Unnur, Friðrik has a sense of spirituality and connection with country life where he was influenced as a child. The ironies involved are in many ways a product of transnational reflexivity: an awareness of one's own culture through the eyes of outsiders. While Friðrik uses humour and provocation he also approaches heritage earnestly as his "own culture" and the collective experience of Icelanders as nation.

3.5.2. Noi's Woollen Cap

Another director whose films have been widely distributed is Dagur Kári (b. 1973). Like Friðrik's films, they have often been taken to represent Icelandic culture and even as drawing on heritage such as the *Icelandic Sagas*. While Dagur Kári's films are perhaps better categorised as avant-garde and artistic rather than representational or folkloric, Dagur has to some extent humoured the expectations of foreign journalists before claiming the universality of his work. A good example may be found in the following exchange between *Guardian* journalist Steve Rose and Dagur Kári following the success of his feature debut *Nói Albínói* or *Noi the Albino* (2002):

It would be a disservice to the film-maker to suggest that *Noi Albinoi* is interesting only because of its country of origin. However, there is something consciously Icelandic about it - and it's not just the snowscapes. There is a fantastical quality to the story, as if it were based on an ancient folk tale. After Björk and cod, Iceland's best-known product is probably its medieval sagas. Perhaps it's inevitable that foreign eyes will read the film in this context.

“It doesn't really bother me,” says Kari. “It was important to me to establish where I come from. To a large extent, it's true about Iceland being a mythological place. I know all the sagas by heart without having read them. It's incorporated in me, and I think it's best not to be too aware of it, but just trust that by being brought up in this part of the world you have a lot of heritage that will filter through. I think you can still take the film at a more universal level, though. In every country there's a small town and a teenager that wants to break away.”²⁷¹

In my interview with Dagur Kári²⁷² he was, like Friðrik Þór, less inclined to own up to any overt or conscious representation of place and people. While he says that Icelandic funding is more easily secured if the subject matter is “Icelandic” he has not felt the need to focus on it. Indeed two of his recent films, *Voksne mennesker* (2005) and *The Good Heart* (2009) have little if anything to do with Iceland. But *Nói Albínói*, about an adolescent at odds with his native Westfjord town, has been widely seen as a representation of Icelandic rural life. The protagonist *Nói*, wearing the signature Icelandic woollen cap, is an outsider who dreams of escaping the country. Yet Dagur claims never to have intended to represent rural life nor does he pretend to have any experience with it. On the contrary the town, in the script, is based on Springfield: the fictitious small town

²⁷¹ Steve Rose, “Fjord fiesta”, *Guardian*, 11 November 2003.

²⁷² The interview was conducted at Dagur Kári's studio in Reykjavík May 11th 2006.

of the television programme *Simpsons*. It was intended to be simple and universally understood: with one convenient store; one book shop; one taxi driver; and cemetery. But Dagur also revealed, almost reluctantly, how local and national culture “found its way” into the work of art both on location and through the director’s own life experiences.

Asked if he significantly represents his “own culture as a native of Reykjavík or Iceland” into his films he replies: “Not in any premeditated way but as in *Nói the Albino* there are certain motifs from my youth that I think are very Icelandic. Certain programmes from the radio; drinking malt (a sweet low-alcoholic beer); and all the fads – the waves that go over Iceland.” Dagur used these motifs to build a sense of nostalgia and timelessness. He also describes these Icelandic elements as coming from a mental process of “collecting ideas from every direction. Things I have experienced; things I’ve seen in foreign and Icelandic papers; read in books; some ideas just come from outer space or something. You collect these together and it becomes a casserole of raw materials from every direction.”²⁷³ Among the products of this collecting process is the central motif of the film; the avalanche or “flood of ice” which the name *Noí* springs from. Like the biblical Noah, *Nói* shelters himself in an “arc” of self-containment. While this reference is not an overt one and meant to “cater to the sub-consciousness more than anything else”²⁷⁴ the calamity of avalanches is a significant part of recent Icelandic history and potential feature of Icelanders’ national identity. Dagur expresses both his anxiety in representing such an event and the transforming effect it had on his own identity:

These avalanches had of course a very strong effect on me personally. I had never come to the Westfjords. I have often felt that I lacked some sort of national identity. I

²⁷³ “[I translate:] Heldur er þetta ákveðið söfnunarferli þar sem ég safna hugmyndum úr öllum áttum. Bæði eitthvað sem ég hef upplifað sjálfur, sem ég hef heyrt aðra hafa lent í, það sem ég sé í dagblöðum íslenskum og erlendum, les í bókum, sumar hugmyndir koma bara utanúr geymnum eða eitthvað og maður safnar í sarpinn og þetta verður einhver pottréttur með hráefnum úr öllum áttum. “

²⁷⁴ “[I translate:] Vísun sem höfðar kannski fyrst og fremst til undirmeðvitundarinnar.”

don't have a strong national identity, so these avalanches here - I remember when the first one came. I was home alone and saw the pictures of the people who had died and I was grief stricken. And I had this feeling that I was part of a nation. Like we were just a small fragile family. So this was something that had a very strong influence on me and I was very much afraid to tackle this in the environment where this had actually taken place. And we avoided filming in the villages where it had actually happened - Flateyri og Súðavík. And I was very anxious about people's reactions – whether I was allowed to have this in the film not having experienced this in any direct way so forth.

([I translate]Þessi snjóflóð höfðu nátturlega mjög sterk áhrif á mig persónulega. Ég hafði náttúrulega aldrei komið til Vestfjarða. Mér hefur oft fundist eins og mig skorti einhverja þjóðerniskennd. Ég hef ekki mjög sterka þjóðernisvitund, en svo þegar þessi snjóflóð hérna – ég man þegar að fyrsta snjófljóðið kom, ég var einn heima og sá myndrnar af fólkinu sem hafði látist birtast og ég var mjög harmi sleginn og ég fékk þessa tilfinningu að ég væri partur af þjóð. Við værum bara rosa svona lítil og brothætt fjölskylda. Þannig að þetta er eitthvað sem hafði mjög sterk áhrif á mig og ég var mjög hræddur við að takast á við þetta í þessu umhverfi sem þetta hafði raunverulega gerst og við forðuðumst að taka upp í þeim þorpum sem þetta gerðist – Flateyri og Súðavík. Og ég var mjög hræddur við viðbrögð fólks – hvort ég hefði leyfi til þess að hafa þetta í bíómynd hafandi ekki upplifað þetta með neinum beinum hætti og svo framvegis.)

The director's own life experience, albeit through the medium of television, therefore formed part of the “casserole” that culminated in the film. But the significance of this “national” event also had an effect on the collaborative filmmaking process on location. Despite initial anxieties with regard to the actual avalanche locations the film was made in near-by Westfjord towns such as Þingeyri and Bolungarvík including an extensive avalanche scene. Dagur describes how during this filming definitions of actuality and art become blurry and the cast and crew had an experience that can be described as liminal:

Also a lot of peculiar things happened when we were filming the avalanche. It was actually a long scene with rescue teams. We had buried the set with snow – Thomas was actually buried in snow and we had actual rescue teams and actual rescue dogs. And it all became a little too real. The dogs for example. They of course didn't know they

were starring in a film so they were full of adrenaline trying to save human lives. And for the first and only time while filming I felt I was watching something real. And everybody was really affected by this. People were starting to cry and we lost control a little bit while staging this. But what was even more unbelievable is when we were trying to edit this. And we thought that we had an amazing scene but there was nothing on film that we could use. The strong emotion we had wasn't done any justice. You just saw some guys in red overalls with sticks. So we couldn't recreate the experience of the film. So we ended up solving it differently and the scene that was supposed to be the most powerful was shortened but the emotion is brought forth differently or when Núi sees the deceased on television.

([I translate]: Og svo voru mjög undarlegir atburðir sem gerðust þegar við vorum að kvikmynda snjóflóðið. Það var í rauninni löng sena þar sem voru björgunarsveitir. Við vorum búnir að grafa leikmyndina undir snjó – Tómas [the lead actor Tómas Lemarquis] var raunverulega undir snjó og svo vorum við með raunverulegar björgunarsveitir og raunverulega björgunarahunda. Og þetta varð allt svona einum of raunverulegt. Eins og til dæmis hundarnir, þeir náttúrliga vissu ekki að þeir voru að leika í bíómynd þannig að þeir voru alveg á fullu adrenalíni að reyna að bjarga mannlífi. Og í fyrsta og eina skipti að vera kvikmynda eitthvað þá fannst mér ég vera að horfa á raunveruleika. Og það voru allir helteknir af þessu. Fólk var farið að gráta og við misstum þetta dálítið stjórn á þessu við að setja þetta í gang. Og það sem var enn ótrúlegra að þegar við ætluðum að klippa þetta og héldum að við værum með alveg magnaða senu þá var ekkert á filmunni sem hægt var að nota. Sú tilfinning sem var svona sterkt við að horfa á þetta að hún komst engan veginn til skila. Maður sá bara einhverja menn í einhverjum rauðum göllum með einhver prik. Það var semsagt ekki hægt að endurskapa þessa upplifun í myndinni. Þannig að við enduðum með því að leysa það öðruvísi að sú sena sem átti að vera mun veigameiri í myndinni hún var bara stutt og tilfinningin kemur fram með öðrum hætti eða sem sagt þegar að Núi horfir á fólkið sem að lést í sjónvarpinu.)

This account, a performance in itself, can be taken to illustrate that while film may be artifice then the filmmaking process can be an actual experience of the senses within material culture where the cast and crew are subject to local folklore and everyday practices. Furthermore it reveals the discrepancy that can exist between film and filmed experience. Interestingly the solution the

filmmakers chose for this particular discrepancy was to express the significance of the avalanche through the mirroring of Dagur's own initiation into nationhood through the media: Nói watching the televised images of the deceased.

3.5.3. Exoticising Food in Film

One of the motifs Dagur mentions as being particularly Icelandic is a scene where blood pudding is prepared. There he joins the ranks of the many who have exoticised and ironised Icelandic food traditions. In *Nói the Albino*, the preparation of traditional food is presented in a most barbaric fashion. In a scene where his dysfunctional family prepares blood-pudding the audience is challenged with close-ups of the messy business of grinding fat, liver and mixing blood and grain. Interestingly the preparation is directed by Nói's bullying, chain-smoking alcoholic father in the benevolent grandmother's kitchen. The grotesque affair is further highlighted when the hapless protagonist Nói, fumbles and spills a huge pot of blood all over his family. In another recent Icelandic film, *Mýrin* or *Jar City* by Baltasar Kormákur, an adaptation of the novel by popular crime writer Arnaldur Indriðason, there is a scene where the protagonist is seen digging into a particularly gelatinous dish of singed sheep's head or *svið* (pronounced svith, meaning something singed). Indeed in light of the emphasis put on the protagonist's consumption of *svið*, one would be justified in suspecting that its sole purpose was to catch the othering eye of foreign audiences.

While this traditional dish consisting of a split, singed and boiled head of sheep is still commercially available in Iceland and displayed in the food stores the dish's everyday status and banality has been somewhat diminishing in recent decades. It has been steadily gaining a place among other traditional dishes such as sour ram's testicles and cured skate, which are rarely seen except at the time of their designated festivities for which they may add a sense

of folksy patriotism. Nonetheless the proprietor of the drive-through restaurant featured in the film claimed a huge boost in sales of this handy and fast food of the ages after its screening began.²⁷⁵ Yet, at the time, the current Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries, was not one to recoil in the face of traditional produce and seems disturbed in his personal blog:

We know well that many do not like whaling, have reservations to the invasion of Icelandic companies, do not appreciate our dams. And perhaps detective Erlendur feasting on svið in Arnaldur's and Baltasar Kormákur's film, *Jar City*, gives a worse image than before; this is, at least, not the image of "gourmet" Iceland – the modern Iceland.²⁷⁶

The Minister seems to be suggesting here that this alleged antithesis of gourmet Iceland has little basis in contemporary reality or at least that if it did than it is not an image to be heralded. But the apparent lack of forcefulness in the minister's concerns for the "image" of modern Iceland comes to the heart of matter. Despite the potentially deprecating effect on the nation's image, depicting it rather as eccentric and peripheral, little protest towards these representations has been voiced in Iceland. On the contrary, even high-ranking political figures openly embrace these eccentricities as a national asset. In an attempt to illustrate and trumpet Icelandic business successes abroad the president of Iceland Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson stated in a speech that:

Because of how small the Icelandic nation is, we do not travel the world with an extra baggage of ulterior motives or big power interests rooted in military, financial or political strength. No one is afraid to work with us; people even see us as fascinating eccentrics who can do no harm and

²⁷⁵ *Fréttablaðið* 5 Nóvember 2006.

²⁷⁶ Einar K. Guðfinnson, "Af hverju er hið voðalega Ísland svona eftirsótt?", *Blog of Einar Kristinn Guðfinnson*, 5.12(2006) <<http://www.ekg.is/blogg/nr/669>> [accessed 10 January 2010].

therefore all doors are thrown wide open when we arrive.²⁷⁷

This in fact also highlights that although these are to some extent local and artistic self-representations, they are also potentially lucrative transcultural commodities, reflexively aimed at both foreign and domestic consumers.

3.6. Conclusion

From Sneglu-Halli to Núi Albínói the ironic performance of Icelandicness, not least through food traditions, have played a significant part in Iceland's representation and relations with the outside world. This has been particularly evident in the exportation of media images. But in stark contrast to the explosion of protest in the eve of the 20th Century, among the Icelandic intelligentsia in Copenhagen, the contemporary exposition of Icelanders as primitive and exotic nature-folk seems to have been received with open arms both by Icelanders and the foreign target audience. As can be seen in the ethnography the production of borealistic images cannot solely be described in terms of commercialism or nation-state hegemony. Rather it is a complicated negotiation between such competing factors as personal artistic expression, professional traditions, folklore as well as, or even counter to, state policy and market-focused decisions. In an age of international markets and mass communication such "foreign" commodities are often received and integrated without much political or social turmoil.²⁷⁸ When it comes to the integration of "foreign" people and culture into local society the reverse is often the case.²⁷⁹ However, what I wish to bring into focus here, through further transnational

²⁷⁷ Pres. Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, "How to Succeed in Modern Business: Lessons from the Icelandic Voyage" *A Speech at the Walbrook Club in London*, March 2005, <<http://www.forseti.is/media/files/05.05.03.Walbrook.Club.pdf>> [accessed, 17 September 2009].

²⁷⁸ Regina Bendix, & Barbro Klein, "Foreigners and Foreignness in Europe: Expressive Culture in Transcultural Encounters", *Journal of Folklore Research* 30 (1993), 1 -14 (p. 5)

²⁷⁹ See for example Brian Spooner, "Weavers and Dealers: The Authenticity of an Oriental Carpet", in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. by Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986) pp. 195 – 233.

ethnography, is that against a backdrop of media exoticisms, many Icelanders living abroad actually seem to embody projected images of eccentricity, basing them on differentiating folklore, but performing them to the point of exaggeration in their everyday lives.

4. Performing the North

After a brief research history of what guided my personal and academic interest to Icelanders abroad the following chapters (ch. 4 – 6) will engage with how borealism is practiced among this primary research group. Here, the reflexive audio-visual approaches set forth in chapter two (ch. 2.8) will be brought to bear through an ethnographic exploration on how Icelanders react to or enact exotic representations of themselves abroad and how that relates to power relations. Starting with in-group performances my informants will be introduced and contextualised as belonging to folk groups and as parts of communities that have internal traditions and coping structures. Before moving on to transnational encounters, myself and my field collaborator Katla Kjartansdóttir are contextualised in the process of fieldwork, and aspects that would inform my research, such as ironic food performances, are foreshadowed. The dynamics of power, performance and irony, set forth in chapter two (ch. 2.1.- 2.7.) will then be applied in an depth analysis of narratives that deal with the ironic and transnational performances of national identity.

4.1. Internal Borealism: a Narrative Prelude

Before moving directly to the ethnography among Icelanders abroad a short exposition of the ethnographic work that first led me to this transnational field can cast some light on the development of this research that began primarily in oral narrative. The oral narratives are a corpus of anecdotes and contemporary legends I have documented prior to my current ethnography of Icelandic expatriates. What is particularly relevant in this ethnography is how oral narratives may share the, often ironic, accent on eccentricity, the rural and the wild, which is so apparent in the visual representations already discussed. Entering a territory where visual culture and oral narratives meet one quickly discovers that they are two distinct forms of expression but not incompatible.

They also exhibit how power struggles of margin and centre within nations may mirror those between nations. In addition they show that exoticisation is not practised exclusively abroad or in the presence of foreigners. In that sense it can be stressed that transnational folklore is not limited to extended physical transnational encounters.

The narratives I collected in an informal storytelling and drinking session of young men in downtown Reykjavík are humorous stories. They depict isolated rural characters and folk heroes, ironically clashing with the contemporary world. The storytellers furthermore represent them as modern day rural wild men of sorts - comparable with the outlaws of Icelandic folktales or to use a more mainstream parallel, the cowboys or frontiersmen of the North American “wild west”. In the inner world of these narratives the eccentricities of these wild men and close interaction with a rugged northern nature is pitted against the encroaching modern world around them. Many of these narratives were told on film sets throughout rural Iceland, during extended coffee breaks or during the long winding pauses between takes, waiting periods that cast and crew felt driven to fill with stories as one of my informant puts it. The varying levels of irony and earnestness are evident in my fieldwork observations and qualitative interviews whereas the storytellers commonly give a short review or opinion on the stories such as: “this is a ridiculous story” or “this story explains what it's like up there”.²⁸⁰ The reflexive features of multiple participants in each storytelling session and my presence as a folklorist are also quite evident not least in the artful responses of the active storytellers. Active storytellers generally integrate performance and imagination to personal experience narratives and supposedly fact-based legends and commonly collect and elaborate on stories from other storytellers.

The context of this collection of narratives was, more often than not, a

²⁸⁰ William Labov refers to this as *coda*: an optional closing comment See “The Transformation of Experience in Narrative Syntax”, *Language in the Inner City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972) pp. 354-396.

depiction either of the local culture (for example where filming was taking place) or the place of origin of a visiting storyteller. Although varying themes were covered in the repertoires of these more active narrators they commonly centred on incidents from the recent past or as far back as the 1940's, a turning point in Iceland's social and cultural history and the dawn of rapid urbanization. The protagonists in these stories were entirely of rural origin although these archaic characters were sometimes juxtaposed into the more modern town or city with the resultant cultural clashes. More often than not the narrative events (where and when the storytelling took place) was in the vicinity of the narrated events (where and when the events of the story allegedly took place). The more remote settings of the narratives, mostly in the north-west part of Iceland or remote farms bordering with the highland interior, were sometimes described in rather unclear terms and had, particularly among younger narrators, a mythical air.

Their focus on the strange acts and remarks of the protagonists puts them in the popular and traditional narrative genre of “odd character stories”, an actual search category in Icelandic folklore databases.²⁸¹ Odd character anecdotes often revolve around quick-witted blowhards, grand liars, strongmen and sharpshooters.²⁸² But what defines the particular corpus of anecdotes in question here, and sets them apart from traditional Icelandic outlaw narratives, is how these heroic or anti-heroic protagonists comically react to their liminal experience of being in between the archaic and the modern; culture and nature; the mundane and the supernatural.

One group of these narratives was narrated in various documented events but perhaps most notably on an extended coffee break on an outdoor film set which lasted most of the day. They tell of a man, or in some cases a band of men, from a remote part of the Westfjords where the closest town is Ísafjörður where many inhabitants are familiar with the individuals portrayed. The main

²⁸¹ See for example the Folklore Database of *The Árni Magnússon Institute in Iceland*.

²⁸² These characters are, like many in narratives of this case study, consistent with Richard Dorson's description of a folk hero as a local eccentric known for tricks and clever sayings. See Richard M. Dorson, *America in Legend* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973), p. 170.

protagonist is described as a horseskin-clad hunter who lived outdoors all summer and generally sustained himself in the wild by, among other things, hunting seal. One story relates how a tour bus on a cultural excursion from Reykjavík stumbles upon him in the act of dragging a seal ashore. But just as the tour guide directs attention to this charming remnant of an archaic hunting method the protagonist cuts the seal's throat and proceeds to drink his blood, causing half of the civilised tourists on board to discharge their lunch. This ironic quality intensifies as the protagonist enters the more urban areas. In one such case he is in fact hired to exterminate wild cats that have become a problem in the town of Ísafjörður. He arrives in his pelt, rifle in one hand, shotgun in the other, bowie knife in his belt and performs his duty so enthusiastically that he clears the town of all cats, both wild and domestic.

When the setting is moved to Reykjavík the clashes are even more severe. In one such tale a band of "outlaws", seeking work in the city, raise a calf in the loft of their comfortable flat. Eventually he becomes too big to fit through the door so they go ahead and slaughter him in the loft. City flats are not uncommon settings for modern legends about rural people or immigrants moving into urban areas. They often involve the new inhabitants growing potatoes beneath the floorboards, indoors cooking over an open fire or keeping cattle on the balcony. Interestingly in Sweden before an increase in immigration in the 60's these motifs were applied to rural Sami people moving into the city but were later appropriated to immigrants. The Swedish folklorist Bengt af Klintberg points out how these legends have more to do with prejudice than any social reality.²⁸³

Whether these particular anecdotes and tales have roots in an urban prejudice is of course an open question but the ethnographic data, particularly of the performance contexts (for example the coda), points to other meanings. Indeed it suggests no such singularly negative representation. Although these archaic and wild characters are albeit ironically presented they are also admired as rebels reacting in their own way to everyday rules of modern society and

²⁸³ Bengt af Klintberg, "Folksagner I dag", *Fataburen* (1988), 271.

foreign power. And while these narrated cultural regions are exoticised and othered these contemporary memorates are also in discourse with a romanticised past which the characters seem to symbolise.

This signification is even clearer in a group of narratives focusing on the relations between remote farmers and hunters and the combatants of the Second World War struggling off the north-west Icelandic coast. These regional and familial tales were also narrated to storytelling participants as a representation of the characteristics of the people populating the now mostly abandoned areas of the Strandir and Hornstrandir region in the north west of Iceland. One tale begins with a German-speaking worker on the farm suspiciously surveying the movement of ships on the horizon. Come morning, flashes of light are seen in the skyline followed with faint blasts and two days later the corpses of soldiers are washed up on the shore along with various supplies. Among these supplies are nutritious biscuits and pills that my informant laughingly assured me had come to good use for all-night egg-picking and bird hunting in steep cliffs. They were in fact amphetamines.

