

THE LAST AUTUMN

A desolate farm, pushed up against the Arctic ocean has been breeding sheep for centuries. This is the last autumn they herd their sheep down from the surrounding mountains.



Original title: SÍÐASTA HAUSTIÐ English title: THE LAST AUTUMN Language: ICELANDIC
Country: ICELAND Length: 78 MINUTES Shooting format: 16 MM Screening format: DCP
Aspect ratio: 16:9 Screen ratio: 1.77 Sound: DOLBY 5.1 Print details: COLOUR & B&W



Karlovy Vary
International Film Festival
Documentary Films – Competition





SYNOPSIS

More than a thousand autumns ago, humans arrived with their animals to a land pushed up against the Arctic ocean.

Autumns came and autumns went. Where the road ends, Úlfar, the last in a long line of farmers, lives with his wife. As autumn returns their grandchildren arrive from the city to attend the last herding of the flock.

Next autumn farming will cease and all the sheep will be gone, but the landscape pushed up against the Arctic ocean will continue to tell about that one Last Autumn at the end of the world.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

IN ÁRNESHREPPUR, the smallest parish in Iceland, farmers live in harmony with their animals and nature. Like they have done since settlement. For three months of the year, this peripheral community is shut off from the world, with only a small airplane arriving, when the weather allows, with necessities and the occasional passenger.

I first came to Árneshreppur in September 2010, it was dark and we drove through the gravel road with the mountains on one side and the sea on the other side. Occasionally we met sheep on the road, they were still roaming. The very next morning I woke up, after hardly sleeping out of excitement to see the landscape. All I could utter was “oh my lord, this can't be true”. The beauty of it was not of this world and I was besotted. The same day I helped out with the herding and since then, I have been helping the farmers to herd their sheep down the mountains each autumn and I see them as my friends. In 2015 I taught the five students at the school analogue photography.

In 2016, the year when *The Last Autumn* was shot, there were 9 farms, and five children in the school and there was a small shop. Today the school and the shop has closed. With every year that passes, the population gets smaller as people leave. There are controversial plans to build a dam. While some say the dam could save the parish, others warn of the irreversible damage to the untouched nature.

Farming has always formed a cornerstone of life in Árneshreppur, but the younger generations are moving away, following other paths. For now, life is as it is lived, just before the transformation that seems to be around the corner.





INTERVIEW

by **LUCIANO BARISONE**, former director of *Visions du Réel*,
with the director **YRSA ROCA FANNBERG**



*“The last autumn is like a poem,
it’s a song of spaces and solitudes, where
also the disappearance of a sheep can be
a loss, something to mourn”.*

Watching The Last Autumn, I had the feeling of being the witness of a daily saga, where man is small if compared to nature; as we can see clearly in a short sequence at the beginning of your film, where man appears for the first time as a tiny point between earth and sky.. Which was the starting point of your work, of your research?

Farmlife was a big part of my childhood. In the past it was quite common for children to spend the summers at a farm, giving a helping hand and as a child I wanted to be a farmer, however life turned out differently. To me life at a farm is not exotic, even if obviously growing up in the city I am not a farmer. So in a way one could say that the starting point is my heritage.

A few years ago, a friend of mine told me that her father was quitting and with the children not wanting to take over, he had no way out, but to sell or kill his sheep. She was quite taken with it and obviously her father too. Farmers do breed their flock, during decades and sometimes centuries, as often the flock is passed down generations. In Úlfar’s case (my protagonist) his sheep were passed down from his ancestors.

When I found out that Úlfar was quitting, I had years of internal research, unconsciously I had been visioning this idea for a long time and from that moment I had only a few months of actual preparation, as it was going to happen, it’s not something where one can postpone the shooting for a few months or a year, as you can understand.

*Who the characters are? Why and how you choose them?
How did you work with them?*

Úlfar is from the area and his ancestors on both sides are from Árneshreppur as far back as one can count. He is as much part of the landscape as the mountains surrounding him. His wife Oddný is from down south, about an hour from Reykjavík, but came as a child to one of the farms in the area.



