The First Cameraman in Iceland
Travel Film and Travel Literature

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Non-fiction has always been the poor relation of early film studies, but several film historians are starting to put this right... As was equally true in later years, the majority of early so-called ethnographic films were not produced by professional (or even amateur) anthropologists, they were made by commercial organizations for the entertainment (and sometimes) education of cinema audiences.2

The early travelogue occupied an interesting space between travel literature and the travel film. Here I examine their common points of reference and the travelogue's place in the early film industry. Earlier research on the filmmaker Nöggerath alerted me to his films shot in Iceland in 1901 and released in 1902 by the Warwick Trading Company. Nöggerath was therefore the first cameraman to set foot in Iceland, at the time one of the poorest but most exotic places in Europe. The films themselves have apparently not survived, but we do have his published recollections, which include a photograph of an undefined location in Iceland with Nöggerath's boxes on the left foreground.3 The early travel film was informed by various literary models. Principal among these was the travel literature genre, a genre that included travel accounts and travel diaries by artists, geologists, biologists, anthropologists and the like, and also the relatively new type of the travel guide.

Anton Nöggerath: Across Iceland

Anton Nöggerath (1880-1947) was the son of a Dutch vaudeville proprietor and key figure in early film exhibition and distribution in the Netherlands. In 1897, Nöggerath senior became the representative for the Warwick Trading Company in the Netherlands, Denmark and Norway. In the same year the seventeen-year-old Anton was sent to Britain to learn the film trade as trainee at Warwick. There he worked in the laboratory and, from late 1898, as a cameraman, shooting news and non-fiction for Warwick, such as a Naval Manoeuvres series in 1900, a fake collision for the Drury Lane play The Great Millionaire (1901), a series of fishing subjects in 1901, and the coronation of the Norwegian King Haakon in Trondheim in 1906.

In September 1901, Nöggerath made his trip to Iceland, departing on the trawler Nile from Hull. The Icelandic press commented that he had arrived too late to film the whale catch and a group of tourists, but concluded that his work was nevertheless important for the promotion of tourism in Iceland.4

Travel Literature and Rising Tourism in Iceland

The main production companies, such as Lumière and Biograph, avoided Iceland for their travelogues. The absence contrasts with foreigners writing about Iceland, and it was a well-known place among Western European readers around 1900. We are therefore dealing here with a special kind of exoticism: a place not visited by many, but well-known in the mind.

Mainly through literary sources, people were familiar with Iceland with its volcanoes, geysers and glaciers; its devastating volcanic
eruptions, earthquakes and sometimes extreme cold; its barren desolate landscape; and its lack of infrastructure. Iceland was well-known as the oldest democracy in Europe (AD 930) and as the site of the medieval Icelandic sagas. It was much written about by Northern Europeans from such countries as France, Britain, the Netherlands, Germany and Denmark. A long tradition existed of Northern European tourists, artists and scientists visiting Iceland and publishing books and articles about it. In particular, Iceland was very popular among explorers in the nineteenth century, resulting in published diaries and journals, scientific studies and novels. In the scientific field, special attention was given to archaeology, leprosy and, of course, the Icelandic sagas. One of the most well-known visitors was the artist, art critic and leader of the Arts and Crafts movement, William Morris, who visited Iceland in 1870 and 1873 and published his travel accounts afterwards.

Several, including Morris, went to Iceland to see the landscape and locations that had served as inspiration for the century-old sagas, seeking corporeal sensations to match their reading experiences. Morris was also a fan of Icelandic embroidery, metalwork and silverwork. The language barrier prevented all but a minimum of contact for some. Others, like Morris, learned the language and were able to have a more profound contact with the inhabitants, who themselves were very eager readers and storytellers. Next to travel accounts by private individuals, a new genre emerged in the late nineteenth century: the travel guide. In addition, travel literature was increasingly accompanied with illustrations. At the same time, postcards from Iceland started to appear and readers were offered direct images of Iceland.

In 1901, the year of Nögerath's visit, Iceland had become a modest tourist attraction with the country beginning to be inserted in travel guides to Scandinavia. More and more, separate travel books for the general reader started to appear, often attractively illustrated. Geographer William Bisiker, who published *Across Iceland* (1902), already noticed the rise of tourism when visiting Iceland in 1900. Near the Gullfoss waterfalls he visited a typical old farm. The family made bone spoons with 'Gullfoss' carved on them, as he writes, 'for the "trippers" who pass by.' Nögerath mentioned how locals would help visitors and offer lodgings and he was pleased by the hospitality.