But the bodies of German soldiers are left alone in fear of their ghosts and particularly the dead naval captain, which is deemed especially haunted. But when the British heard of the incident they deputise the reluctant Icelanders to collect the captain's remains. But in their fear and haste they instead collect a heap of whalebones causing great mirth on assembly and surprise as to how well the Germans had adapted to marine life. Humiliated by this a local chieftain of sorts ensures that all the earthly remains are collected. As he proceeds to bury them he is interrupted by the appearance of a German naval ship in the bay. An admiral comes ashore and claims the bodies but the Icelandic leader claims that by law all that washes ashore in his land is his own property. And indeed under threat of a whole naval fleet the chief does not flinch until he has been paid the equivalent of numerous farmsteads. These humorous characterisations of which a local narrator called with some warmth: "these wild beasts", could of course be perceived as something other than a representation

of region or nation. But the context of representation is already within the storytelling situation. In that light these “wild” archaic masculine heroes or antiheroes can be seen as representations of a traditional and proud nation in control or rather in communion with their “wild northern nature”.

The themes, characters, motives and discourses within these narratives and the practice of narrating them indicated to me, I felt, that there was a correlation and an intertextuality of contemporary oral narrative and the Borealistic images so widespread in modern times. Much like these images the narratives were set forth in the context of representation and as a way of negotiating national identity. Oral narrators, as well as producers within the contemporary film, media and creative arts, call upon the available discourses and myths of their perceived “own culture”. Furthermore it seemed apparent to me that these cultural and national myths were not pure and simply reflections of history or contemporary times but dynamic contemporary transformations of them.

But why was there so much irony in these negotiations? May this be explained in terms of power relations? Can I perhaps apply Certeau’s notion of strategy and tactics? Are these ironic representations in some way a local tactic against a larger strategy of tourism and national authority, appropriating an iconography of the North? Is this what happens when the simulacra of national representations is no longer viewed as “true”, when the image itself is no longer perceived as being believable but is still meaningful in the negotiation of identity? Are they meaningful? Are Icelanders indeed identifying with this marginal representation?

Are the narrators appropriating these eccentricities as Icelandic artists and performers may do when finding their footing in the transnational arena and marketplace and so attract attention in the global village? This brought up the question of whether one could describe the dynamics of performing one’s identity and folk culture in transnational contexts. Furthermore I was intrigued by the thought that if Icelanders “at home” exoticise and ironise themselves in a domestic context, in both folklore as well as within art; film; advertisements, then

how do Icelanders react to or enact exotic representations of themselves abroad?

As I initially attempted to answer these questions it was clear that doing so would require more ethnographic study, which in part would involve the research into the reception of these images but also the communal expressive culture and oral narratives of the their producers and the locality and contexts from which they may draw. But at this point I began to go forward on the hypothesis, based on textual research and limited fieldwork, that these images of the wild North were part of an emergent oral and visual iconography. The irony could perhaps be perceived as a tactic in the negotiation of identity through everyday expressive culture under the gaze of a perceived cultural centre but identifying with the margins: the northern periphery of the so-called global village. This is in brief the research history of what originally guided my academic and personal interest to an ethnographic case study on those most engaged in this transnational space: Icelanders abroad.

4.2. Folk Culture, Exoticism and Irony among Icelanders abroad: Performance in Transnational Contexts

The primary case study presented in this thesis focuses on how Icelanders represent themselves transnationally and how this relates to their identity. *Íslendingar erlendis* or Icelanders abroad is a term that perhaps connotes a strangely static condition of “Icelandicness” and the idea that their presence outside of Iceland is merely tentative. Somehow a term such as *Icelandic Americans* or *Icelandic Canadians* has never caught on in the Icelandic language: the descendants of Icelanders that emigrated to North America over a century ago are still referred to as *West-Icelanders*. Icelanders abroad are also often considered to be excessively Icelandic, a reflexive feature Barbro Klein has frequently come across among Swedes when referring to Swedish

Americans (Klein 2001:78). Nevertheless, Icelandic expatriates in any given area rarely form a cohesive community and are usually few and far between.²⁸⁴ Reaching its zenith on festive holidays, in-group congregations are often focused on occasional calendar customs that serve meaningful cohesive purposes. In cities where Icelanders are numerous they may for example meet at the *jólaboð* or Christmas parties (which often are centred on children) or they may congregate on the June 17th National Holiday celebrating independence from Denmark since 1944 or get together for the *þorrablót* (pronounced THORR-a-blote) a mid-winter feast involving what used to be the last reserves of cured meat and fish products in the old winter month called Þorri. The traditional element of these events, such as food and dress, may certainly serve an important purpose for the guests as a folk group but the way in which the individuals relate to the traditions is no simple matter. Nor is it easily discernable what aspects of them can be seen as tradition and which as innovation. While many of these occasions may be familiar (for example the *jól* or Christmas traditions) or easily explained (for example the June 17th as Independence Day) this may not be true of others such as the *þorrablót*. The traditional aspects of these days must therefore be elaborated on in relation to their folkloric significance and the reasonable level of familiarity to be expected of my supervisors and examiners.

Much of the field work for this case study was done in collaboration with Katla Kjartansdóttir, centring on joint participant observation, qualitative inquiry and audio/visual documentation of how Icelanders abroad conceptualise, perform and negotiate their identity (particularly national identity) on a personal level and within everyday life. Going from this common ground we executed a fairly flexible research scheme from which we pursued our more individual research questions (in my case focused on personal narrative and other expressive culture/folklore; material culture). Although our basic common

²⁸⁴ One of the few possible exceptions to this is Denmark where the Icelandic embassy reports around 8000 expatriates.

research questions have been general (for example “we're interested in aspects of your life as an Icelander abroad”) we also have joint interests in the following specific questions: How would participants define their national identity?; Do participants exercise any particular national rituals, if so, what, how and why?; How important to participants is their nationality in relation to their personal identity?; What particular meaning(s) do they attach to it (their national identity)?; How important do they think it is to uphold national identity and pass it on to their descendants?

Katla and I interviewed over 50 informants for this case study and accumulated about 30 hours of audio-visual data. Among the factors emphasised in these interviews is the nature of the Icelanders social relations in their adopted countries both internally (between Icelanders) and externally; their experience of local or national culture; if they adhere to any “Icelandic customs”; behaviours; food traditions; the relations between their nationality and childrearing and reception of films, books, media.; how nature and weather factor into conversation, narrative and humour and if informants take on representational roles. What has also in some cases been focused on explicitly (after a series of more implicit identity questions) was the more mental image people had of Iceland and themselves as Icelanders.

The first leg of these interviews began with a participant observation of the *Þjóðhátíðardagur* or “National Holiday” observance on June 17th at the Icelandic Vice-Consulate’s home in Liberton House, Liberton, Edinburgh. In attendance were members or potential members of the Icelandic Association in Scotland. The celebration was announced on the Ísskot internet website and emailing group and gave us a good start in recruiting informants and observing how their national identity may come into play (see next chapter). From this point we arranged and concluded in-depth interviews with eight informants either within their own home or in our temporary flat in Edinburgh. In line with the snowballing technique we used, and perhaps proportionately with the temporary Icelandic migrants, our informants have mainly been young professionals or

mature post-graduate students.

After this first leg I was concerned with eliciting more narratives from our informants and since I have put more emphasis on this either by explicitly asking for stories or directing my questions in a more casual way. For the second leg of the Icelanders abroad case study we went to Berlin, Copenhagen and Glasgow and I put further emphasis on participant observation and documentation of areas Icelanders congregated in places such as an Icelandic run café in Copenhagen and a regular Saturday football game for Icelanders in Berlin. Further interviews within this research project were conducted on special field trips, primarily to the U.K., and a number of expats who had come to Iceland. Short follow-up interviews were conducted in some cases where the interviewees were contacted by phone or Internet.

On the whole Katla and I were pleased with the level and depth of responses and with the development of our collaboration. In some cases we disagreed on the tempo of questioning, for example how quickly one should break the silence after an informant's response. Sometimes we had different emphasis in questioning and worried that certain issues were dominating the interview time. This was perhaps symptomatic of the fact that we were getting in-depth answers to numerous in-depth questions. Therefore we rarely got through all our intended questions before signs of fatigue became visible in our informants. In general our interview lasted well into the second hour. Other benefits of our collaboration were that we were ourselves temporary migrants; that we were of the opposite sex; that we were a couple; and that we were of similar age and position as so many of our informants. This I believed gave us better access to a more private, relaxed and conducive atmosphere.

4.3. In-group National Performance

The commencement of the fieldwork in Edinburgh, perhaps appropriately, took place on the national holiday or *Þjóðhátíðardagur* (literal translation: “National Celebration Day”) the 17th of June 2006. An exposition of this first joint field excursion will effectively introduce so many of the themes running through the whole of the case study including: expatriate networking; food irony; and folklore. An annual event publicised on the “Ísskot (Icelanders in Scotland) internet network was held at the home of the Icelandic Vice-Consul” Kristín Hulda Hannesdóttir or “Limma” in Liberton House, Liberton, Edinburgh. In attendance were members or potential members of the Icelandic Association in Scotland. Most guests were mature Icelandic students. Two non-Icelandic speaking husbands-to-Icelanders were in attendance and mostly kept to each other’s company. Quite a lot of children were in attendance including our own two: Una, age six and Matthías who had recently turned three. The festivities took part mostly outside in the garden or, to a lesser extent in the adjacent living rooms of the house.

Trying to be mindful of possible expressions of nationality in the material culture around me I felt a slight strain viewing familiar objects with the necessary analytical scrutiny. But among the first, and more obvious, examples to be found was the Icelandic flag. As we arrived the flag flew high over the Liberton House, a restored “mansion” on the outskirts of Edinburgh, and had been noted as a guiding point in the email-announcement. In addition a few small handheld flags were in circulation among the many children and one little girl had a flag painted on her cheek. Other obvious national symbols were a framed photo of the President of Iceland and his wife in national costume positioned near to where the food was served. While clothing and food can be a common expression of nationality this was not the case here in any obvious way. Clothing was informally western. Only a few men wore ties; many had their shirts untucked or wore t-shirts and jeans. Many of the women, on the other

hand, wore dresses and the children were generally well dressed – girls in summer dresses and the boys in clean “sunday dress”. There were no national costumes to be seen, which I found unusual, nor was the woollen pattern often recognised as Icelandic visible. Granted it was a warm day.

Food was to some extent more traditional but expressed a sense of national identity perhaps not noticeable to someone unfamiliar with the contemporary practice of food culture in Iceland. Firstly the buffet table, decorated with small Icelandic flags was comprised of an assortment of common Icelandic sweet flour-based food that had been brought by the guests. There were *pönnukökur* (sweet crêpe-like pancakes served with sugar or jam and whipped cream), Icelandic *kleinur* (semi-sweet, twisted and deep fried “doughnuts”), chocolate cake and, the odd one out, a large pitcher of Pimm’s “punch”.

Interestingly the food supplied and advertised by the organisers was far from uniquely Icelandic although it could be considered characteristic of both banal and national festive food. These were hot dogs, Prince Polo chocolate biscuits and Coca Cola. Indeed this was cause for a great deal of verbal irony. A standing joke was the fact that the Prince Polo was bought at a local Polish delicatessen. Prince Polo used to be among the few chocolate bars available in Iceland. The combination of Coca Cola and Prince Polo is both common in everyday life and seen by many as nostalgically Icelandic. The hot dog, for many a figure of modernity and even negative foreign influence, does have a certain nostalgic resonance and a sense of “Icelandicness” among Icelanders. A long-time popular treat at children parties and barbeques the “Icelandic hotdog” is often lampooned as distinctive due to a certain percentage of lamb meat in its ingredients and the fillings commonly used in Iceland. The Icelandic hot dog has even been lifted to a meta-cultural level. Examples of this include, a landmark hotdog stand, *Bæjarins bestu pylsur* (the town’s best hotdogs), which foreigners are encouraged to try. Also notable is a regularly televised advertisement for a brand of hotdog that builds on exaggerated and ironic nationalism and a

popularised slogan performed with mock solemnity: “*Icelanders eat SS hot dogs.*”

Tradition and nationality was to some extent expressed through various organised activities ranging from the traditional greeting “Gleðilega hátíð” (Happy Holliday) and a reading by an up-and-coming Icelandic author and an attempt at singing of Icelandic music. “Gleðilega hátíð!” Limma would call out after ringing a bell in the garden, meant to gather the guests around her. A young Icelandic writer, Andri Snær Magnason, was invited to read from his children's book for the children and from his latest book which is a topical essay-based book addressing the nation's politics, environmental questions and culture. It is titled: *The Land of Dreams: a Self-help Book for a Fearful Nation*. The books were for sale and an author's signature on offer. After the reading the author added some of his thoughts on polluting industry and the generation of energy in Iceland. Following applause from the audience Limma, who had initially herded the group together for the reading, attempted to initiate group singing and tried to designate someone to take the lead in singing – claiming he was choir. His hesitation proved too long and Limma finally conceded with the words “If you find it awkward we don't have to do it.” The crowd slowly dispersed and small group chatting commenced.

Besides these more or less subtle expressions of national identity the celebration was in many ways a garden party, where guests used the garden furniture, stood or walked around the large well-grown and tended “British” garden. An inflated jumping castle for the kids was placed in the garden and was in full use the whole time. The guests mostly chatted in small groups and one had the feeling that these groups were made of people somehow previously acquainted. Initial conversation would often consist of refreshing old acquaintances already made and on heard occasional excuses for not having been in contact and promises of getting in contact again. Tracing one's friendship relation to a mutual point also took place. I felt it too invasive to actually record many conversations too closely.

We had brought the video camera after asking Limma, the Vice-Consul, for permission by e-mail. As I had walked around with it and placed it in the garden one could notice an effect specifically in the conversations initiated with guests. Question such as “Are you filming?” or “Are you making a film?” indicated that my filming could not be easily mistaken for recreational activity. This might have had something to do with the semi-professional look of the medium-sized Sony PD50 camera and tripod and the somewhat intrusive filming at close range (near the end of the event). Guests often reacted to this with humour. After the camera had lingered on Limma she remarked over the crowd: “Are you making the film specifically about me?” To which I replied: “Yes, of course, it's all about you”. The performed exchange continued and another guest by the name of Linda, a young student, joined in:

LIMMA: Are you studying me? Are you making a PhD about me?

LINDA: I think that's pretty good. I bet they could only make a BA paper on me.

LIMMA: That's right (laughs). I'm so much older than you.

Viewing my written and audio-visual record of this exchange I feel it is a prime example of the kind of performance explicit filming can induce. A primary feature of such performances is the heightened awareness of an audience of some sort. They also set in motion the dynamics of agency and objectification often involved with filming or photography. In this case there is a subtle change of power as the passive filmed subject, Limma, takes control of the situation through performed teasing. This is then followed by an exchange of self-deprecation between the Vice-Consul and the student. So while the “field” might be highly affected by the researcher in this case the “subjects” are not without agency and reveal elements of their personality and social standing. Questions about the camera were also a welcomed icebreaker and offered opportunities to recruit research participants. We managed to collect contact information on several potential participants who had agreed to partake. Many were mature

post-graduate students or young professionals.

Near the end of the party we were invited to come to the University apartments on Blackett Avenue to have some Indian food with a group of ten adults and five children. Conversation was lively, covering a number of subjects. Katla and I had agreed to hold back on discussing our specific opinions on some of the subjects of our research project such as Icelandic national identity. Nevertheless some related comments came up such as what people considered Icelandic food. One guest jokingly asked if I would make a note about “us” Icelanders retreating from the national celebration to eat “un-Icelandic” Indian food. And so I did. Food irony was also a part of a discussion on what sort of food Icelanders had sent from home. The fact that many had sent for manufactured spreads and candy was a cause for laughter. The house residents for example pulled out some Icelandic bacon flavoured cream cheese from the refrigerator - half-jokingly praising its importance and quality and how one could not be without it. The traditionality of “modern” and “manufactured” food was therefore a central incongruity. As another example the question was jokingly put forth if lamb and curry could be considered a traditional Icelandic dish seeing as it had probably been served in Iceland for decades.

Throughout the evening one of the most common points of discussion was a comparison of Icelandic culture and Scottish. We talked about the class system, road systems, food and restaurants, the children’s upbringing, world economics, such as the effects of free trade (some in the group were studying for an MBA in UEd). While I chose not to focus on such in-group comparisons these conversations did inform our future interviews.

To sum up this brief description of the commencement of the fieldwork in Edinburgh this in-group celebration was a fruitful start that presented us with many of the features to come in our research. In our experience the celebration of nationality through material culture or folklore was somewhat secondary to a practice of networking between people who were connected on a cultural and

practical level. The common language, shared discourses and separation from family and friends were therefore not taken for granted. The expatriate community was therefore a coping structure the Icelanders could turn to in need. The importance of the subtle expressions of nationality through food and decoration must of course not be underestimated. The somewhat tongue-in-cheek practice of these traditions was, on the other hand, a strong indicator that national tradition and iconography was not practised or “imbibed” or “absorbed” by the expatriates through cultural hegemony without qualification. Indeed this congregation proved an arena where a diverse set of identities and agencies were performed and played out.

4.4. Transnational Encounters and Performance

While performance and folklore has proved an integral part of these in-group congregations of Icelanders abroad, their role in communication between folk groups is also crucial. In the remaining exposition of this case study I will be concentrating on that reflexive liminality of foreigner-native encounters in which exoticising performances are generated. Primarily I will build on the phenomenological perspective of the Icelandic participants in my research but in light of theories and approaches to transnational and prior folkloristic and ethnological research on tradition and experience.

Approaches to expressive culture in transnational encounters are plentiful within the discipline of folkloristics. Since work such as Richard Bauman's “Differential Identity and the Social Base of Folklore”²⁸⁵ the role of folklore as an arena for contesting territories and drawing boundaries has been firmly established. Twenty years later, scholarly efforts to examine the process were multiplied resulting in a number of innovative case studies. Many of them

²⁸⁵ Richard Bauman, “Differential Identity and the Social Base of Folklore” *Journal of American Folklore* 84. (1971) pp. 31-41.

adapted the performance-centred approach to illustrate the negotiable processes rendering people and symbols foreign as well as well as to analyze the latent and overt strategies in the manipulation of identity symbols.²⁸⁶ As discussed earlier (in chapter 2.6,) one of the pioneers of the performance-oriented approach, Bauman emphasised the significance of the narrator's performance in the interpretation of narratives, defining performance as a way of speaking and communicating, "the essence of which resides in the assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative skill, highlighting the way in which communication is carried out, above and beyond its referential content".²⁸⁷ To the participants of the narration, performance is open to evaluation, not only of the performer's skill and effectiveness of display (form) but also of the enhancement of experience (function). In turn, the evaluation of the form, meaning and function of oral narrative is situated in culturally defined scenes or events where behaviour and experience constitute meaningful contexts.

The reflective nature of performance lies in its ability to create, store, and transmit identity and cultures. Through it people not only present behaviour, but also reflexively comment on it and the values and cultural situations.²⁸⁸ Bauman has also argued that all natural sociable interactions are fundamentally about the construction and negotiation of identity and in interaction narrative performances are vehicles "for the encoding and presentation of information about oneself in order to construct a personal and social image".²⁸⁹ Within the dialectic between individual and society, the stories of self and other, that have been repeated often enough to become artfully shaped performances, are indices of a person's sense of self. Such performances enable us to understand

²⁸⁶ See for example Regina Bendix and Barbro Klein, "Foreigners and Foreignness in Europe: Expressive Culture in Transcultural Encounters", *Journal of Folklore Research* 30 (1993), 1 - 14 (p. 5); Roger Abrahams. "Narratives of Location and Dislocation" in *Folklore, Heritage Politics and Ethnic Diversity, A Festschrift for Barbro Klein*, ed. by Perti. Anttonen and others (Botkyrka: Multicultural Centre, 2000), pp. 15 – 20.

²⁸⁷ Bauman (1986), p. 193.

²⁸⁸ Fine and Speer, p. 8.

²⁸⁹ Bauman 1986, p. 21.

the Other, even across cultures, “since we universally express our lives in verbal performances, most often story performances”.²⁹⁰ But cross-cultural communication does not take place in a vacuum and native-foreign encounters are not always on equal footing. The crisis of the foreigner often lies in the ineffectiveness of his corpus of thought processes and behaviours in the new cultural context.²⁹¹ As Bendix and Klein have pointed out “members of the host culture only rarely perceive any advantage to themselves in adjusting their own habits to accommodate the foreigner”.²⁹²

To fully comprehend transcultural performances of this kind, the imbalance of power must be confronted in the analysis and research models. A prolific model of the force-relationships in vernacular practices (discussed in chapter 2.4) can be found in Michel de Certeau’s monumental work *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1988). Combining the often isolated research of representation on the one hand and the study of modes of behaviour on the other, Certeau focuses on the subtle processes of people conducting their lives in the midst of cultural consumption and innovation; or what Certeau refers to as the art of living. This work of scholarship also includes the study of narration that he describes as being inseparable “from the theory of practices, as its condition as well as its production”.²⁹³ The problem of studying these processes lay, according to Certeau, in their “tactical” position: cultural practices he perceives as reactions countering or evading a strategy of authority. He distinguishes these force relationships into *strategy* and *tactics*. The former is defined as the actions of a holder of will and power (such as a city or an institution). The later are the actions of those that do not work on a spatial or institutional localization and therefore fragmentarily insinuates itself into “the others” place.²⁹⁴ Ever

²⁹⁰ Fine and Speer, p. 9.

²⁹¹ Alfred Schutz 1972.

²⁹² Barbro and Klein, 6

²⁹³ Certeau, 78.

²⁹⁴ Certeau, p. xix. (for an excellent example of these force relationships see Timothy Tangherlini’s exploration of the storytelling of paramedics. Tangherlini 2000. (Discussed in chapter 2.4.1.)).

reaching towards a theory of the relationship that links everyday pursuits to particular circumstances these tactics can only be understood in the local networks of labour and recreation. These pursuits unfailingly establish relational tactics: “a struggle for life, artistic creations and autonomous initiatives.”²⁹⁵ Applying these models to autonomous initiatives of transcultural narrative performances are helpful in understanding the processes and relationships of power embedded in the various contexts of foreign-native encounters.