I had been coming for a few years to help out with the herding, I had taught analogue photography at the school and I had even been to the knitting club, where the women knit and the men play cards, so I knew everyone in the area. Once I heard the news that half of the farms were quitting and amongst them Úlfar, he has a sense of humour, even if that is perhaps not so obvious in the film, but he has a fascinating way of doing his own way; from the way he smokes his pipe, talks to the sheep, his cured salted fish, how he whistles at his sheep and so on. Even though the film is about Úlfar and Oddný at Krossnes, it is as much the story of any of the farmers in that area.

The farmers are not exactly fond of being over dramatical and over sensational, they very much deal with everything in a pragmatic way, so in order to approach Úlfar regarding to wanting to make the film I came over for a few days to visit. It was winter and during that time of the year, the road is closed due to heavy snow and the only way to get there

is with a small plane, like the one you see in the film. Úlfar came to the airport on his tractor, with chains on the wheels to pick me up. We spent a few days together, in the barn, feeding the flock, chatting and patting his animals. I came back a few times during the spring and summer to do my research, mainly watching and annotating, always armed with my medium format camera. About a month or so before the shooting I came with the script I had written and we talked about it, with me and Oddný in the kitchen and Úlfar in the living room watching the news. After a time Oddný called: “Úlfar are you listening”. It was clear he was taking everything in and there I understood something that was quite important to me: with the animals gone and his children living in Reykjavik, this is his testimony even if of course he would never ever say that.

I wanted to film during the autumn, when they herd their flock back from the mountains and send them off, it is the time of death and a new beginning. It is a very stressful time for the farmers, as their livelihood depends on it and they have to gather a lot of people to help them to herd down the sheep. I found it very beautiful that their family is there with them at that moment, accompanying them during this moment. The farmers were very helpful and Úlfar would come sometimes up with suggestions, or point out at cloud formations or how the sea was acting up.

The presence of nature is imposing. Why did you decide to film it in black and white at the beginning of the film? In order to give it a stronger dramatic tone?

The nature in Iceland is quite imposing and I think even more so in Árneshreppur, where each mountain has a character, it is quite magic and once you visit it penetrates your being. I am not saying this lightly but you become besotted. The black and white & the colour during the film has a structural and a dramatical function. From the very early days of the editing process it was one of our main focus, how to differentiate the time the audience experiences the film with the character and without, the time when there is a distance, a perspective not just from the main character, but also from human beings, as if it was the time of the landscape itself.

We wanted (this is a scene very much created together with my editor Federico) to create a sense of repetition, a repetitive beginning of the world; the creation of light, the land being separated from water, the first creatures and a man rising from the ground. In the Nordic mythological texts, the genesis is preceded by Ragnarök (Twilight of the gods). Time is not lineal, but circular and so from the ashes of death a new life is born. That first scene was one of our starting points, but one which we worked on until the very end and it did not click until we got help from the Icelandic writer Sjón to create a mythological poem inspired by Völuspá. A scene that puts life in perspective and not only human life...

In this atmosphere, in this feeling of being at the «end», the extreme limit, of the world, also the relationship between men and animals appears in a new light...

At the end of the world, in a place where civilisation ends and wilderness takes over, humans and animals had to have a special relationship. In a place where the weather and conditions can be and have been quite hostile, the human would not have survived without the animals, the meat gave them energy and the wool heat. And it grew into a symbiosis.

Now, if we talk about an END of a mode of living, of an era, of a life, that's for sure, but only as a way of a new beginning, how life goes in circles. That is why the film begins with the twilight.

And also the trees found on the beach, transported here by the sea streams, acquire a value, not only practical but also symbolic, as a message from another world...

Iceland had trees in the past, but the Vikings, cut them all down making the landscape barren. In Árneshreppur, being by the Artic Ocean it not only had the richness that the sea brings you (whales, fish etc), but it also has an abundance of drift wood, which they could build their houses and boats with. Úlfar's whole barn is built with driftwood, all the wood that they use in the area is from driftwood. The wood gets



to the rivers in Siberia to the Artic sea and by Greenland the currents neatly swifts it towards Iceland and Árneshreppur.

