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Godland

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Godland

Abstract

This is a film review of *Godland*(2022), directed by Hlynur Pálmason.

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Godland (2022), dir. Hlynur Pálmason

Godland is an Icelandic-Danish co-production that tells the story of a young priest, Lucas (Elliott Crosset Hove), who is sent from Denmark in the late-19th century to a remote region of Iceland to oversee the building of a church, establish a parish, and to spread the word of God. Directed by Hlynur Pálmason, the film is inspired by seven wet-plate photographs by a Danish priest taken in the 1800's which are believed to be the first taken of Iceland's more isolated areas. In the film, rather than sail directly to his destination, Lucas opts to travel by land to visit unsettled areas of the country to witness its natural beauty and capture new sights through photography. However, because of this decision, he also faces difficult terrain and the unrelenting landscape, barely making it to his intended settlement. The journey is made with the help of a group of Icelanders, among them a guide named Ragnor (Ingvar Sigurðsson), an older man who is experienced with the difficult terrain, and a translator (Hilmar Guðjónsson) who provides Lucas with some connection to the others in the group as Lucas cannot speak the native tongue except for a few words and

phrases. Set in the period of Danish colonization, *Godland* provides a biting critique of the colonial past and unpacks the role of religion in colonial domination.

European imperial expansion and conquest is characterized as being motivated by “God, Gold, and Glory.” The entanglement of religion and colonialism (as well as race) was at the heart of the emerging world order in the modern period as the Church was an arm of power helping to bring subjects into line with the values and lifestyles of political masters.¹ Iceland by this point had been colonized by Denmark for centuries, and had seen successive Christian missions since the 10th century. Lucas represents this effort as he sets out on his journey with a large cross intended for his new church, a collection of books, and bulky camera equipment to lead these primitive Danish subjects into the orderly world of Lutheran religious discipline and worship, though knowing little of the language, customs, and country itself. Though officially a Christian nation, the Icelandic characters of the film are not thrilled by the arrival of this Danish priest and outsider, with reactions to his presence generally ranging from mild acceptance to outright hatred. In comparison to them, Lucas seems ridiculous and shockingly unprepared for what’s ahead.

The two main characters of the film embody the domination and resistance of the imperial past through conflict and a mutual hatred for one another. Lucas demonstrates the arrogance of the colonizer and the determination to bring religious order to the wild natives. Before setting out, his Bishop warns him that Iceland is a terrible place with weather and a landscape very unlike Denmark, but Lucas in his naiveté is unintimidated, believing himself to be up to the task. That naiveté and arrogance puts his guides at risk, and at one point, results in great tragedy and Lucas’ own illness. This attitude diminishes through successive difficult experiences, but also diminishing is Lucas’ sense of self and purpose, even as he successfully reaches his destination and accomplishes the building of the church. Ragnor symbolizes the resistance of the ‘feral’ native to

the language and religion of the colonizer, one who is close to the land and is as tough as the terrain itself. Even when necessary, Ragnor refuses to speak the little Danish he knows to help Lucas on the arduous journey, and shows a disdain for his role and his religion. Despite his hostility towards the young priest, he continues to guide and help him through all of the various challenges they encounter. The relentless conflict between them builds over time and forms a central thread of the film, bringing into focus the ultimate destruction caused by the colonial project.

It is not just the Icelanders that resist imperial efforts: the land itself defies domination, and nearly breaks Lucas, causing him to wonder if he can continue, and in moments he seemingly questions whether or not God Himself is present there. Pálmason uses incredible scenes of the landscape to capture nature's unyielding grip, paring for example shots of Lucas suffering with shots of floods, ice, intense weather conditions, and a volcanic eruption. Often a single location is captured by Pálmason many times in different seasons and different states. Another interesting feature are time-lapse shots of decaying bodies, exhibiting the ways beings must eventually submit to the forces of nature, and symbolizing loss and decay. These elements parallel Lucas' own internal strife and slow internal 'decay' as betrays his own religious morality, committing grave acts of sin while outwardly remaining a leader for the others in godly action as a Lutheran priest.

Despite its incredibly important critique and intelligently constructed artistic elements, the film's main drawback is that the storyline moves at a glacial pace with a run time of almost two and a half hours. Perhaps it is Pálmason's intention that viewers take that time for consideration of the film's severe message about a colonial mission that fails from its own conceit, and to think of the land itself as escaping human command and religious authority. Even with the film's slow pacing, *Godland* is overall a valuable film for anyone interested in Europe's colonial past and the role of religion in that project.

¹Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "AAR centennial roundtable: Religion, conquest, and race in the foundations of the modern/colonial world" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 82, no.3 (2014): 637.