4.5. Peeping through Windows: Culture Transfer and Yulelad Blunders

The impact of force-relationships in transcultural performances is evident in the following story of a cultural transfer gone wrong. At Christmas, Icelandic families often arrange to have smoked lamb sent or brought from Iceland and adhere to other Christmas customs that may not always fit well with local tradition. Such was the predicament of an Icelandic family with two children living in North Carolina. Their live-in aunt and babysitter, Björk Þorleifsdóttir, interjected the following narratives into a conversation over dinner with four other thirty-something Icelandic dinner guests (including Katla and myself), touching on various amusing misunderstandings involving immigrants. She was encouraged to repeat the tale of “the Yulelads and the children”. This refers to her previously recounted story of an aborted attempt at introducing, to an American environment, the Icelandic custom of shoe-gifts in which parents, in lieu of the Yulelads, lay treats in children's shoes, placed overnight in windowsills.

BJÖRK: The siblings were very excited about all the Christmas fuss and had

²⁹⁵ Certeau, 9.

never been exposed to any American Santas. So they were off their heads with excitement to tell all their American friends on the block there in North Carolina about the Icelandic Santas. After which the kids on the block were much more enthusiastic about the Icelandic Christmas customs in which you put your shoe in window on the thirteen nights before Christmas and not some sock over the fireplace on Christmas night. Some nonsense like that.

(group chuckles)

LÍNEY: (mocking disdain) For crying out loud.

KATLA: All thirteen.

BJÖRK: Right. Thirteen dudes *sko*²⁹⁶

LÍNEY: Get a lot more stuff *sko*.

BJÖRK Yes, indeed. So when the first Yulelad, Stekkjastaur came, all the children in the street knew just who he was and had all (laughs) stuffed their shoes in the window. And some of the parents got wind of this new interest and began to wonder what all these shoes were doing in the windows. And the children explained that the Icelandic Yulelads were coming through and they were giving the children *in their shoe*. So some of the parents gave into the pressure and gave the children in their shoe. But other parents said “we won't participate in this nonsense”. So this created some sort of fiasco in the neighbourhood, some kind of committee of parents contacted my sister and kindly requested a meeting with my sister to discuss this Yulelad business with the American children and explain to them

KATLA: The big case of the Yulelads.

BJÖRK: The big case of the Yulelads yes (laughs) and explain to them that there has been some sort of misunderstanding, these Yulelads being rather senile old wags they had wandered too far over the ocean by mistake after delivering sweets to the Icelandic children. So my sister somehow had to explain that if any American children were given something in their shoe this was in fact a Yulelad blunder and that uh, it would not happen again because the Icelandic Yulelads were that nationalistic that they only gave to Icelandic children. And so ended the Yulelad-shoegiving to the native children of America. And so endeth that tale.

So we're very dutiful, the family, in spreading this nonsense (laughter).

²⁹⁶ I retain the Icelandic interjection *sko* because it is idiomatic and intoned with mock forcefulness, its obscure meaning being something to the effect of “see here!”, “let me tell you!” or “no less” depending on the context.

Expanding our borders (laughter builds up). The ambassadors of the Yulelads and the elves. I'm am quite a storyteller (in deep self-mocking tone).

([I translate:] BJÖRK: Þau voru mjög spennt systkynin fyrir öllu þessu jólastússi og aldrei neitt klikkað með alla þessa amerísku jólasveina. og náttúrlega enginn kom til Ameríku til þess að eyðileggja það fyrir þeim, Þannig að þau voru öll óð og uppvæg í desember að segja öllum amerísku vinunum í götunni frá í N-Carólinu. Síðan voru allir krakkarnir orðnir miklu spenntari fyrir þessum íslensku jólasíðum þar sem maður lætur skóna út í glugga en ekki einhvern sokk á jólanótt yfir arininn. Eitthvað rugl.

(group chuckles)

LÍNEY: (mocking disdain) Ég meina það sko.

KATLA: Þeir eru líka þrettán

BJÖRK: Já já. Þrettán gaurar sko

LÍNEY: Færð líka svolítið meira dót sko

BJÖRK: Já já, þannig að þegar fyrsti íslenski jólaveinninn, Stekkjarstaur, kom þá þekktu öll börnin í götunni þennan mann og voru öll (laughs) búin að troða skónum út í glugga og sumir foreldranna höfðu haft veður af þessum áhuga og voru eitthvað að spekulera hvað þessir skór væru að gera í glugganum og börnin útskýrðu þetta náttúrlega að þarna væru íslensku jólasveinarnir á ferðinni og börnin, þeir gæfu börnunum í skóinn, þannig að sumir foreldrar guggnuðu undan álaginu og gáfu börnunum í skóinn. En aðrir amerískir foreldrar sögðu “við tókum ekki þátt í þessu bulli” þannig að þetta skapaði eitthvað fiaskó í hverfinu, þannig að það varð einhver foreldrasamkunda sem hafði samband við systur mína og bað hana vinsamlegast að koma á fund og ræða þetta jólasveinamál við amerísku börnin og útskýra fyrir þeim að

KATLA: Stóra jólasveinamálið?

BJÖRK: Stóra jólasveinamálið já (laughs)– og útskýra fyrir þeim að þarna hefði orðið eitthvað rugl út af þessir jólasveinar væru orðnir frekar gamlir guttar og eitthvað kannski hefði það verið einhver miskilningur að vera þvælast þetta langa leið yfir hafið og kannski þreyttir á að vera að gefa öllum íslensku börnunum heima fyrst þannig að þeir hefðu verið eitthvað mis – sem sagt. Þannig að systir mín, hún þurfti sem sagt að útskýra fyriri þeim að þau amerísku börn sem hefðu fengið í skóinn, það hafi verið bara jólasveinarugl og hérna, þau

myndi ekkert fá aftur í skóinn því íslensku jólasveinarnir, þeir væru það þjóðermisshinnar að þeir gæfu bara íslenskum börnum. Og þar með lauk skójólasveinagjöfum í Ameríku til innfæddra barna

En við semsagt erum mjög dugleg fjölskyldan í að færa út þessa vitleysu. (Laughter) Svona færa út kvíarnar. (Laughter builds up) Sendiherrar jólasveinanna og álfanna. (In deep self-mocking tone) Ég er svo mikill sögumaður.)

While the story focuses on humorous children's folklore, it is nonetheless structured around tensions in adult force-relationships and cultural homogeneity. Into the tranquil street life of American children a tension is introduced in the form of eccentric male supernatural figures encroaching on the children's windows. These over-the-top Yulelads, like hybrids of peeping-toms and pied-pipers collude with the children and exceed even the American Santa Claus in their exotic extravagancy. This outrage is furthermore framed in the reflexive storytelling situation by mock-patriotism and cheering expressed by the storyteller through reflexive wordplay and intonation. But the dramatic imbalance of this tactical resistance must also be set right by the "host" culture. A force operation is accentuated by the "committee's swift summoning of the subordinate Icelandic mother. She in turn must rely on her own storytelling through which she mediates the "foreign" and inappropriate folk custom in an ingeniously absurd marriage of the supernatural and nationalism – a *supernationalism* of sorts. Whatever remaining tension there is left is deflated in the *coda*, the closing comment that frames the story in Björk's self-parody of her family as tradition bearers in a foreign outpost, and of herself as a storyteller, pre-empting any critique of personal patriotic sentiment or artistic pretensions.

Björk's reference to the elves refers to another conversation-embedded narrative, which exhibits a more successful cultural transmission. It centres on her own recital and performance of another Christmas custom to a group of her

friends in Alabama:

BJÖRK: Well, we exported the custom out to Alabama and our friends there thought it was just so cute, and exciting and crazy that they picked it up.

KRISTINN: The custom of?

BJÖRK: turning out all the lights in the house on the thirteenth [the thirteenth day of Christmas counting from December 25th] walking with one lit candle, all in a group, into each room and reciting the verse: *Come those who come will, stay those that stay will, depart those that depart will, harmlessly to me and mine.*²⁹⁷

And so the verse was written down and given to the gay community in Alabama (laughs) where we heard it had lived on in its written form and was considered really kookie and fun. But I don't know. It's been years since, they might have stopped but for a certain time in a certain group it continued.

KRISTINN: And how was all this received?

BJÖRK: They thought it was really exciting. They thought it was so crazy that people believed such nonsense. They were all "oh it's so cute." They thought it was lovable.

KRISTINN: (laughs) How did you get the idea, how did this come up?

BJÖRK: It's just a tradition in my family. You can do it on New Year's Eve but it works better on the Twelfth night. It's an absolute that if you don't do it on Twelfth Night, then you had better have invited the whole gang on New Year's Eve or Day. It's the most effective and you get good spirits in my family's house if it's the Twelfth night. But you can't mess it up or you get really bad karma (laughs). You don't invite danger into your home.²⁹⁸

KRISTINN: No no. But when you do this, and your family, is there some seriousness in this?

BJÖRK: Oh yes, no question. It's all rather spooky. You turn off the lights. It has to be turned off. Then someone gets the shakes, and we start to tense up. And everyday walks and mutters this verse. After that there is some giggling. And you've walked everywhere, into the food storage area and each cranny of the house. And everybody in my family is very conservative about this, even though they pretend to be great scientists. But this never fails. So.

²⁹⁷This is my translation of the variant Björk recited: *Komi þeir sem koma vilja, veri þeir sem vera vilja, fari þeir sem fara vilja, mér og mínum að meinalausu.*

²⁹⁸ Icelandic proverb: *Þú býður ekki hættunni heim.*

([I translate:] Jæja, við fluttum þetta út til Alabama og vinir okkar sem voru þarna með okkur þeim fannst þetta svo ógeðslega sniðugt og spennandi og klikkað að þetta var bara tekið upp

KRISTINN: Bíddu siðin að?

BJÖRK: Að slökkva öll ljós í húsinu á þrettándanum, gangu með eitt kertaljós, allir í hóp inn í hvert herbergi og fara með þessa vísu þannig að vísan var skrifuð niður og gefin til hommasamlégsins í Alabama (laughs).

KRISTINN: Hvernig var vísan aftur?

BJÖRK: Hérna, komi þeir sem koma vilja veri þeir sem vera vilja, fari þeir sem var fara vilja, mér og mínum að meinalausu og hérna síðan svo sem sagt heyrði maður það að þessu hafi verið viðhaldið og haldið upp á pappírinn með þessu skrifuðu niður og þetta hafi þótt eitthvað svo kúkkí og skemmtilegt ég veit það ekki það eru náttúrliga svo mörg ár síðan, þetta er eflaust hætt núna en þetta var í einhvern tíman hjá vissum hópi sem að þetta viðgekkst.

KRISTINN: Og hvernig var þessu við tekið?

BJÖRK: Þeim fannst þetta bara ógeðslega spennandi. Þeim fannst þetta eitthvað svo klikkað og bara svona að fólk trúði bara á eitthvað svona rugl. Þau voru bara “ó it so cute” þeim fannst þetta eitthvað svo krúttlegt

KRISTINN: laughs, hvernig datt þér þetta í hug, hvernig kom þetta til hjá þér

BJÖRK: Þetta er bara hefð úr minni fjölskyldu sem hefur alltaf. Þetta gengur út það. Þú mátt gera þetta á gamlárskvöldi. Það er ekki neitt spes gott að gera það þá á nýjárs er í lagi en ekki þetta er ekki jafnt svona sko þetta fúnkerar ekki eins vel á þessum tveimur kvöldum. Þrettándin er málið. Það var viðgengið ef þú gætir ómögulega gert þetta á þrettándann þá slyppirðu með að bjóða öllu hinu liðinu inn á þessum hinum tveimur dögum. Þetta er semsagt effektivast og þú ert með góða anda í húsinu hjá minni fjölskyldu ef það er þrettándinn en það má ekki klikka annars er það bara mjög slæmt karma (laughs). Maður býður ekki hættunni heim.

KRISTINN: Nei nei. En þegar þú gerir þetta og þínir nánustu – er einhver alvara í þessu?

BJÖRK: Já, ekki spurning. Þetta er svolítið svona skuggalegt. Þú slekkur allt. Það verður allt að vera slökkt. Svo er einhver með svona skjálfta og svolítið svona spennir og allir labba og hérna tuldra þessa þulu og eftir það er flissað svolítið eftir að búið er að gangi í meira að segja er gengið inn í búr og það verður að vera í hverri kompu á heimilunum og allir í minni fjölskyldu eru mjög hefðbundnir með þetta jafnvel þó þeir þykist vera einhverjir vísindamenn. En þetta ekki klikka ekki. Svo.)

In this story Björk ironically portrays the transmission of an Icelandic folk rite to the unusual recipients: a group of friends “gay community” of Americans in Alabama. The verse and custom is a variation of a protection rite in traditional Icelandic folklore practised either on Christmas night, New Year's Eve or Twelfth Night and is meant to appease the elves and hidden-people believed to wander at these times and is common in folktales.²⁹⁹ Björk stresses the irony of this and the othering reception of the custom but paradoxically underpins the rite's importance as social binder and folk belief among her otherwise scientifically-minded family members. What is significant, though, is how she constitutes its practice in a contextualised sensory experience, walking as a group in the darkness, bringing a dim light into every nook and cranny of the home. In so doing, she juxtaposes this dislocated performance of culture with her family's ritual exploration of the home's space – claiming and defining the inner from the outer; the us from the them. While this re-contextualization of the custom within the host culture is to some extent based on its perceived “cuteness”, as she herself states, this sensory impact of the narrative context should not be overlooked. What is also significant from the perspective of native-foreigner relations is that within the host culture: her native friends in Alabama, it is the *othered*: Björk, that is in control of the performance, setting “the stage” and directing the action.

²⁹⁹ See for example Terry Gunnell, “The Coming of the Christmas Visitors: Folk legends concerning the attacks on Icelandic farmhouses made by spirits at Christmas”, *Northern Studies*, 38 (2004), 51-75.

4.6. *The Dubliners*

The ambassadorial role of more or less settled expats towards newcomers is an important one and involves introducing them to locals and, having pioneered the cultural landscape, passing on information and experience. A case in point is the experience of a small group of Icelandic students studying in Dublin through most of the 1980s. Of all my empirical data this relates an expatriate experience that reaches the furthest back in time and indeed the informants Dr. Gísli Sigurðsson and Dr. Jón M. Einarsson, recently turned 50, had long since completed their studies and moved back to Iceland. The interview took place one late afternoon at the Dubliners bar in Reykjavík in February of 2007. Gísli had suggested an Irish bar for the interview, which we had agreed would be a fitting and conducive venue for the interview and narration of their years in Dublin.

After setting up the video and audio and purchasing beverages at the bar (Guinness for Gísli and myself and tea for Jón), a pre-interview atmosphere was inevitable in which questions of my background and research were asked. I answered, without much elaboration, that I was interested in people's narratives about being abroad and that I had heard Gísli tell such stories before. Following this brief exchange Gísli, not a frequent smoker, asks if he should let himself be seen smoking on camera. After exchanging humorous remarks on the subject of smoking, Gísli, who had come latest, asked Jón if he had "started telling [me] any lies yet." I believe this set the stage for a level of ambiguity that clearly distinguished this documentation of narrative performance from an empirical interview on their experiences. The situational context was that of a storytelling event, the "stage" set for telling stories, which clearly prompted the performative use of language, body and space. "Have you started it", asked Jón glancing toward the camera, and then suggested a story he called "when we repaired Mr.

Spence's pipe." This was now a storytelling event in the process of being recorded. Gísli then suggested we "begin at the beginning". "That's a good idea", I said, "begin at the beginning." What followed was a cluster of stories and conversation lasting close to two hours. The following narratives initiated the storytelling. It introduces the friendship group and encapsulates both the social and cultural milieu they one by one found themselves in:

1.

GÍSLI: Well naturally it began with me staying a year in Dublin by myself. Then the next winter, Andrés Eiríksson arrives. Jón hadn't come yet and Andrés and I were renting a place together. And I went and showed him the pubs and the Guinness and what not (takes a sip of his Guinness) and where you can buy what. And we go on like this together for a couple of weeks and Andrés starts to get bored of it. There are never any girls to catch at the pubs and Andrés wants to go to the discos. I myself, odd as it is, had not acquainted myself with this, after a year alone (looks at Jón). Jón has never entirely believed me on that matter. So I ask around where I might find any good discos and take Andrés to one. We hadn't stayed in the place for half an hour when he already had a lady by his side. An arrangement is made so that he can meet her for lunch two days later. That was the date you see. Couldn't get any further that evening you see. Everything set firmly in its place. So they hooked up nicely and he's married to her, as we speak, in Ireland. So everything worked out.

2.

But we toughed it out that winter until the next fall. And then there is a knock on the door and Jón appears. And we have to teach him some tricks that we had accumulated. Like the one with the hotels. The pubs always closed rather early and that didn't always suit our Icelandic drinking habits and we wanted to drink more. And these discos were really expensive, not something you can afford on student loans. But there were bars in the hotels but you couldn't drink there unless you were a guest at the hotel. But we had found out when we were visited by some Icelanders on an Easter trip to Dublin that you could drink there if you were a guest. So we began to frequent the hotels and pretended to be business tycoons at the hotel to be able to drink there. And that was one of the tricks we taught Jón.

([I translate]: (1) Já, það náttúrllega byrjar þannig að ég var fyrst í Dublin í eitt ár bara einn, Svo næsta vetur þá kemur Andrés Eiríksson. Jón var ekkert komin þá og við Andrés leigðum saman. Og ég fór svona að sýna honum krárnar og Guinness bjórinn og þetta (takes a sip of his Guinness) og hvar er hægt að kaupa þetta. Og við fórum saman í nokkrar vikur og þá fer Andrési að leiðast þetta. Að það séu aldrei neinar stelpur að ná í á kránunum og Andrés vill fara á diskótek. Og ég var, eins og furðulegt er, hafði aldrei kynnt mér þetta mál, eftir eitt ár, einn. (Looks at Jón) Jón hefur nú aldrei trúað þessu alveg. Og svo ég spyrst fyrir hvar muni vera góð diskótek og fer með Andrési á það. Við erum ekki þar í hálf tíma þegar Andrés ser komin með dömu. Þá er sko skipulagt að hann fái að hitta hana í hádegismat tveimur dögum síðar. Það var deitið sko. Komst ekki áfram þetta sama kvöld. Allt í föstum skorðum. Svo ná þau bara vel saman og hann er giftur henni núna út á Írlandi og allt bara gekk upp. (2) En við hörkum þarna þennan vetur þar til næsta haust að þá er bankað upp á hjá okkur og Jón kemur. Og þá þurfum við að fara að kenna honum ýmsar brellur sem við vorum búnir að koma okkur upp. Eins og þessar sögur með hótellinn. Sko krárnar lokuðu alltaf frekar snemma og það hentaði ekki alltaf okkar íslensku drykkjusiðum við vildum drekka meira. Og þessi diskótek eru rándýr. drykkirnir eru alveg til þess að borga fyrir það af námslánunum. En svo voru barir á hótelnunum og þar mátti ekki drekka nema þú værir hótelgestur. Og við höfum komist að því þegar komu Íslendingar í páskaferð til Dyflinna – að þeir máttu drekka á hótelinu eftir lokun. Svo við vorum farnir að stunda þetta, mæta og þykjast vera erlendir viðskiptajöfrar á hótelinu til þess að geta drukkið þar áfram. Og þetta var ein af þeim brellum sem við vorum að kenna Jóni.)

This narration is a continuous one and is quoted in its entirety to convey both an aesthetic quality and a sense of cohesion. But in fact it might be divided into two personal experience narratives. The former (marked 1) comments on the societal context, what the Icelanders of more or less “protestant” background experienced as an outlandish Irish Catholic courtship milieu. It also expresses the social context of young expatriated Icelandic men in their roles as pioneers and newcomers.³⁰⁰ It follows the Labovian model relatively closely: it is the story

³⁰⁰ As stated in the *Theory and Methodology* chapter the social context comprises the group within which the narratives circulate reflecting the social situations of the participants. The societal context more widely expresses the society as a whole such as authoritarian features

of their beginning (abstract), in what order they came to Dublin (orientation); the newcomer Andrés is introduced to local entertainment but is bored and looking for female companionship (complication); the speaker Gísli makes a comical remark on his own lack of interest in such things (evaluation (how speaker views the events; conveying the point of narrative)); they go to the disco where Andrés finds his future bride despite rigid local courtship traditions; (result (resolution)) ; and so everything surprisingly worked out well (coda). The textual and situational contexts are in effect married in Gísli's performance and Jón's participation as he is pulled into the narrated events, having never quite believed in Gísli's lack of interest in girls and discos, and then interjects that he always preferred the nightclubs himself.

The second narrative is shorter and less structured. It continues on the thread of pioneers mentoring newcomers but this time there is a shared experience of "toughing it out" through the winter in the new place. The newcomer is Jón and the complication is the limited drinking hours. Differentiation through national identity is also more explicit: their "Icelandic" drinking habits are highlighted and; more subtly, the image of the Icelandic businessmen abroad is introduced. This development also introduces the tactic of play that runs through so many of my informants' narratives: tactically placing oneself into the other's space of authority and status through performance and trickery. This is a performed prank of tactical and liminal resistance to the restrictions and roles within the new locality. Asserting control within ambiguous force relationships the folk hero "pulls a prank". As in Richard Bauman's documentation of practical jokes the elaborate management of point of view serves the important role of supplying the "audience" with the crucial information not known to the person on the receiving end of the prank.³⁰¹ The point of view and narrated context is also consistent with the cultural context of the Icelandic students, their communal symbolism, taking the place of the powerful

and power struggles. See Hermann Bausinger, *Folklore on Two Continents: Essays in Honor of Linda Dégh*, ed. by Nikolai Burlakoff and Carl Lindahl (Bloomington: Trickster Press, 1980).
³⁰¹ See for example Bauman (1986), p. 55.

businessmen if only temporarily.