At the same time in the film there are these symbolic echoes; how out of nothing the first man appears, with his wife and creatures, and the echoes from the outside world, the trunks that arrive from a distant land, how time circulates like the currents of the sea, the echoes of that outside world.

The radio too creates a strange contradiction: it talks about computers and smartphones against the backdrop of a simple rural world...

The radio very much is that, but not only a contradiction, but also that echo of the outside world, of the future to come, of historic events, like the one about the famine, which to me was quite symbolic.



Between 1783 and 1785 Iceland was hit by particularly harsh volcanic eruption, which in Iceland has a word for it Móðurharðindin (mother harshness), it is thought that 75% of the domestic animals died and about 20% of the population. The temperature lowered and it was thought to be impossible conditions to live in. Iceland was at the time under danish rule, so the danish state decided that the only way out was to move the whole population to Denmark. Like we know, this did not happen and that is an echo how history tends to repeat itself, about the cyclical transformation that us as human beings go through constantly. In the same programme Bergsveinn also referred to the complexities of the human being in the past and how we in the modern world put no value to that, how today it is seen as purely superstition, without giving it the voice. With the radio, apart from being an echo of the outside world, it also strengthens the idea of circularity, how everything (the landscape, language etc) goes through a constant transformation.

What did you want to catch when you started this project? Did you know it before? What surprised you during the shooting? Did you find what you were looking for?

I wanted to capture an dramatical event, the death of a way of living in a non dramatical way. Farmers, especially in Iceland are not dramatic. They deal with life as it comes, like a task. Of course they have emotions, but it is very pragmatiscal. To me it was important to capture a way of life, which in a way is the backbone of how Iceland has seen itself during centuries, at the same time I was concerned about falling into the trap of thinking everything was better in the past, of making a melancholic, nostalgic film.

I would say that the film very much found its tone in the editing process which has been delightful. I worked very closely with my editor Federico, but the sound designer Björn has also been involved in the process the whole time. Even if the film is contemplative, I believe that the tone of the film has come during that working process in the editing and the sound design and perhaps what I have learnt is that life is much more subtle, even if what appears to be the death of something is in fact a transformation, a regeneration.

I was particularly impressed by the scenes where all the men give one another a mutual support gathering together the flocks. You arrived to pick up the special energy of this moment, quite an epic energy... How did you arrive to do that?

This is a scene that I found very difficult to film, to plan. The collaboration between farmers was crucial for the film in order to show how Úlfar and Oddný are not isolated and how their story can be extended to the whole community and region.

A lot of the elements of that scene came during the shooting, the sound of the walkie talkies, the sheep, the dogs, the sense of community, the epic scale of the landscape. The director of photography Carlos and Björn did a great job to capture that. Although, while watching the footage before

the editing it was very difficult to structure the scene, with the feeling and strength necessary to the film. When I started editing with Federico it became immediately clear that this sequence would be a rupture on the logic of the film. We took an impressionistic approach on it and the sequence has mainly tend like it is from the very first rough-cut of the film. Both this scene and the final scenes were one of the earliest decisions we took during the editing, of course tweaking and perfecting them during the process, but these two scenes were what we betted on as our lead scenes in order to build the final structure of the film's journey.

When all the flock are gathered we feel the beginning of a new patch that will drive the sheep to slaughter and we imagine the passage from the white of the sheep to the red of blood... But you avoid all that and prefer to pass again to black and white images accompanied by a sad song, that we perceive as a requiem... the only «gory» moment is when you shoot a shepherd burning and sawing the skulls of two sheep. Why did you decide to do that as a director?

This is the third rupture of the film, the first being the family arriving and Úlfar and Oddný are not alone anymore, the second the herding of the sheep and this is the third one, where everything really changes. From having a barn full of sheep to an empty barn. The reason of not showing the slaughtering of animals, is a dramatical one. Showing the slaughter could have been an obvious choice, but it's also an ethical one. To farmers, animals become something else once they are dead. The black and white photos allowed me to give Úlfar a time alone, and for the audience to feel that Úlfar was processing the grief in peace.