4.6.1. Fixing Mr. Spence's Drain Pipe

Delving deeper into the cultural context of these narrations one can read an appreciation of cultural cunning, courage and of cultural sensitivity. This is also apparent in the storytelling event itself and the audio-visual data representing it. From the fabric of their shared experience in the past the narrators have woven tales that celebrate the coping tactics (NB: not strategies) they employed to deal with their liminal status within a new milieu. Further conversation on their experience in Dublin also cast light on this underlying context of marginality and liminality. Jón for example remarked that generally “Icelanders were not as concerned with the rules of society.”³⁰² While they mostly associated with Irishmen³⁰³ they tended often to be “eccentric” because their “wall was not as fortified” as others. “We were different because we didn’t know these societal rules. Therefore we went over more walls than they [the Irish in general] could allow themselves to.”³⁰⁴ Jón added that the fact that they were Icelandic, as well as students, gave them licence to break convention. They describe how in some cases their national background was an asset for example in such practical matters as renting an apartment. According to Jón the young Irish students had a reputation for undesirable behaviour having “broken out of the countryside and away from their mothers”. The Icelanders, on the other hand, were just adequately “distantly related, but not overly so,” to be trusted. The licence they acquired was therefore, in this case, as a way of smoothing over their benign cultural insensitivity.

This aspect of their liminality is also reflected in the first narrative as well

³⁰² “[I translate:] Íslendingar voru ekki uppteknir af þjóðfélagsreglum.”

³⁰³ Jón also described a group of Iraqi friends who “competed with the Irish for the Icelanders” and remarked on cultural clashes regarding the behaviour of Icelandic women.

³⁰⁴ “[I translate:] Við vorum öðruvísi að því að við kunnum ekki þessar samskiptareglur. Við fórum yfir fleiri múra heldur en þeir gátu gert.”

as other following narratives centring on their expatriate companion Andrés. The stories of Andrés, who was not present during the storytelling event, are in effect heroic stories of unexpected cultural sensitivity and cultural courage that trumps that of the “pioneers” Gísli and Jón. These narratives reflect on how Andrés, having broken the first barrier of courtship, continued on that route. While Andrés’s official social position toward his new girlfriend was still that of a friend her family was nonetheless closely evaluating his character:

KRISTINN: Maybe there is something you would like to add, some memorable stories from this time, regardless of my questions.

GÍSLI: Maybe if we continue about when we first arrived for dinner at the future parents in law of Andrés. We had just acquired knowledge of the different whiskey traditions of Irishmen; that it was of different quality; and from different places, and we had developed a taste for Bushmills. But Andrés hadn’t done his homework – at least not to my knowledge – hadn’t done any research on the origin of his girlfriend’s parents. So we come there this first Sunday to a quiet dinner. We arrived and nothing significant happened. We were shown into a cold room. Actually the fireplace had been lit in our honour. And then we were asked if we wanted something to drink and we were of course thirsty students and thought it a pretty good idea. And what was on offer. Well whiskey. Yes. Yes. “And what kind of whiskey would you like [looks slowly to the left] Scottish or Irish?” asked the father. And we were smart enough to answer “Irish”. “ All right then, what kind of Irish whiskey. “Bushmills” answered Andrés. And then the father asks: “Red or Black?” “Black” they didn’t have the Golden then - that’s much better. And that was just a goal in from the post because he [the father] was from exactly that region where Bushmills originated.

JÓN: Yes, in Northern Ireland wasn’t it.

GÍSLI: Yes. So we were already in his graces because of this.

KRISTINN: A shot in the dark though?

GÍSLI: Yes. A shot in the dark. Completely. And Andrés would have many more whiskey days with this family - under different circumstances.

([I translate:] KRISTINN: Er kannski eitthvað annað sem þið viljið koma að, t.d. einhverjar minnisstæðar sögur frá þessum tíma, svona burtséð frá þessum spurningum mínum?)

GÍSLI: Kannski áfram með þetta þegar við komum í matinn fyrst þarna hjá verðandi tengdaforeldrum Andrésar að þá vorum við búnir að setja okkur inní ólíka viskísiði íra og að viskíð voru ólíkrar gerðar og frá ólíkum stöðum og vorum búnir að koma okkur upp þeim smekk að Bushmills væri gott viskí. En Andrés hafði ekki gert neina heimavinnu í því að rannsaka – eða minnsta kosti ekki miðlað henni til mín – sko uppruna foreldranna. Svo við komum þarna þennan fyrsta sunnudag í svona rólegt matarboð. Og við komum þarna og það er í raun ekkert að gerast. Okkur er bara vísað í svona kalda stofu. Þar sem var reyndar arinn sem var kveikt upp í okkur til heiðurs. Og svo er spurt hvort við viljum fá eitthvað að drekka og við auðvitað langþyrstir stúdentar og fannst það vera nokkuð góð hugmynd og hvað það megi vera – jú viskí – já já. Og hvernig viskí [looks slowly to his left] skoskt eða írskt spyr pabbinn, og við vorum nógu gáfaðir til að segja írskt. Og þá, og hvernig írskt þá, segir hann. “Bushmills”, segir hann, “Bushmills” og þá segir hann sko. Red or Black og þá veljum við Black, það var ekki komið þetta Golden frá Bushmills sem var ennþá betra. Og þá var þetta ákkúrat stöngin inn því hann var frá þessu svæði þar sem Bushmills var búinn til.

JÓN: Já, Norður-Írlandi var það ekki?

GÍSLI: Já, já. Þannig að við vorum strax komnir í náðina út á þetta.

KRISTINN: Já, en slysaskot samt?

GÍSLI: Já, slysaskot. Algjört. Þetta var - og Andrés átti eftir að hafa mikla viskídaga með þessari fjölskyldu. Í öðru samhengi.)

As is evident in my question this narrative was introduced when I believed the storytelling was winding down and my context specific follow-up questions had been answered. Unknown to me at the time the cluster of personal experience narratives were far from conclusion. Gísli's self-mocking overstated style (i.e. “the fireplace had been lit in our honour”) expresses the retrospective aspect of the storytelling: a good-natured self-deprecation of the very young and inexperienced students they once were. The societal context of regionalism and sectarianism that the protagonists find themselves in provides the underlying tension of the complication of the narrative: the test put before the suitor who the audience knows is unprepared. Yet, in the resolution, the suitor and his friends through chance or intuition answer correctly and gain the favour of the their host. The intimate use of ironic intonations, while conveying the narrator's privileged

point of view, is crucial to the dynamics of these narratives. Another case in point is the consecutive narrative in the same cluster: an account of another visit to the girlfriend's family household. Furthermore this narrative had been referred to from the beginning as "the one where we fixed Mr. Spence's drainpipe":

GÍSLI: And then it was the drainpipe story that Jón was mentioning earlier (Jón laughs).

KRISTINN: The drain pipe story?

GÍSLI: Yes, we were invited another time (smiles widely) to dinner but this involved a major chore in the garden. These were well-to-do people and lived in a large house and the drain pipe – the sewage went through the whole garden and out into the street and somewhere far off. But the problem was that it was congested and a great puddle of... just urine had appeared in the middle of the garden.

JÓN: A broken pipe basically.

GÍSLI: (smiles mischievously) So the project, before we could get any whiskey or steak and the lot was to dig this all up and fix the pipe. And the son of household, the younger brother was with us, and the father, overseeing the project, and we got fairly filthy doing this. And finally we got down to the pipe. Fine. But all of the sudden: (gestures "flowing up") things start flowing out of the sides instead of forward. So we had to take this all out of ground to see what it was. Of all things a condom was stuck in the pipe and had congested it.

JÓN: It was ballooning out.

GÍSLI: Yes. The young kid was old enough to be able to pretend not to know what this was and make a big scene out of this, in his innocence (said with an ironic air) "what is this?" (Kristinn and Jón laugh). Of course there was no good response to this because condoms were completely illegal in Ireland and no one in the family was supposed to be using them.

KRISTINN: Was it a Catholic family?

GÍSLI: No, it was mixed. But you just couldn't get this in the country. It was smuggled. Just like cocaine" (Jón laughs). So it was never exposed - inside – what had caused the congestion.

JÓN: No. The matter was at an end. It was silenced.//

GÍSLI: // Yes something like that. And were invited to take a shower and offered some fresh clothes to dine in. That's how it went.

KRISTINN: So there were many suspects to be considered.

GÍSLI: Yes. That's how it went.

JÓN: Yes it was an embarrassing matter.

KRISTINN: Diplomatic.

GÍSLI: (Gísli laughs knowingly) But the most remarkable thing about the family was Andrés's marriage, which was really the only thing that was the only thing about this family that was *outside of the map* [a figure of speech meaning inappropriate or unconventional] . Not really a very promising man financially and not of any preferable religion. But it was the only one that worked.

JÓN: Yes, the siblings.

GÍSLI: Of the siblings yes. All ended in, while looking good at the start – ended in trouble.

JÓN: Yes. Yes. It was a very good relationship.

KRISTINN: So there have been a lot of factors to consider in these cultural relations.

JÓN: Yes, but it was of course because the father was a protestant, wasn't it, and the mother a Catholic, so there was more tolerance.

GÍSLI: Yes. Well not towards them.

JÓN: It wasn't?

GÍSLI: No well yes - because he was an Icelander and especially because he was such a *dark horse* (Icelandic phrase: *kom sterkur inn*, literally: *came in strong*). He had the right line and was a hit with the American father-in-law. Another father-in-law. The sister married an American man of the best sort that was the son of an American general. And Andrés, of all men, an old Alliance man (Young People's Socialist Alliance) had such rapport with the general and, fittingly, by the whiskey cabinet.

JÓN: Yes (laughs).

GÍSLI: (laughs) So he was obviously ...

KRISTINN: Collecting points?

JÓN: Yes.

GÍSLI: Yes. He collected a lot of points at this party (smiles).

KRISTINN: This was important. This isn't just joking around.

GÍSLI: No. No.

JÓN: It's a long process. It has to be said.

([I translate:] GÍSLI: Og svo var þessi frárennslissaga sem að Jón var nú að

viðra herna áðan (Jón laughs).

KRISTINN: Frárennslissagan.

GÍSLI: Já og svo er okkur boðið í annað sinn. (smiles widely) í mat en það fylgdi því að það var svona verk að vinna í garðinum áður. Þetta var svona velstætt fólk og bjó í stóru húsi og frárennslið eða klóakið það lá eftir öllum garðinum út á götu og eitthvað langt í burtu. Og vandamálið sem að við vorum settir í var að það var stíflað og út í miðjum garði var komin stærðarinnar hlandfor bara.

JÓN: Brotið rör bara.

GÍSLI:(smiles mischievously) Þannig að verkefnið var áður en við fengum viski og steik og allar græjur það var að grafa þetta upp og laga leiðsluna. Og sonurinn í fjölskyldunni, yngri bróðir hennar var með, pabbinn, svona verkstjórinn, og urðum náttúrlega frekar skítugir af þessu. Og komum loksins niður á rörið og allt í lagi með það. Það bara (motions a "flowing upp") flæðir út um samskeytin sem venjulega renna áfram. Þannig að við þurfum að taka þetta allt upp og gá hvers kyns er. Þá hafði af öllum stöðum, hafði smokkur festst í niðurfallinu og stíflað það.

JÓN: Blásið út bara.

GÍSLI: Já.

KRISTINN: Já ókei.

GÍSLI: En strákurinn litli hann var nógu gamall til þess að geta þótt ekki vita hvað þetta var og gat gert heilmikið atriði úr þessu í sakleysi sínu (said with an ironic air) "hvað þetta væri" (Kristinn and Jón laugh) og var náttúrlega fátt um svör því í fyrsta lagi voru smokkar algjörlega ólöglegir á Írlandi og enginn í fjölskyldunni átti að vera að nota þetta.

KRISTINN: Var þetta kaþólsk fjölskylda?

GÍSLI: Nei, hún var blönduð. En það var bara ekki hægt að fá þetta í landinu. Þetta var smyglvarningur. Eins og kókain bara. (Jón laughs) Þannig að þetta var. Það var aldrei upplýst inni hvað hafði valdið stíflunni.

JÓN: Nei. Menn eyddu þessu bara. Þetta var þaggað niður//

GÍSLI: // já þetta var bara eitthvað svona. Og okkur var boðið upp á sturtu og ný fót til þess að ganga inn í matinn á eftir. En þetta var svona.

KRISTINN: Það hafa ýmsir sökudólgar komið til greina.

GÍSLI: Já. Það var svona.

JÓN: Þetta var svolítið vandræðalegt mál.

KRISTINN: Diplómatískt.

GÍSLI: (Gísli laughs knowingly) En það var merkilegast líka við þessa fjölskyldu

að þetta hjónaband Andrésar, sem var í rauninu - sem var eina sem var út af kortinu hjá þessari fjölskyldu. Maður sem var ekki vænlegur til vinnings á fjármálasviðinu og ekki af neinum trúarbrögðum sem voru í lagi, að þetta var eina sem gekk upp

JÓN: Já, af systkynunum.

GÍSLI: Af systkynunum. Sem allar enduðu í – sem svona litu betur út í upphafi, höfðu endað með vandræðum.

JÓN: Já já. Þetta var hið besta samband.

KRISTINN: Það hefur verið að mörgu að hyggja í þessum menningarsamskiptum.

JÓN: Já, en það var náttúrliga svona út af því að hann var protestant er það ekki pabbinn og mamman kaþólikki, að þá var meiri tolerans.

GÍSLI: Já sko nei ekki gagnvart þeim.

JÓN: var það ekki.

GÍSLI: Nei. eða jú að hann væri Íslendingur og svo sérstaklega út af því að hann kom svo sterkur inn held ég. Hann var alveg með réttu línuna. Og svo sló hann nú alveg í gegn hjá hjá tengdaföðrunar ameríska – annar tengdafaðir –systirinn giftist amerískum manni af bestu gerð sem var sonur hershöfðingja úr bandaríkjaher. Og Andrés, af öllum mönnum gamall fylkingarmaður frá Íslandi náði mjög góðu sambandi við generallinn og einmitt við viskískápinn.

JÓN: Jáhá. Laughs.

GÍSLI: Laughs. Þannig að hann svona greinilega...

KRISTINN: safnaði prikum?

JÓN: Já.

GÍSLI: Já hann safnaði mjög mörgum prikum í þessu partíi (smiles).

KRISTINN: Þetta er mikilvægt. Þetta er ekki bara grin.

GÍSLI: Nei nei.

JÓN: þetta er langur prósess. Það verður að viðurkenna það.)

This story can also be viewed as symbolic expression of the cultural milieu they were being introduced into. What is also obvious from the performance of the narrative, the laughter and intonation, is that this is a humorous narrative. Elliott Oring stresses the need to look at the performance of humour and, as discussed in chapter two, the interpretation of humour demands an attention to the

contexts of its expression: “Humour does not exist in a vacuum. It succeeds or fails in particular social situations and specific interactions”.³⁰⁵ Oring also introduces the individual context that can for example be seen in the choice of material and style: the mock formal orientation and the somewhat “grotesque” complication underlined with the son’s ironic teasing. Within the dyadic father-son relationship the son plays the clown. In addition to viewing humour as a safety valve, a social corrective, and resistance, scholars have also described clowning as an embodiment of abstract statements about the ideological bases of society and the cosmos. The clown is the violator of the *nomos* of the social group, the socially constructed ordering of experience.³⁰⁶ That *nomos*, which protects the social group, also violates individual freedom. In his article “The Clown as the Lord of Disorder” Wolfgang Zucker imagines that the laughter inspired by the clown is the laughter of an infinite God at the presumption of a finite society that regards its prescriptions as absolute.³⁰⁷ In that light the son’s clowning disrupts a double or ironic morality – the incongruity of what is said and what is done. An irony later cemented in a mutual, yet unstated, cover-up extending the dyadic father-son relationship to the Icelandic guests.

This irony is also echoed in the storytelling event. In the extended conversationally embedded summary and evaluation of the tale lies the additional information that this is the marriage within the family that worked despite being the only one that was “off-colour”. It also provides the necessary societal context that creates further tension: the alleged illegality of the condom. There again lies the context of the resolution: a conspiracy of silence that bonds the men together: father; son; foreign suitor and friends. But the evaluation of the story that takes place in this exchange also brings forth what the narrator seems to find most significant in the cluster of “Andrés narratives”: That his

³⁰⁵ Oring 1992, p. x.

³⁰⁶ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociology of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books 1967), pp. 5 – 25.

³⁰⁷ Wolfgang Zucker, “The Clown as the Lord of Disorder, in *Holy Laughter*, ed. by M. Conrad Hyers (New York: Seabury, 1969) pp. 75-89.

success rested on his liminal status as an Icelander and the agency he appropriated.

This liminal status is partly based on the exotic or illusiveness image of Iceland and Icelanders in Dublin at the time. Jón and Gísli feel that very little was known about them. Norse presence in Viking Age Ireland was relatively well known and even sensitive to some. Icelanders were sometimes understood to be on the whole affluent compared to many other nationalities and in a time of recession in Ireland. The largest backdrop of current events was news coverage of the so-called Cod Wars – a series of confrontations between the 1950s and 1970s regarding fishing rights in the North Atlantic. The dispute ended in favour of the Icelanders: a fact that, according to Gísli and Jón, bought them some favour with the Irish. But despite whatever scraps of knowledge they were met with the Icelanders felt their rather obscure national background offered them a clean slate on which they could build.

4.6.2 Everyday Nationhood

Nationality does not only feature in the narratives within transnational interaction. It also plays a role among the Icelanders themselves and in their common experience. The friends expressed a certain sense of “banal nationalism”, a commonplace celebration of their nationality, and a craving for some sort of Icelandic familiarity. They went to much trouble to acquire this as well. This included making a trip from Dublin to Northern Ireland where the Icelandic *Fram FC* was playing a local team. There they “pretended to support Fram but the main thing was to feel some allegiance with our fellow countrymen”, as Gísli put it. In that regard, as with so many other informants, food from Iceland played a significant part of being an expatriate. Many

humorous narratives express the complications involving the importation and presentation of food. They, for example, retell with some amusement how unhappy they were with the unfamiliar cut of lamb that was the custom of the local butchers. They went as far as giving a butcher specific written instructions on how to cut the lamb the way they were used to it. Food was also brought and sent from home, in limited amounts, for the apparent reason of keeping to the familiar food they were accustomed to.

4.6.3. Performing Iceland

“Food from home” was also a way of presenting oneself, or a part of oneself, to the locals. But it was by far not the only way of doing this. Both informants elaborate on how they presented the country regularly to locals. Jón remembers having slowly developed what he calls a speech or a lecture on Iceland in reaction to being asked the same questions repeatedly. This included: how closely Icelanders and Irishmen were related in the Viking Age; that “our forefathers had been up there together” and that Irish and Icelandic narratives cross-fertilized each other. “Then I went into the land itself,” Jón continues: he would talk about hot springs and how they were used for heating; That there was a lot of fishing; That Iceland had a good economy; That it was also known for the Cod Wars and for its beautiful women. This “lecture” was according to Jón a regular occurrence. In a self-deprecating and straightforward style of narrating Jón explains how the chore of narrating “the lecture” was delegated to an Irish friend:

JÓN: But we were always delivering this Iceland lecture.

KRISTINN: Oh really?

JÓN: Yes, because it was always the same questions. It took some time to realize that this was really a courtesy to get you to relax. But I always delivered this lecture and it had become quite long and polished and I had stopped noticing when I was delivering it.

And then Dan, a good friend of mine from Belfast, had learned it by heart. I was tired of it so he started to do it for me. So people began to ask him “so you have lived a long time in Iceland?”. “What? No, no I have never lived there. This is just what I have heard Jón say.

([I translate:] JÓN: En maður var alltaf að flytja þennan Íslandsfyrirlestur.

KRISTINN: Já er það?

JÓN: Já, út af því að það voru alltaf sömu spurningarnar og hérna maður varð náttúrulega. Þetta tók svolítið langan tíman að læra að þetta var náttúrulega svona kurteis til að fá mann til að slappa af. En ég flutti alltaf fyrirlesturinn og hann var orðinn talsvert langur og slípaður að ég var hættur að taka eftir því þegar ég var flutti hann. En svo var Dan, góður vinur minn frá Belfast, að hann kunni fyrirlesturinn og ég var orðinn leiður á að flytja hann þannig að bara Dan flutti hann. Þannig að fólk var farið að spyrja hann: “Já, svo þú hefur búið þarna lengi?” “Ha, nei nei, ég hef aldrei komið þarna. Þetta er bara það sem ég heyrð Jón segja”.)

This humorous anecdote reveals how repeatedly this event took place. It also underlines the liquidity of folk groups and the experiences relating to it. The Irish friend undertakes the role of narrating Iceland or performing a sense of North in the Icelander’s place: A surrogate member of the folk group: *Icelanders*. There lies also the underlying incongruity that the image of Iceland could be delivered by an outsider that had never set foot on the island. This incongruity also exposes the constructed nature of such images. But there is also subtle self-deprecation in Jón’s narrative that springs from an acquired cultural sensitivity. It took a long time, he says, to realize that the questions that prompted the lecture were not necessarily rooted in sincere interest but were rather a tactic to put the young guest at ease. The narrative presentation of Iceland is therefore in itself put forth in an ironic light.

The narratives of Gísli and Jón present us with the cultural and societal contexts of Icelanders abroad accentuating an appreciation of cultural cunning, courage

and of cultural sensitivity. This is also apparent in the, often ironic, storytelling event itself and the audio-visual data representing it. The storytelling is a symbolic expression of the cultural milieu the Icelanders found themselves in and how they tactically performed their identities through various forms of expression such as narrative, tradition and food. While these “Dublin-based” narratives present us with long-term success stories of culture transfer, Björk’s narratives (ch. 4.5.) do the opposite. At least in the sense that the introduction of Icelandic traditions were in the short term rejected or appropriated to very different contexts than they originated in. But the parallels between the “Dublin” and the “Alabama” narratives are strongest in terms of how they both present tactical powerplay within native-foreigner relations. Narrating to the host culture it is the *othered* Icelanders that take control of the performance, setting “the stage” and directing the action – not unlike the Saga character Sneglu-Halli (ch. 3.1.) Both stress the irony and the othering reception of Icelandic traditions abroad yet also underpin their importance as social binders in their respective folk groups. While the re-contextualisation of these traditions within the host culture is to some extent based on its perceived exoticism these sensorial context of the narratives (such as walking in the dark or the taste of whiskey) is also significant. This sensory context will also be of importance in the next chapters that explore further the folklore of food and irony.

5. Ironising Food Traditions

The representation of Iceland to Irishmen was of course not done through narrative alone. As stated before food traditions were also an important way of presenting oneself. But interestingly the Icelanders in Dublin often presented food traditions from home in an ironic light. The Icelanders for example introduced dried cod to their Irish friends and exchanged jokes deprecating the national food. One Irish friend for example, referred to as Stevo, likened the dry, firm and wafer-thin fish to beer mats and “wondered how any man would get the notion to eat this.”³⁰⁸ Within these dyadic relationships much was allowed and the ridicule was not exclusive to the national food. Irishmen also made jokes about their own traditional food and stated for example that the Irish contribution to world cuisine was merely potatoes and a six-pack. Third parties were also made the butt of transnational food misunderstandings. One anecdote, following Stevo’s reaction to dried cod, builds on the familiar image of the uncultured American:

And he told a joke about a guy coming from the mainland, who was drinking beer, and he, an American, wasn’t acquainted with the beer mat culture. He was ordering his fifth beer and added: “but no more biscuits” (we laugh deeply). But this [the dried fish] didn’t quite suit Stevo [the Irish friend] although he wasn’t picky when it came to food.

([“I translate:” Og hann sagði einhvern brandara frá manni á meginlandinu sem var að drekka bjór, Ameríkani og hafði ekki kynnst þessari bjórplattamenningu og hafði svo

³⁰⁸ “[I translate:] Og hann undraðist hvernig nokkrum manni dytti í hug að í hug að borga þetta.”

pantað bjór – fimmta bjórinn-: “but no more bisquets” (we laugh deeply). Þannig að það féll ekki í kramið hjá Stevo þótt hann væri nú ekki mjög vandfýsin á mat.)

On another occasion the Icelanders were formally invited to a cultural event and asked by persons within the University to bring “something traditional from Iceland.” The result was an event attended by about a dozen Irishmen and two Icelanders where the latter were introduced to such Icelandic food as dried cod and cured shark. “And it was received remarkably well, “ says Jón and continues: “They understood that this was just old-fashioned traditional food (laughs) and ate it with an open mind.”³⁰⁹ The laughter represented in the brackets from the situational context/the interview, might seem odd but it goes beyond the humorous incongruity of the quaint and old-fashioned. My questioning and Jón’s elaboration cast much light on this practice of irony:

JÓN: Of course the shark astounded them and the hardest would maybe eat it. And people got to know each other a little bit.

[...]

Men were astounded by the shark and asked what on earth this was. But of course one capitalised on this sort of *eccentricity* (note Jón’s use of the English word), the absurdity of it, and blew it so out of proportion that men really didn’t get a chance to add to it.

KRISTINN: Why does one do that?

JÓN: I just did it. I enjoyed it. I said (deadpan tone) this is shark and usually its buried and sometimes they pissed on it in the old days. Then you would go into the biology of it: that there was ammonia breaking down and there was a certain cultivation going on. And... I took it to the deep end. You know. And men thought this was fantastically strange – and fun.

([I translate]: Jón: *Og menn voru náttúrulega stórunrandi á þessum hákarli og hörðustu menn borðuðu hann kannski. Og þarna svona kynntust menn aðeins*

[...]

Nei, menn náttúrulega undruðust þennan hákarl og spurðu hvern andskotinn þetta væri.

³⁰⁹ “[I translate:] Og menn bara tóku þessu afskaplega vel. Þeir skildu það að þetta var bara svona gamaldags þjóðlegur matur [laughs] og borðuðu þetta með opnum huga.”

En maður náttúrulega gerði út á svona eccentricity - sko fáránleikan í þessu og blés hann út þannig að kannski menn höfðu eiginlega ekki færi á því að vera bæta á það

KRISTINN: Af hverju gerir maður það?

JÓN: Ég gerði það bara . Mér þótti það bara gaman. Ég sagði þetta er hákárll og venjulega er þetta grafið í jörðu og stundum var nú mýgið á þetta í gamla daga og svo fór maður aðeins í lífræðina í þessu að þarna væru þvagefni sem væru að brotna niður þarna og það væri sérstök gerjun sem ætti sér stað þarna. Og – fór svona í djúpu laugina með þetta. Þú veist. Og mönnum fannst þetta stórunarlegt sko – og skemmtilegt.)

In what can be seen as an act of pre-emptive irony the Icelanders so deprecated and exoticised the food and its preparation that there would be no room for ridicule on behalf of the dinner guests. Interesting is the explicit statement of “capitalizing” on “eccentricity” and the use of the English term rather than Icelandic. While Jón matter-of-factly explains that he did this because he enjoyed it then further questioning cast light on this behaviour and its underlying motives. The food the Icelanders brought in and sent for (having a hard time getting cleared through customs) and presented as part of their nationality indeed belongs to a category of food traditions that is often associated with the term *þorri*. As will be presented in the following representations of narrative performances the so-called *þorri* food, just as in some of the media representations discussed earlier, proved to be the subject of much irony among Icelanders abroad.

5.1. Obscure Heritage or Obscurity as Heritage?: the Þorablót

Jón refers to this event as a *þorablót* and the food as *þorri*-food. As the fieldwork reveals the heritage status of the so called *þorri*-food and the *þorablót* is, unlike more banal traditions such as a Sunday roasts or birthday

celebrations, essential to its practice and performance. In the many þorrablót I have attended national identity has also been highlighted and the food presented, sometimes with tongue in cheek, as that which kept “our ancestors” alive throughout the centuries. Close scrutiny, on the other hand, would suggest that the traditionality of the þorrablót celebration, as it is practised in contemporary times, is somewhat dubious or that it at least calls for some qualification. The rich Icelandic oral and literary tradition offers a somewhat incomplete history of the þorrablót while a look into late 19th and early 20th Century media testifies to its relatively recent revival or indeed invention.

While the meaning of the word þorri is unknown it was in fact the name of the fourth lunar month of winter in the earliest Icelandic calendar. It began roughly in the second or third week of January but this varied from the 11th Century onwards with the increasing influence from Christian calendars. Already in the 12th Century many other old calendar names had their competitors but þorri has to some extent survived as a vernacular alternative to the Julian and later Gregorian calendar for the period ranging from the thirteenth week of winter (a Friday within January 19 – 25) through the seventeenth week (a Saturday within February 18 – 24).³¹⁰ Today it could be argued that its use is primarily meta-cultural and that referring to the period as such frames the season in a traditional context.

The word blót can be more easily associated with pre-Christian celebrations in Iceland, Old-Norse worship and even sacrifice. The true sacrificial nature of the blót is though somewhat debated. While Dr. Árni Björnsson, a specialist in calendar customs, suggests the blót was a trivial set of pagan traditions exaggerated in Christian times; others hold that valid accounts may be read from ancient texts.³¹¹ The Icelandic folklorist Prof. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson specialised in the pagan sacrifice from his earliest PhD research in the University of Lund to his last days as Professor Emeritus at the University

³¹⁰ Árni Björnsson, *High Days and Holidays in Iceland*, trans. by Ann H. Yates (Reykavík: Mál og menning, 1995).

³¹¹ See Árni Björnsson 2008. *Þorrablót* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning 2008), p. 12.

of Iceland. He saw the blót in terms of animal and, more rarely, human sacrifice. More often bulls, rams, goats or even the sacred horses, were slaughtered and their blood sprinkled over walls, idols and even on people. The purpose of these rituals, Jón Hnefill deduces, are to bring into use magical powers and attract the gods' favour.³¹² Nevertheless the celebratory nature of the blót is often evident even in conjunction with sacrifice such as in this 13th Century account of Snorri Sturluson in his *Heimskringla* or the *Chronicle of the Kings of Norway*:

The sacrificial cup was passed over the fire and consecrated by the chieftain as well as the sacrificial blood. Toasts were drunk and all must join in the ceremonial beer drinking. Toasts of Odin were drunk for victory and toasts of Njordr and Freyr for fruitful harvest and for peace.³¹³

The mere existence of the word þorrablót in medieval texts might suggest some form of worship or celebration in pre-Christian times. However, medieval sources that refer to a þorrablót are rather obscure and oddly out of sync with other sources. The oldest known source is a short chapter in the *Orkneyinga Saga*, from around 1300, about the “discovery” of Norway. It refers to a king of Finland and Kvenland and his sons whose names correspond with forces of nature. Among them is Logi, meaning fire; Kári, meaning wind, Frosti meaning frost, and Þorri who is described as “[I translate] a great blót man, he had blót every year in mid winter, what they called the þorrablót; from this the month took its name.”³¹⁴ In his own reading of the source Árni Björnsson sees this account as an origin legend of the term þorri whose meaning has been forgotten. He also finds that the personification of þorri as a force of nature lifts him to the status of

³¹² Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, *A Piece of Horse Liver: Myth, Ritual and Folklore in Old Icelandic Sources*, trans. by Terry Gunnell and Joan Turville-Petre, (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press 1998), p. 38.

³¹³ Trans. by Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson in *Under the Cloak: A Pagan Ritual Turning Point in the Conversion of Iceland* (University of Iceland Press: Reykjavík, 1999), p. 20.

³¹⁴ “[I translate:] Þorri var blótmaður mikill, hann hafði blót á hverju ári að miðjum vetri, það kölluðu þeir þorrablót; af því tók mánaðurinn heiti”, From *Orkneyinga saga, Íslensk fornrit, Vol 34*, (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1965), 3.

a winter spirit or winter god. But one might add that the þorrablót seems already an obscure term as well, while the word þorri seems to be well known as term for a month. Indeed it is “what *they called* the þorrablót [italics mine] “.

Evidence for both a godly Þorri and the þorrablót itself in medieval Iceland is scarce. It is in fact not until the 17th Century that sources on the personification of Þorri appear in the form of Þorrakvæði or Þorri-poems. In the many Þorri-poems collected onward through the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries Þorri may appear as an grey bearded elder or a Viking chieftain but is just as likely to turn into a pillar of ice. The Þorri of the poems demands respect and is often greeted welcome with a plea of mercy for mild weather. “[I translate:] “Welcome Þorri”, was always said after crossing oneself in the morning”, stated a farmer born in South–East Iceland in 1884: “Don’t be cruel”.³¹⁵ In modern times the act of bidding the þorri welcome is by many thought to be a time-honoured tradition. So too is commencing the þorri month with *Farmer’s Day* (*Bóndadagur*) in which the male farmer of the house is treated to “breakfast in bed” or other luxuries. But in fact the oldest printed source for these traditions appears in the late nineteenth century folktale collection of Jón Árnason in 1864. He is also the oldest source for the curious, but evidently elaborate, act of running half naked around the farmhouse:

Therefore it was the duty of the farmers “to greet þorri” or “bid him welcome into the farm” by being the first to rise in the morning that þorri began. They should get up and out in their shirt alone, with bare legs and feet, but with one leg in the trousers, go to the door, open it, hop on one foot around the whole farmhouse, dragging the trousers behind him on the other and bid the þorri welcome to the farm and into the house. Then they should host a feast for other farmers in the community; this was called “to greet the þorri.”

³¹⁵ “[I translate:] Velkominn Þorri”, var einatt sagt eftir morgunsigningu: “Vertu ekki grimmur”, document nr. 3659,2 in the National Museum of Iceland Ethnology Archives. .

([I translate] Þess vegna var það skylda bænda “að fagna þorra” eða “bjóða honum í garð” með því að þeir áttu að fara fyrstir á fætur allra manna á bænum þann morgun sem þorri gekk í garð. Áttu þeir að fara ofan og út í skyrtunni einni, vera bæði berlæraðir og berfættir, en fara í aðra brókarskálmina og láta hina svo lafa eða draga hana eftir sér á öðrum fæti, ganga svo til dyra, ljúka upp bæjarhurðinni, hoppa á öðrum fæti í kringum allan bæinn, draga eftir sér brókina á hinum og bjóða þorra velkominn í garð eða til húsa. Síðan áttu þeir að halda öðrum bændum úr byggðarlaginu veizlu fyrsta þorradag; þetta hét “að fagna þorra”).³¹⁶

Jón Árnason's source for this curious custom of “greeting the þorri” is unclear. But he himself remarks that on the temporal and regional variation of the tradition, for example that “[I translate:] in some places in the north of the country the first day of þorri is *still* called *bóndadagur* when the lady of house should treat her husband well and these festivities are still called þorrablót.”³¹⁷ Here it seems that the term *bóndadagur* or “Farmers Day” is an obscure one only surviving in certain remote places where the celebration of this day and the þorrablót are one and the same. While Árni Björnsson takes sources such as these critically he does, with some qualification, hold that the tradition of the þorrablót is an established, enduring and yet struggling tradition rooted in pre-Christian festivities of some sort. He offers a down-to-earth theorem to that effect:

It must therefore be held true that through all the centuries the Þorri was bid welcome and “secretly worshipped” either with fearful respect or

³¹⁶ Jón Árnason, *Íslenskar þjóðsögur og ævintýri*, vol 1-6, ed. by Árni Böðvarsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (Reykjavík: 1954 – 1961 [1st addition Leipzig 1862-1864]) vol, 2, pp. 550-551.

³¹⁷ “[I translate] Sumstaðar á Norðurlandi er fyrsti þorradagur enn í dag kallaður “bóndadagur; á þá húsfreyjan að halda vel til bónda síns og heita þau hátíða brigði enn þorrablót.) Jón Árnason, Vol II., 551.

festive joyfulness. This is much more likely than that the thread had indeed been entirely cut. Then it would have been a bigger effort to revive the tradition and even life-threatening to do so in the 17th and 18th Centuries. Participants in such merrymaking could of course be as devoutly Christian in their heart as anyone else though they allowed themselves to play around.

([I translate:] Að framansögðu verður að hafa fyrir satt að sumir hafi um allar aldir boðið Þorra velkominn og “blótað á laun” hvort heldur sem það var gert með óttablandinni virðingu eða gleðskap og gamni. Það er mun líklegra en að þráðurinn hafi nokkru sinni slitnað upp með öllu. Þá hefði orðið mun meiri fyrirtekt að vekja siðinn upp að nýju og jafnvel lífshættulegt á 17. og 18. öld. Þátttakendur í því líkum gamanmálum gátu að sjálfssögðu verið eins sannkristnir í hjarta sínu og hver annar þótt þeir leyfðu sér að bregða á leik.)³¹⁸

This would seem to suggest that the þorrablót was indeed practiced in early Iceland and continued through the Middle Ages and into early modern times when the sources again mention them. Furthermore Árni suggests that the þorri customs were more likely practiced in playfulness than devout faith (whether in Christian or pagan times). Here I believe he might be on to something that holds a key to understanding the practice of þorrablót rather than its origin. So while playfulness might be the answer I have doubts the question is right. The question of whether or not the people practiced the þorrablót devoutly or not is as unanswerable as asking whether its practice went uninterrupted throughout the Middle Ages. For lack of sources any claim for or against would simply be conjecture. But a more interesting and pressing question is: why did early modern people engage in this activity and why is it practiced today? Could it be that the obscurity of the þorrablót and near absence in medieval sources may

³¹⁸ Árni Björnsson (2008), pp. 17 – 18.

tell us something significant about the practice of this tradition In context to the practices of the þorrablót today I believe it speaks volumes. All together, and counter to Árne's argument, what I find the most striking feature of the underlying sources on the traditional aspect the þorrablót is how inconsistent, varying and regional they are within Iceland. Also significant is how many accounts seem to exoticise them as either remote or ridiculous.

When it comes to early modern practices of the þorrablót *revival* and *reinvention* seem like useful, yet problematic terms. Because the ancient practice of the þorrablót was unknown any true revival would be suspect. But in retrospect a set of traditions was set in motion on the grounds of a perceived traditionality although with humorous undertones. The first indication of þorrablót, outside whatever celebrations took place in the private homes, can be found in the rising nationalism of the mid- 19th century intelligentsia. Through the registries and records of student associations and drama clubs (mostly in Reykjavík from 1867 – 1873) it is clear that student drinking parties held on the coming of the þorri-month were taking on the somewhat humorous air of the *Saga age*.³¹⁹ Þorri poems and þorri rimes referred to the heroics and drinking of Saga heroes leaving much space for the elaborate toasting of pagan deities. Among these young poets were some of the Icelandic nation's most well known *frelshetjur* or “freedom heroes” who spearheaded the largely cultural and political fight for Iceland self- rule) and later independence from the Danish Crown (1944). The nationalism movement was partly founded in the heart of the colonial power Copenhagen and that is where the þorrablót next appears. As stated in the journal of the rising Icelandic intellectuals in the Danish capitol on the 24th of January 1873 Icelanders in Copenhagen held a Þorrablót, in the ancient custom”.³²⁰ The earnestness of that claim becomes somewhat questionable in light of the comic verses performed at the event and printed in the journal titled *To Thor's Health (Full Þórs)*” which concludes:

³¹⁹ Árne Björnsson (2008), 32 - 39

³²⁰ “[I translate:] “Tuttugasta og fjórða janúar 1873 höfðu Íslendingar í Kaupmannahöfn Þorrablót, að fornum sið”, *Ný Félagsrit* (Copenhagen: 1873), 128.

O give us “Thor!” this time
to “drink” as much as you!
We hallow with hammer a heathen salute
In pure faith.

*([I translate]: Æ gef oss ,Þór!” að þessu sinni
Að ,þjóra” jafnmikið og þú!
Vér signum hamri heiðið minni
Í hreinni trú).³²¹*

A year later, in 1874, a þorablót was held in Akureyri (north Iceland’s largest town) on the year commemorating the supposed millennium since Iceland’s settlement. The event was reportedly respectable although many salutes were given and the pagan god Thor toasted.³²² The þorablót was repeated a year later and the following years spread, albeit thinly, throughout the countryside. In the first decades of the 20th Century þorri events were recorded in various rural areas but this form of entertainment did not seem to catch on in urban areas where foreign novelty were often favoured by a modernising population. In fact it was not until the 1960’s that the rustic Þorablót is “revived” in Reykjavík and gains true popularity.³²³ From the 1940’s *Homeland* associations (*Átthagafélög*)³²⁴ had begun to prefer more traditional food for their events rather than the modern and imported foods more available in the city. In 1958 a restaurant proprietor began to pick up on this and decided to provide the *þorri-food* (*þorramat*) that he had seen advertised by the Homeland associations - a novel term then but commonplace today. In order to boost business in a difficult

³²¹ Björn M. Ólsen, *Ný Félagsrit* (Copenhagen: 1873), 128 – 129.

³²² *Norðanfari*, 26 November 1874, 121.

³²³ Árni Björnsson (2008), pp. 69 – 78.

³²⁴ *Homeland associations or Átthagafélög* were groups formed by people who had moved away from their respective home regions within the country.

season other restaurants began to advertise þorri-food - a selection of whey-soured meats, cured shark, rye bread and flatcakes served on square-shaped wooden platter based on an item on display in the National Museum. Guests at the þorrablót were invited to wash this down with light beer and a shot of Black Death (a popular Icelandic schnapps).³²⁵

After 1960 the þorrablót spread like a wave throughout the country. Today in urban areas as well as most larger townships or farming communities have þorrablót in varying forms. The þorri-food may be supplemented with a more modern dish for those whose palates do not approve of the sour tastes and smells of the food. Mocking toasts and heavy drinking are regular features of these events and in the countryside organised satirical plays mocking individuals in the community are quite popular.

The 1960s wave of þorrablót was not limited to Iceland but spread to many of the expatriate associations of Icelanders around the world. Like the menus of the Homeland associations these events promise a variation of the same theme: *traditional food, Icelandic food; þorri-food in the ancient tradition*. Much effort is put into importing the odorous and sometimes gassy agricultural products and often Icelandic entertainers are brought in as well. But as the following case studies show the þorrablót and þorri food traditions are practiced in multitude of ways and can be applied to different contexts. They are not simply practiced to pass on tradition nor do the þorrablót follow a strict set of antique rites. In fact the only aspect they are sure to have in common with ancient practices, as they appear in medieval sources, is the traditional and exotic context thrust upon them. If the þorri has any consistency as a tradition then that it lies in its constant state of revival and variation. And, as will be further elaborated in conjunction with the ethnography, therein lies its power: in its folkloric obscurity and adaptability to different contexts.

³²⁵ *Þjóðviljinn* 7. February 1958 quoted from Árni Björnsson (2008), pp. 78.

5.2. Knocking on Doors: Integration Through Exoticism

The study the relation of power and tradition will not be furthered with isolated examples or descriptions of traditions, for example the þorrablót, but can surely benefit from contextual folkloric research. The following is such an attempt where thick data is presented and attention is the performance of the tradition, and the narrator's own understanding of how and why he or she practices it. In this the following narratives show how the "distressing" and exaggerated performances of formerly banal food customs can serve as stepping stone in the process of gaining access to host cultures. Áslaug Hersteinsdóttir is in her mid-thirties and has spent much of her adult life in Finland and Russia. When we interview her, she is expecting a child with her Finnish partner and has no direct plans of moving to Iceland.³²⁶ From her first consecutive years in St. Petersburg and Helsinki, she remembers herself and other Icelanders as being very preoccupied with national characteristics. Conversation often focused on analyzing cultural differences and similarities in Finns and Russians respectively in comparison with other Icelanders. After settling down in Finland, she quickly found herself in the dual role of representing Iceland to Finns and vice-versa. She gave presentations and wrote articles on Iceland in local Finnish papers and for a period of time served as foreign correspondent every other Saturday for the Icelandic Broadcasting Company. In day-to-day conversations, Áslaug would also self-effacingly answer questions about Icelanders:

ÁSLAUG: Generally when I meet people then I say Iceland is full of know-it-alls, that Icelanders are eccentric and very entertaining and, of course, always that Icelanders are unpunctual. I mean (laughs) it's a national characteristic how late we are all the time.

³²⁶This interview was conducted in June 2006. Áslaug is now living with her husband and two children in Helsinki.

([I translate:] ég segi nú oft bara svona almennt þegar ég hitti folk, þá segi ég að island sé svona land fullt af besservisserum, að Íslendingar séu sérvitir og mjög skemmtilegir þannig og náttúrlega alltaf talað um hvað Íslendingar eru seinir. Ég meina það er alveg þjóðareinkenni hvað við mætum alltaf seint.)