Like the black and white of the beginning of the film, it is not a time with Úlfar, but rather that transition of time through that landscape. It is like the black and white in the beginning of the *The Ghosts* is not only the sheep, but Úlfar as well, the time when only the mountains and the landscape remains.

*The end of *The Last Autumn* is dedicated to the memories of this world: the radio tells about a terrible famine that hit Iceland in the past, while a couple tans the skin of a sheep and the stables are empty of animals... It's a sort of a long goodbye... Is this the final meaning of your film?*

In one way yes, it is a long goodbye to so many things, the death of language, the death of Árneshreppur, the death of a long line of heritage and so on.

It is a long goodbye, at the same time there is also the grandchild, the future, the rebirth transformed. After Ragnarök the wasted meadows of earth grow green again.





PRODUCTION & TECHNICAL DETAILS

A film by: YRSA ROCA FANNBERG

Produced by: AKKERI FILMS & BITI APTAN BÆÐI

Producer: HANNA BJÖRK VALSDÓTTIR & YRSA ROCA FANNBERG

Cinematography: CARLOS VÁSQUEZ MÉNDEZ

Editing: FEDERICO DELPERO BEJAR

Sound Design: BJÖRN VIKTORSSON

Music: GYÐA VALTÝSDÓTTIR

Script: YRSA ROCA FANNBERG & ELÍN AGLA BRÍEM

Foley: STUDIO H5 FILM SOUND – HEIKKI KOSSI

Sound recording & Editing: BJÖRN VIKTORSSON

Color grading & post production: FEDERICO DELPERO BEJAR

Graphics: INGI KRISTJÁN SIGURMARSSON

English translations: MIKHAEL AARON ÓSKARSSON

Supported by: THE ICELANDIC FILM CENTRE
WESTFJORDS REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT OFFICE
MINISTRY OF INDUSTRIES AND INNOVATION





BIOGRAPHY

Yrsa Roca Fannberg was born in Iceland, brought up in Sweden with Catalan heritage. She holds a BA in Fine art from Chelsea College of Art, London (2000) and a master in Creative Documentary from Pompeu Fabra University, Barcelona (2009). Her first documentary *Salóme* (2014) won several awards, amongst them the Best Nordic documentary at Nordisk Panorama.



The Last autumn (2019) is her first feature documentary and is produced by Akkeri Films and Biti aptan bæði. Her third documentary is in pre-production.

Yrsa also works with analogue photography and watercolours. Recently she had a solo show with photographs *Life, as it is before the transformation* at the National Museum in Iceland.

Yrsa is part of the organisation of Skjaldborg, an Icelandic documentary festival and programmes monthly screenings of creative documentaries and experimental films at Kling & Bang gallery in Reykjavík.

AKKERI FILMS

Akkeri Films is a newly established production company in Reykjavík founded by Hanna Björk Valsdóttir, documentary producer previously working at Ground Control Productions and two-time Edda: Icelandic Film Award recipient for best documentary (*Dreamland*, 2009 & *The Laxá Farmers* 2013). Co-founder is established sound designer Björn Viktorsson. The aim of Akkeri Films is to make high quality creative documentaries for international release. *DIVE: rituals in water* (2019) by Elín Hansdóttir, Anna Rún Tryggvadóttir and Hanna Björk is Akkeri Film's first feature length production and *The Last Autumn* (2019) by Yrsa Roca Fannberg premiering in competition at Karlovy Vary. Also in production is *Little White Africa* (2020) by Hanna Björk and other works.

BITI APTAN BÆÐI

Founded by Yrsa Roca Fannberg in 2016, Biti aptan bæði produces cinematic documentaries. *The Last Autumn* is the company's first release. Other films in production are *Across the Ocean* and *Almost a Century*.

FESTIVALS AND AWARDS

Karlovy Vary International film festival, July 2019.
International Documentary Competition.

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