In addition to lack of punctuality³²⁷ she also attributed the dubious talent of exaggeration and storytelling to her fellow-countrymen, something she contrasted with the straightforwardness she had experienced with Finns: “Icelanders are really good at exaggerating. It's also entertaining to listen to people who exaggerate (laughs). That's why they are also good at telling stories. It's interesting to listen to. But the Finns aren't much like that.” As a case in point, Áslaug mentions that unlike the Finns, Icelanders tend to “exaggerate as much as they can” when it comes to Icelandic food but asserts that the same doesn't apply to her. Nevertheless, her conversationally embedded personal experience narratives about the food she was brought up on and how she later presented it shed light on how banal food customs “at home” become exotic performances abroad. Having initially taken tradition food with her she later sent for shark as well as smoked lamb that she prepared for her flatmates in the traditional sweet white sauce. Her explanation as to why she did this is quite interesting, as is her regret in losing touch with the tradition:

ÁSLAUG: I did it most likely..., I just decided to distress people. And since then, what's happened to me is that I see this food so rarely now. I have been to *þorrablóts*, but I've really stopped liking *þorri*-food like I did before. One has become so unused to it. I ate *svið* (singled sheep's head) as a kid - I've often told this story - and the eyes were my favourite part.

³²⁷This was actually among the most common things our participants mentioned when asked to “describe Icelanders”. General responses to the question were surprisingly consistent from one participant to another suggesting some uniformity within banal national identities (on banal nationalism see Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage Publications, 1995). Other common responses described Icelanders as disorganized, discourteous nature-lovers who have an omnipresent can-do attitude which is characterized by the idiom “þetta reddast”; meaning roughly that the things will work themselves out. Indeed Áslaug referred to this alleged characteristic even before the interview formally began.

KATLA: Did you live in the country?

ÁSLAUG: No, just in Kópavogur [a town next to the capital Reykjavík]. It was dad's favourite food. Just svið, it was always every other Saturday, chicken the other Saturday.

KRISTINN: We had svið at my home too. Almost weekly.

ÁSLAUG: Yes. Most liked the tongue best. Of course, people don't eat svið that much any more.

KRISTINN: Perhaps. I don't know. But you've lost your appetite for it through the years?

ÁSLAUG: Yes, regretfully. I used to go to the corner stores at home in Iceland and bought canned shark (Katla grimaces – Áslaug laughs) and ate it while watching television. I just really enjoyed shark.

([I translate:] ÁSLAUG: Nei ábyggilega bara bara ég ákvað aðeins að hrella folk. Svo hefur það bara gerst hjá mér að ég sé þennan mat svo sjaldan núna. Ég hef farið á þorablót, ég er eiginlega hætt að þykja þorramat eins góður og mér fannst áður. Maður er orðiinn svo óvanur að sjá þetta. ég borðari svið þegar ég var krakki. ég hef oft sagt þessa sögu líka, og augun voru uppáhalds hlutinn.

KK: Áttirðu heima upp í sveit?

ÁSLAUG: Nei, bara í Kópavoginu. Það var uppáhaldsmaturinn hans pabba. Bara svið, það var alltaf annan hvort laugardag og kjúklingur hinn.

KRISTINN: Það voru oft svið heima hjá mér. Næstum vikulega.

ÁSLAUG: Já, flestum þótti tungan best. Þú veist náttúrlega, folk borðar ekkert svið lengur svona mikið.

KRISTINN: Kannski ekki eins mikið, ég veit það ekki. En þú hefur aðeins misst listina fyrir þessum mat í gegnum tíðina

ÁSLAUG: Já, bara því miður. Ég fór stundum út í sjoppa heima á Íslandi og keypti, þú veist það var svona niðurskorinn hákarl, (Katla grimaces – Áslaug laughs) og borðaði þegar ég var að horfa á sjónvarpið. Mér fannst hákarl bara rosalega góður.)

Áslaug would later come to participate in þorablót, both in Helsinki and St. Petersburg, affairs that were often arranged by Icelandic associations in collusion with temporarily stationed Icelandic businessmen. Áslaug claims that

the businessmen were eager to socialise with Icelandic students and through them gain access to the local culture they felt isolated from. Often feasts such as these would take on the form of national representations aimed at the host culture. The guest lists would include affluent locals who were presented with hired entertainment or presentations dealing with differences and similarities between the respective nations. The costly importation of cured and pungent meat, fish and dairy products would, of course, be a central part of this representation, and comparable to the exotic fashion in which Áslaug herself presented the food to friends in private life. This presentation of the traditional food as *curiosa* is nonetheless a far cry from its banal consumption in Iceland (see above). But what is also interesting is the acute reflexive awareness of how foreigners receive the food and how Áslaug herself has begun to marginalise these traditional food practices in her own life:

ÁSLAUG: I think it [svið and shark] is not very usual – not quite normal. And moreover from an island like this; way out in the ocean (lift ups her hand, pointing, looking up) where the natives eat shark and sheep heads (deep laugh).

([I translate] ÁSLAUG: Ég held að þetta sé ekki mjög venjulegt – sé ekki mjög eðlilegt. Og það er einmitt einhver svona eyja út í hafi (lift ups her hand and looks up to it). Þegar innfæddir eru að borða hákarl og svið (deep laugh).)

In this clarification of how she effectively and quite deliberately “distressed” her dinner guests, she elaborates on the archaic and primitive image projected, something further illustrated by her self-effacing laughter and hand gestures as if pointing to the North on a wall-based map. Iceland's position on the global northern fringe of habitation only further exoticises her visualised role and position in these transcultural exchanges. The fact that Áslaug willingly and ironically took on the role of the exotic native from the obscure northern island “way out in the ocean” in her encounter must also be in put into context with her

successful integration into Finnish society. The ironic performance can thus in fact be considered a stepping-stone in her integration process. Through the bewildering sensory experience and symbolic primitivism she presented Áslaug upset the strategies within her host locality creating a new liminal space in which to operate and perform. The tactic was further mediated by the jocularity of her dinner guests strong responses to the exotic narratives of food consumption in her folk culture. Having used this exotic representation as an entry point, she then slowly, and with some regret, went on to abandon the food custom on which her performance was based and so widen even further the distance between the performance and banality; eccentricity and authenticity.

5.3. The Bankers' Þorrablót

While a sense of melancholic nostalgia may be felt in Áslaug's ironic narratives such sentiments are harder to make out in the kitsch and self-parody of the more formal yet carnivalesque bankers' *þorrablót*. Nonetheless the fieldwork revealed many other interesting aspects of how exotic representations, commodification and identities interlink in everyday, as opposed to institutionalised, transnational relations. A case in point is the *þorrablót* of the *Glitnir* bank or more precisely its London branch. Our participant observation and interviews with leading architects of a global Icelandic banking expansion took place in the winter of 2007, a year now synonymous in Iceland with the destructive extravagance of its overblown banking sector. Indeed the phrase "That is so 2007!" is now widely known in Iceland connoting excess and garish wastefulness. Glitnir bank was born through a merger of *Íslandsbanki* (literally *Iceland's bank*) with FBA Icelandic Investment Bank in 2000. According to its first director the new name Glitnir, an insignificant character name pulled out Eddic prose, fulfilled all the requirements of good Icelandic name: "It has a positive message in the minds of Icelanders, has a historical connection, is both

Icelandic and Nordic, it is easy to pronounce in most languages and it is spelled with international letters only.”³²⁸ The positive transnordic yet international message had gone seriously sour by 2008 when the whole Icelandic bank crashed with a heavy foreign debt falling on the Icelandic state. Its reputation tainted with an image of recklessness, the failed bank was nationalised and its name, changed back to Íslandsbanki.

But in 2007 the bank seemed at top of its game. The annual midwinter party, then in its seventh year, played an extremely important role according to bank director Bjarni Ármannsson, in the running of the bank and gaining access to the foreign markets and business talent. Its cultural context, unlike Áslaug’s private dinner party, is therefore to a large degree that of a marketing strategy – although many features of heritage, folklore and everyday power relations come into play. This annual midwinter party, then in its seventh year, was according to bank director Bjarni Ármannsson an extremely important part of the running the bank and gaining access to the foreign markets and business talent.

While Icelanders had for a long time done business around the globe, primarily fisheries, this was a new and neo-liberal financial climate. Since the beginning of the 21st century Icelandic banks, some only recently privatised, began to set up branches abroad. Taking advantage of lax regulation and Iceland’s membership of the European Economic Area this privatised financial sector grew to ten times gross domestic product in Iceland. To its detriment the Icelandic state was legally bound to refund minimum bank guarantees.³²⁹ This formed the foundation of an economic phenomenon known in Iceland as “*íslenska útrásin*” or the Icelandic overseas charge. At its height this “house of cards”, as it can now be called, was commonly described in the foreign press with references to Vikings and Viking raids. But initially the Icelandic bankers’

³²⁸ [I translate] Það hefur jákvæða merkingu í hugum Íslendinga, á sér sögulega skírskotun, er bæði íslenskt og norrænt í senn, er auðvelt í framburði á helstu tungumálum og inniheldur eingöngu alþjóðlega stafi”.

³²⁹ For a brief synopsis on these developments in English see Martin Wolf, “How the Icelandic saga should end”, *Financial Times*, 14 January 2010.

main obstacle abroad was not their notoriety but their obscurity.

The leadership of the investment bank Glitnir, having gained a level of trust in its first years in London, soon decided to break out of this obscurity in order to gain access to new markets and talented staff. In my interview with Bjarni, who had directed the bank from the start, he elaborated extensively on the long-term strategies and short-term tactics of the seemingly flourishing bank and its ventures abroad. Interestingly he expressed management's will to stress the bank's Icelandicness and convey the nation's heritage and wild "can do" attitude. I asked Bjarni what impact he, or other top executives, might actually have on the bank's image and how big a part of that was in the hands of advertising and public relations professionals. Bjarni stated that while this was mixed the initiative generally would come from the bank's management: "We have a clear idea of where we want to go and we hire the professionals to help get us there - rather than the professionals telling us where to go." And where the management wanted to go was ahead of the rest. Having gained some level of trust on the foreign market attracting attention became an important tactic:

BJARNI: Fundamentally all our business is based on trust. If that foundation isn't there you might as well stay home. On the other hand when you have achieved that then the question is how do you distinguish yourself from the rest. There are thousands of banks in the world competing for the attention of potential clients. For the Icelandic banks the main thing has been achieving stability on the one hand and access to wholesale markets on the other. It is therefore very important to get attention and be different. The talent we are competing for usually spend their whole life in the market – just travelling between companies. Then the question is how do you make yourself different from the rest. One of our methods has been to accentuate our Icelandicness – without going too far; To use it as a platform. Therefore I think that both image and identity are very important both in the market place and without. It's a question of positioning yourself in the market place and representing something.

([I translate] Í grunninn byggja öll okkar viðskipti á trausti. Ef það er ekki til staðar er best að halda sig heima við hvað það varðar. En á hinn bóginn þegar það er komið þá er

Þetta spurning um hvernig maður aðgreinir sjálfan sig. Það eru þúsundir banka í heiminum sem eru stöðugt að leyta að athygli viðskiptavina. Fyrir okkur Íslensku bankana hefur stöðuleiki verið mikið mál og hins vegar aðgangur að heildsölumarkaðnum. Og það að ná þessari athygli og vera öðruvísi er mjög mikilvægt. Því þetta fólk sem maður er að eiga við sérstaklega á þessum fjármálamörkuðum eyðir ævinna þar hjá sérstökum fyrirtækjum en er að færa sig þar á milli. Þá er svona spurning hvernig maður nær að aðgreina sig og gera sig öðruvísi en hinir eru. Og ein af okkar leiðum hefur verið að vekja athygli á því sem Íslenskt er án þess að vera ganga út í einhverjar öfgar. Nota það meira sem svona grunn bara platform. Og því held ég að svona ímynd eða ídentitet sé mjög mikilvægt. Bæði í bankaviðskiptinum sem og öðru. Þetta er allt spurning um að staðsetja sig á markaði og standa fyrir eitthvað.)

While there is no reason to take Bjarni's statements at face value they are internally consistent and strongly suggest that national identity and image plays a significant role in banking and business. Furthermore it reveals that the Icelanders at the helm of the bank saw themselves as marginal not only because of their obscurity on the market but because of their national and geographical background. Despite the internationalisation of the banking sector the bankers themselves interacted within nationally charged localities. Bjarni's comments also reveal that the Icelandic bankers, not belonging to these localities, felt the need to exercise certain tactics, "to play on the margins" as Bjarni put it, within the overall strategies of banking in their host countries. Moreover, they distinguished between the host countries based on their perception of national cultures and attempted to influence their image accordingly:

BJARNI: I am in no doubt that image construction is extremely important and the Icelandic banks have seen this in their various markets. In Norway for example our image construction has gone very well and we have merged smoothly into the community, while in Denmark we have met a lot of resistance. And this makes the business environment a lot more difficult. It is more difficult to get good staff; it is more difficult to get partners and collaborators; it is more difficult to find opportunities; and get

people to accept that you're a part of this business community. And that is in my mind fundamental.

([I translate:] Ég er ekki í vafa um það að ímyndaruppbygging og það hafa til að mynda íslensku bankarnir séð á misjöfnum markaði eru geysilega mikilvægt. Hjá okkur í noregi þar hefur ímyndaruppbygging gengið mjög vel – við höfum runnið inn í samfélagið ef svo má segja meðan í Danmörku að þá mæti menn mikið mótstöðu þá gerir það viðskiptaumhverfið miklu erfiðara. Það er erfiðara að ná í starfsfólk það er erfiðara að finna samstarfsaðila, það er erfiðara að finna tækifæri og erfitt að fá fólk til að acceptera eða bara samþykkja það að maður sé hluti af þessu viðskiptasamfélagi. Og það er í mínum huga algjört lykilatriði.)

Moreover this image construction did not take place primarily through mediums of mass communication but within localities and spaces of performed events such as the *þorrablót*. Bjarni directly expressed the need to play and perform the alleged “values” of the bank as opposed to verbally stating them:

BJARNI: It has been very important that people understand our values and that they shine through. And these values are fast, smart and thorough (he smiles) or *fast smart in thorough (in English)*. But you cannot say it. You must show it. You can't tell them your fast, smart and thorough they have to experience it. And then that it's fun. And once you delivered that than people are have the right experience of us.

([I translate] “Það hefur verið okkur mjög mikilvægt að fólk skilji okkar, svona, gildi. Og þau svona skíni í gegn. Og þau gildi hjá okkur eru sem sagt fljót, snjöll og fagleg (he smiles) eða fast smart and thorough. Það er svona það sem við viljum að komi í gegn. En þú mátt ekki segja það – þú verður að sýna það. Síðan að þetta sé skemmtilegt. Þegar við teljum okkur hafa náð því að koma því á framfæri þá hefur fólk það fengið rétta mynd af okkur.”)

In the *þorrablót* the unspoken message of “fast smart and thorough” was primarily expressed through Borealistic imagery playing on Viking kitsch and paraphernalia; ambiguous wordplay and an attack on the senses where the sights, tastes and smell of the food associated with *þorri* is appropriated in a variety of ways. But the campaign was not contained within the party itself.

Initially prospective clients were sent invitation cards which right from the start sarcastically denigrated the traditions on display. In the feast's first year, when the bank was completely unknown, this involved enclosing a vacuum-packed piece of cured shark marked: "Do not open". According to Bjarni people could not resist and opened the package letting out a stench that filled the office space containing up to two to three hundred staff members:

BJARNI: And everyone would say: "What is this?!" And throwing it in the trash wouldn't do any good either because the smell was just as strong there. So the first year everyone had heard of the party. The attendance was quite good and we've drive the concept through.

([I translate:] Og bara allir segja: "Hvað er þetta eiginlega?!" Og það þýðir ekkert að henda þessu í ruslafötuna því lyktin verður alveg jafn sterkt þar. Þannig að strax fyrsta árið að þá vissu allir af þessu partyi. Og þátttakan var mjög góð og hefur allaf verið mjög góð. Og þetta er svona ákveðið konsept sem við höfum náð að keyra í gegn.)

The 2007 invitations indeed suggest an established dyadic or joking relationship. They came in a box containing a sheep's horn on a leather string and a card reading:

"Feeling horny? No wonder! The time to grab your shovel dig up last year's flotsam and road kill and set about eating it with a narrow selection of Icelandic firewater is upon us again! So, grab your beard/ braid your hair (as appropriate) and glimpse Valhalla at Glitnir's 7th London Thorrablot Party on 28th February 2007. On offer will be all the usual ambrosian delights of Viking cuisine, including esoteric parts of sheep, accompanied with some innovative intoxicating liquids from the frozen North. We are delighted to invite new friends, and old, to a party whose popularity over the years has depended on the guests' inability to remember what the food was like the previous year. See you there!"

Wordplay, such as "feeling horny", is something Bjarni describes as being particularly British and well appreciated. This directly refers to the accompanying sheep horns that Bjarni states are "what our forefathers of course drank from". But they also refer to the horned "Viking helmet". The idea that Viking Age

Norsemen wore horned helmets was probably first conceived in Swedish Romanticism but later came to be popularised and widely appropriated through popular culture such as film and sporting events.³³⁰ Indeed, the previous year, Glitnir bank sent the kind of furry, striped horned caps that one may commonly see in football stadiums. Another year they had sent blonde and braided wigs. The kitsch costume had become a fixture in the þorrablót. The carnivalesque and playful nature of the event was therefore clear from the start. But Bjarni claims that the Icelandic bank had a licence to adopt this playfulness due to a balance of trust and its marginal status. He stated for example that “no American bank would have dared send out this text. And that is exactly what makes us different.” And yet he qualified this statement in terms of the kind of dyadic relationship established: “Of course we can’t behave any old way but because we already have trust and people are acquainted with us, we can allow ourselves to play on the margins if you can put it that way.” How, or indeed if, this delicate balance of playing on the margins was achieved may be further illuminated through participant observation at the event itself.

5.3.1. Playing on the Margins: the “Glitnir Þorrablót Party 2007”

How our presence at the “Glitnir Þorrablót Party 2007” the 28th of February 2007 in London came about is important from a reflexive viewpoint. A few weeks earlier I had been conducting field research and filming at a council-run þorrablót in the town of Seltjarnarnes that is in effect a “suburb” of west side Reykjavík.³³¹ This event appeared to be primarily attended by affluent locals, politicians and businessmen – including Bjarni Ármannsson. I had gotten permission by the

³³⁰ See “The Invention of the Viking Horned Helmet,” in *International Scandinavian and Medieval Studies in Memory of Gerd Wolfgang Weber*: ed. by Michael Dallapiazza and others (Trieste: Edizioni Parnaso, 2000), pp. 199-208.

³³¹ The findings of this research will be illustrated, and compared with þorrablót abroad, in later writings.

organizers to film at the event and was fairly visible doing so. Midway through the evening Bjarni approached and addressed me as if he were aware of my identity and purpose. He directly told me about the Glitnir þorrablót and invited me to come. I reacted positively, if somewhat guardedly, towards what I believed was a benevolent and generous gesture. As it fitted our research plan perfectly I later confirmed our attendance. So when Katla and I arrived at the party's usual venue, the Bluebird Dining Rooms in Chelsea, nametags were waiting for us at the reception. Under our names and the Glitnir logo read: "Academia". We were therefore quite literally marked from the start and, in some liminal way, included in the strategy of the event.

At the reception those of us who had left behind their horns on leather straps and furry helmets at home were offered a replacement. On entering a dining hall I quickly set up my cameras: a digital still photo camera and a Sony PD180 digital video recorder. Katla and I alternated taking interviews together and separately with the guests both on and off camera. We designated a meeting point where we would regularly meet, compare notes and continue our observations. I gained much from Katla's observations that I had not particularly noticed myself. She for example noticed the gendered aspects of the guests' clothing, which she described as generally masculine. The women wore mostly dark trousers and shirts – "with all but ties" as Katla commented and the women's postures were rather masculine as well. Men, who were obviously in a majority, wore rather uniform dark suits, ties and leather shoes, and as Katla also noted, I was the only person on the premises wearing trainers. The guests usually stood in circled groups of three to five.

Tables were adorned with the furry Viking helmets and an abundance of wine was on offer. Yet the conversation did not seem jovial to begin with. Indeed the atmosphere was what we would describe as business-orientated and reserved. Nevertheless, already at this early point, an Icelandic man was already visibly intoxicated and singing loudly into the microphone. A pop music band was led by a well-known Icelandic guitarist, Friðrik Karlsson (formerly of

the band Mezzaforte). Many of the song's initially played were 1980's ballads. The tempo and volume increased as the evening progressed and more and more "helmets" appeared on the guests' heads. We were somewhat confused at this point when one guest described this as a "typical banker's party".

Describing this bricolage of business, fine dining, tradition and cocktail-party networking as typical of anything truly seemed odd. The experience of oddity must of course lie in the eye of the beholder but may be described reflexively or auto-ethnographically. As we stood in the midst of these revelling Viking-helmeted bankers at the 2007 midwinter feast of the Glitnir bank in London various perplexing thoughts ran through my mind: "Can one draw a line between marketing and tradition", I thought as a waiter offered me hors d'œuvres. Detecting a whiff of cured shark in the air I was reminded of the words of an expatriate Icelander describing the relative abnormality of traditional food in Iceland: "And from an island like this," she said gesturing upwards as to the North on a wall map, "way out in the ocean where the natives eat shark and sheep heads". "Can one base identity on irony?", I thought. Standing there, perplexed as I often am during fieldwork, I began to comprehend how both identities and images were being performed ironically and in a transnational context.

But who was performing to whom? And why? My own participatory observation and audio-visual documentation of the event revealed a highly communicative interactional context. Breaking norms, however unwittingly, subsequently attracted attention and communicative responses, not least to my brandishing of a digital camera.³³² These reflexive aspects of the camera/researcher furthermore constituted inquisitive, albeit sometimes suspicious responses. For the most part people reacted with amusement that in some cases revealed networks of joking relationships. Furthermore this helped me to gain access to the societal context of the event. As an example, while

³³² On a similar subject of disrupting norms see: Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, "Transforming Qualitative Research Methods: Is It a Revolution?", *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 24 (1995), 349-357.

filming the spread of þorri food one guest suggested he hold the camera while I had something to eat as well. Through curiosity I briefly took him up on the offer. This interaction, while capturing the researcher for the record on camera, offered further access to his verbalised reactions to the food: “so this is supposed to be traditional Icelandic food?” he said as to himself and proceeded to taste it. “Not bad”, he exclaimed. He thus exhibited that while he had a healthy scepticism on the authenticity of the food he now accepted its traditionality outside of irony.

I have thus argued and exhibited that the involvement of the video-researcher need not be looked upon as contamination of the fieldwork data but as an illumination and a record of what constituted the interaction taking place in the field and that this interaction may subsequently be analyzed from the visual-text. This effect of the camera/researcher could also be examined by the absence of the camera. At points in time I stepped away from the camera and attempted to mingle into the crowd. I accepted a glass of wine and placed myself on the edges of group conversations, tentatively making eye contact with individuals within them. In this context many Icelandic guests seemed to relate to me first and foremost as a fellow young (and awkwardly dressed) Icelander. Some commented on how I looked familiar and when it became clear that I was not part of the banking world some seemed suspicious of my presence there. One asked if I had come for the drink, which to I jokingly replied: “not solely”. Foreign members reacted to me rather quizzically and initial conversation was usually in the form of relating information on local culture as one would to any tourist. Soon the guests’ attention would come to the small text on my nametag (marked “Academia”), which brought on discussions on my role at the event.

My purpose at the event was later clearly stated as Bjarni gave a short welcome to the guests. After briefly describing the event as an Icelandic tradition he introduced me as a folklore student researching the þorrablót.³³³

³³³ As Bjarni introduced me he actually misspoke my surname as Briem: another relatively common family name in Iceland where family names are in fact rare as opposed to

The announcement received a voiced reaction of surprise and laughter as Bjarni suggested, tongue in cheek, the audience should be on its best behaviour. But it dawned on me at the time that this was why I was invited: my presence was part of the overall strategy of the event. The presence of Katla and I provided a sense of validation and an elevation of the þorrablót as a tradition. This, on the other hand, would not hinder that the tradition be performed with a sense of irony. The researchers' gaze on my wielding of the camera, when noticed, only further facilitated these performances.

The influence of the camera can thus be put into practical use by marking and clarifying assigned roles. Here again one may make use of the methodological field metaphor of a still pond (see Theory and Methodology chapter). Unstirred, you know little of what lies beneath its surface. If you disturb it then it is no longer the same as when you found it. But the very ripples you have caused may inform you of its qualities. Having thrown the stone into the pond, stressing my ethnographic presence, these particular ripples quite surprised me. The willingness to be folklorised in this milieu of international bankers seemed to substantiate the theorem that identity shared a seat with numbers and calculations in the discourse of banking. The role of the filming folklorist elevated the dynamic qualities of an ethnic tradition. Bjarni's admission that this was designed to attract attention, gain access and bring across a message also supports this.

When my purpose and status had been clearly expressed people were generally more forthcoming on who they were and expressed their opinions on the event more openly. Some described events like these as important sites of networking or "dating" where many connections were made with colleagues you might have heard of but not met in person. If one was from Merryl Lynch then

patronymics. At this point I was standing on a chair filming in the back of the room. To correct him I yelled: "Schram!" In reply many of the guests lifted their wineglasses and saluted me with a joyful "Schram". While this rather amusing misunderstanding isn't particularly pertinent to the subject at hand it does provide a prime example of the absurd assumptions and misconceptions possible in transcultural relations.

one might meet the people that fill the same position in Morgan Stanley or UBS. The superiors would also to be visible and scout interesting new talent. This chimes with Bjarni Ármannsson's claim that "in the end this is a war for people. You must not forget that you are always fighting to get good people and keep good relationships with good people." ³³⁴

While this seems to be the overall strategy of the event as organized by superordinates one must not overlook the agential dimension "on the floor" so to speak. Building on de Certeau's notion of discursive activity as a form of social activity where people attempt to apply the roles of the discourses they assume³³⁵ one must take into account the fluidity of power relations between alleged superordinates and subordinates. The latter may, for example utilise various narratives and practices as ironic and tactical resistance towards regulatory strategies and in so doing become agents of control.³³⁶ Many there would for example freely express to us their opinions of colleagues and often with disparaging remarks on how they behave in certain situations: one always became drunk too early; another was hard to deal with in business. A central question in relation to fluid and seemingly ambiguous power relations is how the force of verbal and performed irony may indeed be a social activity that affects one's objective reality. The networking achieved at the Glitnir þorablót is certainly a significant factor in the lives of many people and it is also clear from our conversations with guests that its transforming effects on their working lives. For example, the event was in many ways a way of personalizing otherwise impersonal business dealings. One guest made use of the analogy of "sheathing the sword" to describe this effect. Whether this was a subtle allusion to the plastic "Viking" swords brandished at the event was not clear to me. But the guest did make it clear that events like these were "all about blowing off

³³⁴ "[I translate:] Í endanum er þetta stríð um folk. Maður má alls ekki gleyma því að maður er alltaf berjast um það að ná í gott folk og halda góðum tengslum við gott folk."

³³⁵ See for example Michel de Certeau: *Heterologies: Discourses on the Other* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

³³⁶ On this specific point I refer again to Tangherlini's work on the strategies and tactic of paramedics, p. 48.

steam and seeing reserved bankers transform into something wild.” It offered a sense of relief from the aggressive nature of the bankers’ work. This bears witness to the importance of jocularly in certain narrative functions such as mediating controversial issues within the occupational culture and allowing members of the trade to evaluate serious subjects under the guise of humour.

It is clear that one of the subjects evaluated at this event was that of origin or more specifically ethnic and national background and image. The way nationality figures into decision-making in banking is, of course, not purely imagological. Many of the guests we spoke to on the subject suggested that working with foreign nationalities could entail many potential hurdles. Chiefly mentioned were language but also the depth of cultural difference. One guest, which we will call Peter, from the *GSC Group*, a transatlantic investment advisor, said that identity was often more important than “numbers”. While local legislation and currency played a big role he tended to avoid bankers from certain countries, such as Russia or Pakistan, based on reputation. Peter also pointed out that he had been dealing with local colleagues that are now part of Glitnir and their identity and profile has changed. Bjarni Ármannsson also expressed this view and introducing the term “Glitnir culture”:

BJARNI: I have no doubt that the Glitnir culture has a lot of influence on people. They go into a milieu of speed where participants create their own success. We are, it has to be said, more informal. We demand results. Rather than adhering to a process of going from a to b and from b to c you have to deal with matters your own way. We are first and foremost looking for results. But like all discoveries you will not reach them unless there is a sense of desperation. You need it. Capital itself is not enough to make progress. You have to put people in a certain position where they have to find solutions. And that’s exactly what we have been trying to do.

([I translate]: En ég er ekki í vafa um það að þessi Glitniskúltur hefur mikil áhrif á fólk. Fer inn í þessa hraðamiljö og þátttakendur í því að skapa eigin velgengni.

Við erum þrátt fyrir allt óformlegri. Við gerum kröfur um árangur í staðinn fyrir að fylgja ferlinu frá a til b og frá b til c að þá þarftu svolítið að sjá um það sjálfur. Við erum sumsé fyrst og fremst að leita að árangrinum. Og viljum gera vel við þá sem ná góðum árangri. En alveg eins og með allar uppgötvanir þú nærð þeim ekki fram nema það sé einhver neyð. Þú þarft á þessu að halda. Þannig að peningamagn er ekki besta leiðin til að ná framþróun. Heldur að koma fólki í ákveðnar ástæður þar sem það þarf að finna lausnir. Og það er ákkúrat það sem við höfum verið að reyna að gera.)

The terms “identity” and “culture” appear to be synonymous in this discourse and connote a fluid and transmittable quality that, in the case of the Icelandic bank, lies in “qualities” such as flexibility, individualism, low (or no) regulation or formality, speed and short lines of communication. In short, the basic doctrines of neo-liberalism that have been attributed to fall of the Icelandic banking system and the international finance crisis³³⁷. But while this is by far not an uncommon aspect of contemporary international banking the discourse within the Glitnir social world appeared to have “nationalised” these traits and thus capitalised on the sensational elements of ethnic difference. The authenticity of these factors is in fact secondary to the attention-grabbing aspects they contain. Bjarni puts this in more colourful terms: “If it is a part of the ancient culture all the better. It can just as well be applied to the business world. You need people to look at you. Then you can start doing business.”³³⁸ And so they did and were highly praised in the international market. This was, for example, duly noted at the þorrablót with a large sign reading “ÞorrAAAblót” representing, as was proudly explained to us on arrival, the top “triple A” rating announced only two days

³³⁷ See the Report of the Special Investigation Commission (SIC). The Commission was established by Act No. 142/2008 by Althingi, the Icelandic Parliament, in December 2008, to investigate and analyze the processes leading to the collapse of the three main banks in Iceland. SIC delivered its report to Althingi on April 12 2010 that was damning to both the member within the Icelandic Government and banks including Glitnir. See English excerpts on the Commission’s findings on the Icelandic Parliament website: <<http://sic.althingi.is>> [accessed 31. March 2010].

³³⁸ “[I translate:] Þó það sé hluti af fornmenningunni þá er það frábært – þó verið sé að gera það sama í bizzness heiminum. Þú þarft að láta horfa á þig svo geturðu farið að gera bizzness.”

earlier by the *Moody's Investors Service*. Bjarni made of point of how impressed their clients were that the sign had been altered so fast and in time for the event. “And that describes the dynamic of the organisation – because we are so small we have to move fast. It has to have style, be well thought through and fit into a certain frame.”³³⁹

This explicit image construction is of course a way of “branding” the bank and its services. The use of the terms “Glitnir culture” or identity are therefore suspect. One might therefore suggest some subtler term such as those suggested by Brubaker and Cooper: identification, self-understanding and commonality or connectedness or “groupness.”³⁴⁰ Yet, while such criticism can well be founded, I reiterate that preselecting and appraising the way people articulate and structure collective images of themselves as strong or weak is in many ways contrary to the phenomenological approach. Brand and identity may overlap for good or ill and in many other contexts than strictly within occupational groups.³⁴¹ But here I will suffice to say that the bankers and co-workers within the Glitnir bank could indeed be considered an occupational folk group that shares a set of traditions rooted in both Icelandic folklore as well as the Borealism dominant in contemporary mediums and everyday life. This includes the ironic presentation of traditional food.

5.3.2 Capitalising on “Bad Food”

The presentation of food at the party itself was as self-mocking as the invitation.

³³⁹ “ [I translate:] Og það lýsir líka dýnamíkinni í organasajóninni út af því við erum svona litlir þá verðum að hreyfa okkur hratt. Þetta þarf að vera svoltið skemmtilegt en svona smart og úthugað þannig að þetta falli inni í ákveðin ramma.”

³⁴⁰ Brubaker and Cooper, (p. 6).

³⁴¹ See for example David McCrone, Angela Morris, and Richard Kiely, *Scotland the Brand: the Making of Scottish Heritage* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999).

While the standing room-only was showered with fine wine and extravagant fingerfood the guests were escorted one-by-one to the back of the room where they were dared to try the various dried, cured or soured meat and fish. Each dish is marked by its original name for example “Hrútsprungur”, followed by its descriptive and literal translation: “Ram’s testicles”. Each morsel was adorned with a toothpick and miniature Icelandic flag. The grinning of the Icelandic bankers and the grimacing of their foreign colleagues revealed to us the ironic character of the presentation. Looking back through the field notes the problem of describing and interpreting the physicality of the performance is evident – yet equally clear is how Katla and I perceived them as ironic. Viewing the visual data from the event, on the other hand, may offer a thicker description. Yet as has been stated before, the photographic image is to all practical purposes “thin” and potentially illusory and can only become “thick with meaning” when explicitly interpreted and conceptualised.³⁴² When triangulated with auto-ethnographic description the reader/viewer can hope for a interpretation with phenomenological credibility. But a more textual, and texted as in prewritten, irony can be found in the bank director’s annual, and evidently much awaited, speech affirming the bank’s annual successes and also played on the food’s alleged lack in quality. But this time he turned the joke on his English guests. After giving an account of the bank’s investments in Finland the director offered the following anecdote:

BJARNI: Looking at the food here I was thinking what was actually guiding our investment strategy. I was reminded what Jacques Chirac said about Finland: that they made the worst food in the world. Probably worse than the English. So you can see what’s really guiding our investment philosophy: we invest in countries where there is bad food.

From this point participation from an otherwise business-like group of guests

³⁴² Maria Vasenkari & Armi Pekkala, “Dialogic methodology”, in *Thick Corpus, Organic Variation and Textuality in Oral Tradition*, ed. by Lauri Honko (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2000), p. 575.

increased as did the drinking, dancing and brandishing of furry and brightly coloured Viking helmets, drinking horns and the occasional plastic sword. The evening then culminated in the bank director's much-anticipated, seemingly appreciated, erratic and wild-eyed performance of Steppenwolf's song "Born to be Wild". So how may these performances be contextualised and understood? Why has a quasi-traditional food event been practiced with such a display of irony and self-parody? Why, imagologically speaking, has the proverbial woollen cap been abandoned for a furry Viking helmet?

To some extent these performances have the elements of occupational pranks or practical jokes. In this understanding the associates invited are the subjects of a prank. Many folklorists have explored practical jokes stressing the careful management of points of view with them.³⁴³ The Icelanders enjoy from the start knowledge that the guests are not privy to. Through the irony of simultaneously highlighting and mocking the "national" dishes the guests are put into an ambivalent and liminal state. The elaborate management of point of view serves an important role whereas only limited information, in this case of the unpalatable sour and pungent food, is at the disposal of those on the receiving end of the prank. Equally hidden from the guests is the þorrlát's, at best, tentative status as *tradition* and the marginality of the food within the contemporary Icelandic diet.

In this sense the Icelanders are protagonists acting within the transient and liminal experience with trickery of one that is "in the know". Asserting control in what can be seen as an ambiguous status of force relationships, the folk hero "pulls his prank" on the actors previously in a position of power. This is in many ways consistent with Richard Dorson's description of a folk hero as a "local character, a wag, an eccentric, talked about in close-knit circles for feats of strength or of eating or drinking or for knavish tricks and clever sayings."³⁴⁴ In an innovative article on occupational narratives within this genre, Jack Santino

³⁴³ See for example Bauman, p. 55.

³⁴⁴ Richard M. Dorson, *America in Legend* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973), p. 170.

exhibits the rewards that extensive collecting and analysis of contemporary occupational narrative can bear. He focuses on two job levels within the industry of commercial flight: the subordinate and superordinate, and on those stories that feature strong, heroic protagonists. As well as examining their actions and attributes he suggests the social and occupational factors that account for the similarities and the differences of these heroes. Santino presents examples of various prank narratives featuring occupational heroes as tricksters who on the subordinate level break their status barrier by assuming privileges allowed to superordinates. On the superordinate level, the heroes are practical jokers who rebel against social norms and restraints, extending their privileges of authority into areas forbidden to them by society. By challenging and breaking these rules, the heroes demonstrate transcendence and control over them,³⁴⁵

They achieve a notoriety that is usually limited to their home base or domicile [...] although occasionally, a particularly flamboyant character will be well known throughout the entire industry. These stories circulate orally, are widespread, and are well known among members of the occupational group.³⁴⁶

This work presents an interesting perspective on the more ambiguous status of the foreign banker in the host country. While food culture may be at their centre these verbal and physical performances play most significantly on nationality. And it is within the transnational context that they gain their irony and ambiguous meaning. In one of the earliest studies of irony Kierkegaard mapped out a particular way of engaging in public activity through verbal irony. As discussed in chapter two (ch. 2.7.2.) his ironist rejects convention as illusory and acts on his rejection by following it without any true engagement. But by only playing at practice the actor gains sufficient distance from the immediacy of the ordinary

³⁴⁵ Jack Santino, "'Flew the Ocean in a Plane': an Investigation of Airline Occupational Narrative", *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 3 (1978), 189-209.

³⁴⁶ Santino, 192.

and thus awakens his subjectivity and the conception of oneself as a subject. He calls this the “infinite absolute negativity” of irony. It negates this or that phenomenon and establishes nothing, because that which is to be established lies behind it. Therefore irony is a qualification of subjectivity but also a suspension within it.³⁴⁷

So are these ironic *þorrablót* simply an exercise in transcultural subjectivity? Fernandez and Huber have stressed that in any given situation irony has the power to resist, blur, or redefine preconceived categories (see Theory and Methodology). In light of this I hold that within transcultural identity negotiations verbal irony plays an important part in questioning and corroding categories of inclusion and exclusion. I can also argue that such performances can also lead these individuals, transcending the authenticity of their identity, to an ironist standpoint. But, Fernandez, Huber and others have also questioned the true force of the ironic trope in contexts such as these and whether insubordinate ironies actually do anything to change the objective circumstances of people’s lives.³⁴⁸

What is interesting in this relation is Bjarni’s admission that the self-irony of the *þorrablót* was designed to attract attention, gain access and bring across a message. While this is viable to a degree I believe that various other dynamics are in place. Playing on, and in some cases “attacking”, the senses these individuals apply their tactics to gain voice, agency and leverage in the otherwise firmly set power structures within their host cultures and the liminal relationship between the local and the foreigner. The self-parody of the event may also be seen as an attempt to defuse the tensions and distrust associated with a marginal national culture operating within a new host culture. Through it an ironic distance is created toward the “ethnic background”; An identity represented but simultaneously negated. But after these categories have been corroded what is left other than the commodity, the comedy and Kierkegaard’s

³⁴⁷ Kierkegaard 1841

³⁴⁸ Fernandez and Huber 2001.

“absolute negativity”? Or is there an identity in irony - having abandoned authenticity?

6. Walking Up Hills – Entering Societies

One may get closer to answering that question in another and more personal case of the re-appropriation of food exoticism so common among my informants. Taking wider account of the culture transfer within different contexts of everyday life we can analyze the narrative accounts of an Icelandic expatriate in Scotland and his relationship with his flatmates and friends; his American partner and in-laws; and also with an exclusive society of mountaineers. Haraldur Guðmundsson is a mathematician in his forties and has been researching artificial intelligence for a few years.³⁴⁹ Although I quote him at the beginning of this thesis on his run-in with “the question”: if Icelanders live in igloos (snow houses), a common misconception of Icelandic architecture, Haraldur initially stated that his national origin had little bearing on his everyday life. He socialises with very few Icelanders in Scotland and does not seek out Icelandic cultural events unless they are especially to his liking. He claims that whatever need he has of speaking Icelandic he fulfils by occasionally speaking to his family on the phone or during visits.

To some extent Haraldur also maintains a link to his native country through the media. He follows Icelandic news and is particularly interested in British press reactions to Icelandic business ventures. He asserts that he is not filled with any sense of pride by reports of Icelanders taking over foreign business, which are frequently historicised with references and allusions to Viking raids.³⁵⁰ His interest stems more from when he worked earlier for an Icelandic bank and having since been asked about the Icelandic economy by the likes of a Lloyd’s banker. Other references to media can be seen as to be equally reflexive and representational. For example he describes the above

³⁴⁹While still in the UK, Haraldur went south of the border to England not long after this much appreciated contribution to the research in the summer of 2006. He has recently communicated that he still misses Scotland.

³⁵⁰See for example Ian Griffiths, “Viking raiders return undefeated to Britain's financial territory”, *Guardian*, 13 October 2006.

mentioned, *Icelanders*, which he gave to his partner's parents and as being representational for an important part of Icelanders, albeit not the whole of the nation. Asked if he followed Icelandic films, he replied that he would have liked to see a television broadcast of Dagur Kári's *Nói Albínói* again, having seen it earlier in a local art house cinema: "I would have wanted my girlfriend to see it. To see how difficult (he chuckles) how difficult life is in the Westfjords."³⁵¹

Although Haraldur does not regularly seek out Icelanders, he stated that he wanted to attend the last þorablót on account of his American partner but was away. "It was really unfortunate", he says and adds with a chuckle "because my girlfriend really wanted to see, to get to know this incredible food, or rather to see other people eat it." This sardonic pun becomes even more significant as we learn more about Haraldur's own practice of (that is his attitudes to and experiences with) traditional food. Indeed a cluster of his narratives set him as the subject as well the agent of subtle banter and self-parody revolving around his own food habits.

Haraldur has in fact managed to maintain such fundamentals of the traditional Icelandic diet as fish, adapting them to his life abroad. For example, Haraldur and his otherwise vegetarian fiancé meet halfway over fish suppers. This enables him to continue on a diet of fish three to four times a week, similar to that he was raised on. He claims that he feels weak and dull-minded without it. He is satisfied with the Edinburgh fishmongers and even claim to have found an outlet for his national sentiment by shopping in a particular Japanese fish shop where he is still greeted with respect after a discussion on shark-preparation. In addition to this diet, he supplements his Omega 3 intake with dry fish brought from home and stocks up on bottles of *Lýsi*, a popular Icelandic fish liver oil. He half-jokingly complains about running out and going on the *Lýsi*–

³⁵¹While I do not pretend to fully understand my informant's hilarity at this point, a certain and perhaps apparent irony presents itself in that *Nói Albínói* does not go far in representing the Westfjords towns. In fact, as discussed in chapter 3, in my interview with Dagur Kári, he claims that the scripted location was modelled on Springfield, the cartoon town from TV series *The Simpsons*.

tablets, expressing severe doubt as to the compatibility of non-Icelandic fish oil and Omega 3 products. His unwavering faith in the product has become a standing joke with his flatmates, something he answers by “preaching and pointing to studies in its support”:

HARALDUR: This is made into a joke. My flatmates are quick to point out that the reason, that the contents of the bottles are the cause of the contamination – or that the fridge smells. Which is, of course, complete nonsense.

(I translate: Þessu er nú líka stundum snúið upp í brandara. Meðleigendur mínir eru líka snöggir að benda á þetta að það sé orsök, í flöskunum sé orsök mengunar, eða þú veist að ísskápurinn lykti. Sem er náttúrlega bara bull.)

Despite the strict adherence to his relatively traditional diet in his daily life, Haraldur is quite aware of its transcultural significance. He has, in fact appropriated it into the daily routines within his host culture. Exoticism as a tactic of gaining access and inclusion is quite apparent in Haraldur's initiation into an exclusive and traditional British folk group. An important part of his circle of friends consists of a group of British mountaineers or hillwalkers. An avid outdoorsman himself he got to know the group from a professor who eventually wrote the letter of recommendation needed to join the club. Early on in our interview we asked if in general he thought that being an Icelander had any bearing in [his] communication with British people, he answered: “I think it was easier for me to get in. I was really well received in the mountaineering club because I was an Icelander.”

This positive reception lies to some extent in the reflexive cultural framework of the folkgroup, and its recurrent appreciation of wilderness and the exotic. Scottish hill walking was established as an honourable pastime and code of practice among circles of gentlemen in the mid-nineteenth century, alongside an emerging romantic notion of nature “forged through the contrast

with nineteenth century industrial cities and their sense-scapes'.³⁵² From these practices it has been argued that the culture arose that would instil or enhance tendencies of exploration and admiration of “untouched” nature in addition to the redemptive values attributed to healthy and picturesque walks in the British Countryside in the eighteenth century.³⁵³ The implications of being an Icelander within this cultural framework, which came later to Iceland and in different form, were certainly not lost on Haraldur:

HARALDUR: I think Iceland is a little exotic in mountaineering. There is so much untouched there, while here every hill has been walked from every side and been searched for a steeper way up. But at home, some shepherd might have run up and down but nobody saw the point until the 20th century in walking on mountains just walking on them. Usually the sheep are the reason you're there.

([I translate:] Ég held að Ísland er svolítið exotískt í fjallamennsku. Það er svo mikið ósnert meðan hérna er búið að ganga uppá hvern hól frá öllum hliðum og reynt að finna eitthverja aðra leið upp hólinn sem er aðeins brattari. En svo heima eru fjöllin – það eru kannski einhverjir smalamenn sem eru búnir að hlaupa upp og niður en enginn sá tilganginn fyrr en á 20. öld að labba á fjöll bara til þess að labba á þeim. Það er oft einhverjar kindur hérna sem eru ástæðan.)

A recent ethnography of hillwalkers in Scotland provides some illuminating and contextual annotation for Haraldur's narrative. From her fieldwork in Scotland in 2001 and 2002, anthropologist Katrín Lund learned that when mountaineers scale the hills they express what the eye catches through actual descriptions. They look around and name mountains, glens and lochs in a process of *ordering the scenery*. Moreover, she learned that walking in the Scottish mountains is about “getting to know the country”, and this was what most mountaineers agreed on. Working with the notion of reflexive awareness, Lund goes on to illustrate that what the mountaineer sees needs to be examined in relation to the

³⁵²Phil Macnaghten and John Urry, *Bodies of Nature* (London: Sage, 2001), p. 5.

³⁵³See Katrín Lund, “Seeing in Motion and the Touching Eye: Walking over Scotland's Mountains”, *Etnofoor* 17 (2005), 27-42.

sensual dialogue between the surroundings and the self. She found that in the course of one's eyes moving over the Scottish Highlands (established as spectacular landscape) modes of movement change at different inclinations and over the duration of the climb and that "the eye not only observes, it also reflects."³⁵⁴ "This correlated with the views the mountaineers frequently pointed out to her, that that when walking the Scottish hills you learn as much about yourself as you learn about Scotland and that "getting to know the country and getting to know yourself is the same thing".³⁵⁵

It is into this sensory dialogue, reflexive awareness and exclusive social context that Haraldur brings his own sense of self and place. On joining the society he presented a pamphlet he had put together entitled: *An Introduction to Mountaineering in Iceland* and provided networks and contacts in Icelandic mountaineering. He has recently gone as far as bringing two of his Scottish friends to Iceland. As he says, "we climbed a new mountain route and that's always considered remarkable. It's something that will live on for the next decades." Self-effacingly, he declares having for long been planning to seek funding from Icelandic airlines for British mountaineers, by so doing bolstering tourism over the wintertime. Haraldur is frequently asked about the country, its geology, climate and history. Overall, he explains, the mountaineers seek to gain from each other's experiences, practical knowledge and significantly from each others' stories. These storytelling sessions often begin by trading practical information, how to get to the wilds and what to do there and who to ask for logistical information. Often this will entail personal experience narratives that are often characterised by what he calls healthy exaggerations - a common Icelandic term:

HARALDUR: Yes, what really matters in this is indeed the natural conditions, how the snow lies, the ice. It matters greatly in terms of safety. People ask me. There's news of someone, somewhere and what the conditions where like.

³⁵⁴ Lund, (pp. 28-29).

³⁵⁵ Lund, (p. 29).

That's when the stories follow. Then of course when men have had a few drinks, than it's like in fishing, the salmon gets bigger and bigger with every story. It always gets steeper and steeper.

([I translate]: Já, það sem skiptir náttúrulega mestu máli í þessu eru náttúrulega aðstæður, hvernig snjóalög eru, ísalög, skiptir rosalegu máli bæði upp á öryggi, t.d. snjófljóð og gæði klifursins. Fólk spyr mig, fréttist af einhverjum einhversstaðar mikið hvernig aðstæður hafa verið. Þá fylgja með sögur En svo náttúrulega þegar menn hafa fengið sér nokkra drykki þá er það eins og í veiðimennskunni - laxinn stækkar alltaf og stækkar með hverri sögu. Það verður alltaf brattara og brattara.)

As an example of integrating into the group Haraldur mentions how after he started to understand the in-crowd, and sometimes jocular, use of Gaelic place-names he began to relate to his fellow-mountaineers how place-names in the Iceland often correspond with the Scottish. In the light of his experiences it can also be argued that cultural exchange during, or more frequently, after the act of mountaineering, adds significantly to an already reflexive construction of place and self. In addition to the reflexive awareness of self and country already present in the mountaineering experience, Haraldur brings a sense of place from outside of the immediate locality. Indeed he also literally brings the “other” to his own locality by facilitating mountaineering trips to Iceland. But he also does this symbolically in the context of Scottish hillwalking through the process of both narration and, as illustrated below, symbolic food display as well as ironic narration of his food traditions as being incongruous, exotic and northern. This becomes clear when he explains the reason for why he has acquired *brennivín* (lit. burnt wine), the signature Icelandic schnapps, and *harðfiskur* (dried fish) from his family:

HARALDUR: That's mainly for, and has become an old tradition of mine, when I go to the mountains. Its really great once you come back, because dried fish is

packed with proteins (gesture: presses hands together tightly) when you're back in your tent or your hut and are recharging for the next day. And also exhibits one's custom (gesture: hands reaching out, palms upward). The Scot of course, drink whisky like it was water. It's a big part, at the end of their day, to have a little whisky and go over the day's events. And then I have presented a little brennivín and have tried to... (starts smiling) to turn them. The reception has been mixed.

([I translate] Það er nú aðallega til þess að og orðin gamall siður hjá mér að þegar ég fer á fjöll því að þá er alveg frábært þegar þú kemur til baka (gestures: slamming hands together) því að harðfiskur er bara pakkaður af prótínum, þegar þú ert komin niður í tjald eða skála að hlaða sig upp fyrir næsta dag og líka að svona sýna sinn sið (hand gestures: reaching out - giving), skotarnir drekka náttúrulega bara víski eins og vatn mikill partur hjá þeim í lok dags að fá sér aðeins víski og fara yfir daginn. Og þá hef ég komið með smá brennivín og harðfisk og reynt að (starts smiling) snúa þeim. Það hafa verið svona misjafnar viðtökur.)

The hint of irony in the last utterance and the grin that followed suggests that this attempt at dietary conversion did not receive an entirely positive reaction. Indeed, an initiation into Icelandic tradition was not necessarily intended. In what he refers to as an “old tradition” of his, we may certainly see the expression of nutritional values deeply rooted in Haraldur's upbringing and characteristic of a traditional Icelandic diet. But it is no less his performance (and the olfactory effects of the food), rather than merely his consumption, that has most significance in cultural context of those evenings recapping the day's events in tents and huts. He further elaborates on this in what he calls *tröllasögur* (lit. troll-tails) or tall tales:

HARALDUR: Yes, I of course tell them troll-tales of how one should eat shark with the brennivín and then completely exaggerate the shark's production process. That's a real fountain and I've done that for the men, yes. I would just really like to be able to bring over some shark (laughs) to show the men that it

isn't just some fairy tale.

[I translate:] Já, ég náttúrulega segi þeim tröllasögur hvernig taka eigi brennivínið með hákarli og stór ýki þá náttúrulega framleiðsluferlið hákarls og það er mikil uppspretta eða ég hef verið svona skotpónn fyrir það eða menn já, ég þyrfti bara eiginlega að geta komið með hákarl (hlær) til þess að sýna mönnum að þetta sé ekki bara einhver bábilja.

The exotic and masculine symbolism seen, evoking a northern counterpart to the already exotic Scottish Highlands, offers this Icelander abroad a distinctive voice in the sensory dialogue and reflexive identity negotiation. The construction of the spectacular Highlands is admittedly perhaps akin to the heterotopias of Icelandic nature. But considering Haraldur's narratives, I would argue that the image of Icelandic nature he performs, and in fact practises, is not a mere internalised component based on ethereal stereotypes. It is on the contrary a major component of his identity, daily life and food traditions, and provides cultural capital both "at home" but more significantly abroad, within the exclusive groups he most effectively interacts with. It is an essential part of his phenomenological reality that is experienced with all his senses, explored with acquired skill and folklore and importantly constructed and narrated with agency. However it is also a performed, exaggerated re-appropriation of an emerging exotic image of a wild and "untouched" North. Through this performance, "staged" within the narrative context of an enclosed tent or hut, Haraldur deliberately embodies this exotic image and takes full advantage of the visual, olfactory and flavoursome effects of the traditional food he offers as well as its symbolic meanings. While distancing himself from the notion of authenticity (of the folklore or his national identity) Haraldur chooses eccentricity as a tactic to acquire voice and authority within the strategies of the host culture.

7. Conclusions

As I hope this thesis demonstrates, a major contribution can still be made to the theory and methodology of this disparate but interlinked scholarship of folklore and identity; contemporary mediums and image. Interlinking theory, the study of representations and ethnography my research, perhaps most interestingly, brings to bear how expressive culture and performance may corrode the strategies of boundary making and marginalisation carried out by tactically re-appropriating them. So the main theoretical and ethnographic probe into *the dynamics of performing identity and folklore in transnational contexts* presents us with surprising qualitative results: Embedded in the transnational everyday life of migrants and pitted against a backdrop of historical imagery and media representations, folklore and identity are not only differentiating cultural forms but also tools in the practice of gaining access to, and equal footing within, perceived host cultures.

Before arriving at such a conclusion I have first sought an appropriate synthesis of theory and methodology (presented primarily in chapter 2) and secondly analyzed the history, discourse and production of images of Iceland as part of the North (ch. 3). So doing I also pursued my more specific research questions. Engaging with folkloristic, ethnological and cross-disciplinary literature I have been drawn especially to practice theory, performance-centred and contextual research. I find that these schools of thought offer illuminating perspectives on the dynamics of images and identities, an emphasis on fieldwork and a critical understanding of tradition. I have also deduced that many, valid, approaches centred on the top-down delivery of text and meaning of identity fail to adequately address the many complexities of contemporary transnational communication and commodification of culture and identity. The study of identity, image and cultural representation has often been focused on the production of identity and less on the consumption of identity or indeed its

practice. The emphasis on cultural context, practice and performance offers more potential in understanding the relationship between image and identity and how the latter is formed, sustained and negotiated.

I believe I contextualise and synthesise a set of theories that adequately address the many complexities of contemporary transnational communication and the commodification of culture and identity. An important hypothesis in this study is that identity, personal as well as national, is to a great extent negotiated in everyday life. This contrasts with the hegemonic premise that national identity is primarily forged among an intellectual and political elite and delivered down the cultural strata. Essential in a critique of an overemphasis on such top-down delivery are theoretical perspectives on power or force relationships within folklore; the humour and irony, or inner and outer meanings, within representations; and the expressive bricolage often employed in the practice of tradition.

This emphasis on the field, practice and performance also calls for the researcher to go beyond the text and to the context specific: the complicated aural, visual and sensory experience of everyday life within any given space. Because of the necessity for this context-specific research, and attention to performance and intricate power relations in everyday life I have asked the methodological question: *How may one research identity performances in the field and document them audio-visually (most specifically dealt with in chapter 2.8)*. I have sought methodological grounding in reflexive fieldwork, audio-visual techniques and a synthesis of contemporary folkloric and ethnological scholarship as well as other recent critical ethnographic theory. Problematising the role of the film- or video-researcher I argue that the involvement of audio-video technology need not be looked upon as contamination of the fieldwork data but as an illumination of the interaction taking place in the field and that this interaction may subsequently be analyzed from the visual-text. The potential of such fieldwork practices to induce performance from the research participant must also be acknowledged and in many cases embraced. Examples were

given throughout the thesis of the kind of performance explicit filming can induce; the heightened awareness of an “audience” of some sort and the subsequent dynamics of agency. To reiterate these points one can name the subtle jousting and expressions of dyadic joking relationships at an National Celebration (4.2.); and the attempt to validate the authenticity and gravity of the Glitnir þorabrát performance (5.3.). So while the “field” might be highly affected by the researcher in this case the “subjects” are not without agency and reveal elements of their personality, social standing, strategies and tactics. While a reflexive audio-visual approach may go far in constituting the researcher within the research the data must also be contextualised as to some extent a collaborative performance of both the researcher and those researched.

Another primary but specific research question was: *What are the dynamics of producing representations of a nation, Icelanders in particular, throughout history and within contemporary mediums (means of mass communication within art, film, advertisement) and what is the relation of these images with people’s daily life, identity and folklore (primarily dealt with in chapter three)?* Through Iceland’s history, and arguably even before its settlement, the island’s wild exotic image was created from afar. Though exoticism was to some extent resisted “at home” the ironic performance of Icelandicness, not least through food traditions, have played a significant part in Iceland’s representation and relations with the outside world. While images of the north fluctuated through the ages the Icelanders’ position was for the most part marginal and was reflected in a power-imbalance that does not favour the periphery. While Icelanders colonial position was patronizing and appropriating it was preferable to that of many of the subjects of the Danish Crown. But the image of the Icelandic “noble savage” later became problematic and unacceptable from a nationalist standpoint. These Icelanders needed to be a culture-nation, not a nature-nation, in order to assume authority of themselves and territory. When writing back in the face of such othering representations Icelanders in early 20th century Copenhagen rejected an exotic image of

themselves, stressing their modern European-ness, political sophistication and developed, albeit ancient and deep-rooted, culture. In turn, they expressed abhorrence to the allegedly primitive nature-folk they saw on the other side of the culture-nature dichotomy.

In today's globalised world, emergent media images still play on the exoticism of the North. But in stark contrast to the explosion of protest in the eve of the 20th Century, among the Icelandic intelligentsia in Copenhagen, the contemporary exposition of Icelanders as primitive and exotic nature-folk seems to have been received with open arms both by Icelanders and the foreign target audience. A phenomenological study of the production of contemporary representations of Icelanders in some respect reveals the vitality of the fundamental features of romantic nationalism: an intimate relationship with nature; the rural; folk belief; and a strong adherence to past generations. But delving deeper into the creative processes of these producers reveals a reflexive national identity and a subjective awareness of transnational perspectives. The "tourist gaze" of the outside world has left no stone unturned. The production of ethnocentric commercial artwork should therefore be considered as a complicated negotiation between personal artistic expression, folklore, transnational interaction as well as nation-state policy or market-focused decisions.

The humour and self-parody of the marginal is closely involved with this transnational reflexivity and is, to some extent, mirrored in the rural-urban dichotomy prevalent in national discourse. This, on the other hand, does not negate the varying levels of irony and sincerity associated with "living on the margin", something that both the producers and the informants discern carefully between. Nor does the presence of irony eliminate a search for authenticity. The film directors' narratives, for example, revealed that while film may be artifice, then the filmmaking process can be an actual experience of the senses within material culture where the cast and crew are subject to local folklore and the practice of folklore within a folk group. This experience can furthermore have

national connotations and be contextualised as such. Furthermore it reveals the discrepancy that can exist between film and filmed experience. On the whole delving into the dynamics of the producers' phenomenological dynamics has revealed that the production of borealistic images cannot solely be described in terms of commercialism or nation-state hegemony. Rather it is a complicated negotiation between such competing factors as personal artistic expression, professional traditions and folklore as well as, or even counter to, state policy and market-focused decisions.

The production of national representations is nonetheless separate from transnational interaction in itself. Foreign people are received entirely differently than imported images of foreign people in the form of commodities or art (for example films and books.). The primary ethnography of this thesis therefore deals, not with the reception of transnational images, but with their practice among the exoticised people themselves. The consequent ethnography revealed that against a backdrop of media exoticisms, many Icelanders living abroad actually seem to embody projected images of eccentricity, basing them on differentiating folklore, but performing them to the point of exaggeration in their everyday lives.

There I answer one of my primary and specific research questions of *how Icelanders react to or enact exotic representations of themselves abroad and how that relates to power relations?* Interlinked as they are, the social, societal, cultural and sensual contexts of these performances are crucial to the signification of narrative performances presented here. One important social context within many narratives is that they are embedded in power-relations. In the exposition of these low-level politics of everyday life one may interpret many performances as tactical resistance to a perceived superior position of the expatriate's host. Within certain narrated settings, for example the kitchens of shared flats, dinner parties, or the þorrablót the expatriates themselves may be seen as agents of control in a collective strategy. From this functional perspective the Icelanders are exploring and asserting their status roles, as well

as their personal and communal identities. Personal experience narratives and food performances can thus be understood as empowering when lacking in privileged access and high hierarchal position.

The cultural and societal contexts of national icons and symbols also benefit from examination in light of these narratives and performances. Often evident in the audio/visual data, narrative styles may be varyingly ironic or serious in meaning. Their narratives may emerge significantly in a communal context but can be examined in tandem with the personal conceptualizations of the active narrator as well as those of others within the group. Playing on national, authoritarian and personalised symbols the crux of the narratives often ironically transcends the “conventionally” assumed meanings of these symbols. Accordingly, narratives that from a hegemonic perspective may at first glance appear as “crass” banal nationalism are revealed through reflexive and contextual research as elaborate and often ironic forms of negotiating identity, mediating potential hostility and as a form of tactical resistance. Representations, which these performances are, can therefore be prolifically examined in the cultural and social context of folk groups. Through reflexive, and other critical approaches, one may also get past and overtake the hegemonic notions of vertically “produced” identities and reductions in the individual’s capacity for self-definition.

My research therefore strongly suggests that in contemporary times marked by international market forces, tourism and global media many Icelanders are not simply reluctant receivers of exotic representations but have actually become their active performers. However, unlike the disembodied media images of “the other”, these performances can in fact be seen as a part of the intricate communal processes of identity negotiation embedded in culturally specific contexts and sensory experiences. The ethnography among Icelanders abroad revealed that they bring their own sense of self and place into the sensory dialogue, reflexive awareness and exclusive social contexts within their host countries. Turning the representations of northern eccentric nature-folk, to

their own ends, these individuals have re-appropriated exoticised vernacular practices abroad as a tactic to gain access and influence within the strategies of new localities. There I answer my last specific research question of *why some aspects of national identity, particularly food traditions, are performed ironically*. But *what that entails* is no less interesting. Because through their playful exaggerations these Icelanders have to a some extent distanced themselves from the authenticity that might be associated with these practices. In effect, they have negotiated new, ironic identities, applying differentiation not to build walls, but to open doors.

Yet the range of the irony and how the informants continue to live out these identities and images varies greatly. For some these performances are brief, and often comical, attempts at culture transfer that only confirm how “out of place” the performance of folklore can be outside the context of the folk group it “belonged to” (see for example the Christmas and New Years rites in ch. 4.5). For others the narratives left behind from such transnational encounters remain a testimony of more successful attempts at gaining acceptance and stature through the cunning appropriation of what obscure traditional elements they could gather (as in the case of “the Dubliners” in ch. 4.6. – 5.1.). In other cases the informants have gone so deep into their host culture that little more remains of their former practice of tradition than a memory (see, for example, ch. 5.2).

Conversely, for many, the ironised folklore continues to be a lived phenomenological reality. The prime example of this being found in the case of an informant whose practice and performance of exotic food culture and landscape go hand in hand with his ideas of nutritional value and the proliferation of published images of the north (ch. 6). Here the sensory aspects of folklore are also shown to have special significance whether it is experiencing the surrounding landscape or the tastes and smells of exoticised food. In this case borealistic imagery has laid the foundation for a certain vision of landscape and food that is nonetheless experienced through the senses and internalised as being a central part of how individuals see themselves. In that sense

identities can be to some extent ironic and yet viable – the folklore obscure but nonetheless enduring.

But there is a great gulf between the level of irony and the difference in motives between the tactical presentation of exotic folklore in private settings on the one hand to the premeditated commodification of obscure heritage as part of an overarching business strategy (such as the Glitnir bank þorablót). Yet all share the deliberate decision of creatively appropriating folklore and image to meet an end. Now edging back from the brink of a global economic crisis, in which Iceland has had the world's attention as a choking canary in the coalmine, it must be pointed out that these performances interlinked with the commodification of folk culture, can go well beyond purely phenomenological identity negotiations. They in fact play a significant role in affecting people's objective circumstances such as cultural capital, social or economic standing. This conclusion is of significance to the discussion presented earlier on what real effects irony may have on people's lives (ch. 2.7.2.) beyond mere expression of injustice or the "venting" of frustration. The case of the bankers' þorablót is an excellent, if not extreme, example of how ironic performances not only affect individuals but also play a part in shaping the lives of whole communities and nations. If these playful and ironic performances of identity and tradition were indeed the integral part of Icelandic business ventures, as the bankers claim, the effects of irony can indeed be colossal. In addition to the crash of an overstretched banking system Iceland has seen revolt in the streets (known as the "Home Appliance Revolution or *Búsáhaldabyltingin*"), the downfall of a long standing neo-liberal government and the election of a centre-left administration continuing a harsh program with the IMF and an ominous international dispute on the payment of crushing foreign deposit guarantees that have fallen on the Icelandic state. Within these highly structured contexts of global capitalism it might well be said that these ironic images and performances have proved, as in the case of the London bankers, an unpredictable force both corroding and confirming prior inequalities of power.

Future research would do well to taking notice of these ever-shifting dynamics of identities and the spaces in which they are negotiated. Not only is the media backdrop altered but the composition of Icelanders abroad (fewer financial professionals for one thing) and their economic and cultural conditions are likely to change as well. While an exotic and eccentric image may persist its active re-appropriation might not continue in the same way. Tactics may change with the strategies of culturally-specific contexts. What is clear is that in the study of identity and folklore and its performance in everyday life and contemporary mediums, catastrophes and economic crisis offer unique opportunities. How people may continue to perform the North, build walls or open doors, remains to be seen.

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