Travel guides from around 1900 indicate the major attractions in Iceland and sites such as the ancient place of Thingvellir, the geysers and the Gullfoss waterfalls were captured on film by Nögerath. In another book from the turn of the century, Valtýr Gudmundsson advised three categories of trip: day-trips in and around Reykjavik, smaller trips to the interior (two to six days), and criss-cross trips throughout the country. Among the smaller trips is one Reykjavik-

\[\text{Thingvellir-Geysir-Gullfoss, lasting five days, including Mount Hekla and the road back through the south. This matches quite well with Nögerath's route in 1901, although he also took the effort to travel two extra days in order to see the rounding-up of sheep.}\]

The Present: The Changed Aspect of Reykjavik

Nögerath landed by rowing boat, and was immediately helped by a local teacher who brought him to nearby Reykjavik and introduced him to one of his students, who henceforth accompanied Nögerath as guide on his trip across the land. Nögerath did not describe the city; apparently, it did not impress him much. Neither did it impress his contemporaries. Bisiker remarked in 1902: 'If Reykjavik is not a town to be admired, it must be said that the surrounding scenery is most beautiful.'

The population in Iceland rose sharply from 47,000 in 1801 to 79,000 in 1901, in spite of heavy emigration in the late nineteenth century (mainly to Canada). Housing was mostly traditional, and turf buildings dominated the countryside, as one can see on photographs and postcards around 1900. Timber became increasingly common in towns and villages. The first concrete houses were built in Reykjavik at the end of the nineteenth century. Communications in Iceland had always been difficult. Direct contact with the outer world was only established in 1906 when the first telegraph line was laid. Infrastructure improved from the last quarter of the nineteenth century, with road-making and bridge-building starting on a limited scale. In 1901, roads were still poor and thus the use of pack-ponies, horses and carts was a necessity rather than a tourist gimmick, although this might have added to the allure of the country as model of the rural and unspoilt that so much in demand in the age of the Industrial Revolution.

The first automobile was introduced to Iceland in 1904, but due to the lack of good roads, it would take another decade for cars and lorries to become general means of transport. This lack of communication and infrastructure might well have played a role, together with the leprosy epidemic and natural terrors such as the devastating 1896 earthquake, in deterring the earliest film pioneers such as the Lumière brothers, who did not stay from the main French and British shipping lines to the East and the West when embarking for exotic places.

Natural Scenery and Geology

The first stop of Nögerath's trip through Iceland was the ancient site of Thingvellir, the location of the medieval sagas and the birthplace of
the first European democracy. William Morris had been overburdened with joy upon reaching Thingvellir on 25 August 1871: ‘Once again that thin thread of insight and imagination, which comes so seldom to us, and is such a joy when it comes, did not fail me at this first sight of the greatest marvel and most storied place of Iceland.’ A small wooden church marks the site, but Nögerath did not bother to describe the place and he probably never filmed there.

After Thingvellir, Nögerath visited three other big attractions around 1901, although with mixed feelings: Mount Hekla, the Geysir and the Gullfoss waterfalls. Nögerath, having climbed Mount Hekla, saw only a dead volcano with snow in the crater and concluded that it was not worth filming:

When we arrived at Mount Hekla it was a great disappointment for me to see the mountain so calm and quiet. I immediately got the impression that my journey had been in vain. When I climbed to the top of Hekla with my camera, in the crater I could see nothing but snow. We set up the tents nearby for our stay that night, and the following day we continued our journey, having seen nothing worth mentioning.

After the disappointment of Hekla, Nögerath was deeply impressed by the Geysir. After waiting two days and following a small spurt in the second night, the Geysir finally went up on his third day there:

At about three in the afternoon, after a terrible roar and shaking of the earth, the Geyser spurted: a magnificent sight, almost indescribable, and of which the first 30 meters of film were splendidly successful. Large clouds of steam followed, which soon covered me too, obscuring the shot, so that I soon had to stop filming.

Later on Nögerath came closer to the crater and filmed inside:

We nearly lost our lives due to our curiosity, because right at the moment when we had filmed the crater and interior, we suddenly heard a terrible rumbling, and my guide yelled: ‘Quickly, away from here’. Carrying my camera on my shoulders, we ran as fast as we could, escaping just in time! Then all of a sudden the Geyser went up again at full speed, and spurted; we hadn’t left a second too early. The risks of the film-cameraman ... But I had achieved my goal: the Big Geyser had been filmed!

In contrast to Nögerath, Morris did not like the Geysir plains at all, and he was disgusted to camp at a tourist place and encounter British visitors. While Morris was repelled by the hot springs, the British of an earlier generation, impelled by a scientific curiosity, had made straight for the Geysir, then regarded as one of the wonders of the world, and had been relatively little touched by Iceland’s great literary past. Henry Holland on his trip in 1810 remarked: ‘We all immediately hastened to the spot & placed ourselves as near to the basin, as our present ignorance of the phenomena rendered prudent.’ By contrast, Holland was unimpressed by Thingvellir:

The church of Thingvalla we found to be more miserable than any one we had seen before in Iceland; that of Krísevík alone excepted. It is very small, very dirty, & badly paved with rough fragments of lava. [...] Thingvalla has attained celebrity as being the spot of where the judicial assemblies & other national meetings of Iceland were formerly held. Few vestiges, however, now remain to mark a spot so important in the history of Iceland.
The enthusiasm for the Geysir was evident with later visitors, such as Nöggerath's contemporaries. The spurting was sensational to Bisiker and the rest of his group. Just like Nöggerath, they rushed out every time the Geysir was about to spout:

We hastily left our meal, made an abrupt exit from the tent, and rushed to the spot. Surely enough it was an eruption, for great clouds of steam were rising from the crater and rolling towards us. We got windward of the steam, and looked towards the crater, and what a sight it was!¹⁸

Around 1900, the Gullfoss waterfalls were a popular site. In Bisiker's travel book, an illustrated account intended for a general readership, they seem to have been one of the most popular attractions, demonstrated by the book having six photos from different perspectives, while other attractions such as Thingvellir merited only one.¹⁹ However, Nöggerath the commercial filmmaker writes: 'The day after my narrow escape from death getting shots of the Grand Geyser we left for the Gullfoss to film the waterfalls there... Although the waterfalls presented a very nice view, films had already been taken of Niagara Falls and similar images of nature, so they were of no interest.'²⁰

Livelihood: Sheep Farming

After Gullfoss, Nöggerath travelled for two days to shoot a 'sheep-herding'. He arrived late in the evening and camped in a cave with some shepherds, who offered him rotten food (again) and played music. In spite of it all, he dozed off:

When I woke up the next morning, my first job was to look around for what might be appropriate for the cinema. The first thing that struck me were dozens of large folds (pens), in which thousands and thousands of sheep were kept. Hundreds of farmers moved among them, looking for the brand of their own sheep, in order to transport these animals to a separate field, during which some were carried, others pulled. A lot of noise. Around ten I had my camera ready to take my shots: the arrival of the sheep with their shepherds, the herding of these animals into the folds, the farmers searching for their own animals, the owners on the road to their farms with their sheep, the traffic around the wagons, the party—especially dancing. All this was filmed by me.²¹

The film was released by Warwick as Gathering Sheep, and Nöggerath had been able to film something the average tourist would not see.

The Released Films

There is a striking discrepancy between Nöggerath's descriptions of the topics he encountered and filmed and the final productions as released by Warwick. Nöggerath's films were available from April 1902 with the titles Hauling the Nets and Landing the Catch on an Iceland Trawler, Fun on an Iceland Trawler, Landing and Cleaning of a Catch on an Iceland Trawler, Cleaning the Fish and Landing a Shark, Gathering Sheep, Women Cleaning Fish for Curing and Women Washing Clothes in Hot Wells.²² Almost all the items released by Warwick deal with fishery, either fishing or cleaning. The lines dedicated to them in Nöggerath's memoirs are few, however. During the journey to Iceland he filmed some fishing activities, and a scene in which fishermen hosed each other down in order to get rid of some of the fish odour and slime that they picked up during the landing of the catch. According to Nöggerath, this film entertained audiences greatly, and numerous copies were sold. This might have been the film Fun on an Iceland Trawler. On his return to Reykjavik, Nöggerath filmed fish curing: 'I filmed the so-called flounders (known here as "dabs", a fish that is dried on stone in the open air) and the salting of a part of the flesh of a whale which is consumed as food.'²³ This might refer to the film Women Cleaning Fish for Curing. All these topics deal with human activities, not with documenting the natural scenery such as the activities of the Big Geyser.

Although Nöggerath gives them little attention, fishery subjects were becoming common in film. In 1901, the Warwick Trading Company released a series of films on fishery, also shot by Anton Nöggerath, probably near the Gulf of Biscay and the British coast at Grimsby. Showing human activities within crafts and industry slowly became an important sub-genre within early non-fiction.
nurses who bring sick fishermen to the French hospital in Reykjavik. Fishermen leaving for Iceland, as in Dunkerque (Gaumont, 1913), or celebrating the common Catholic ritual in Brittany, as in Paimpol (Gaumont, 1914), were also filmed by French producers. The British, however, were the most notorious. Terry Lacy remarks:

Most important were the British who, with steam vessels from 1870 on and trawl nets beginning in 1891, fished Icelandic waters far more effectively than either Icelanders or the French and who introduced Icelanders to the advantages of modern equipment. On the other hand, the aggressiveness of British fishing clashed with Icelandic demands. The British and French both refused to acknowledge the nineteenth century fishing limit of 16 miles, insisting on only three miles instead. Furthermore, the British ignored the agreement not to fish in Faxaflói Bay in order to preserve breeding stocks and to let Icelanders utilize their traditional fishing grounds. The result was the Sixth Cod War in 1896–1897 ... which ended with an agreement between Denmark and Britain in 1901. The agreement set a 3 mile limit for the next 50 years and left Icelanders robbed of their livelihood.25

These words explain why Noggerath had to row from the British trawler Nile to the Icelandic coast. The international fishery law prohibited the trawler to land too close to the coast. When Noggerath left in October 1901, he had to row again to a British trawler outside Reykjavik harbour. It might also explain what we would have seen in these films of Noggerath—if they survived. Most of the films named would probably have dealt with activities not by Icelandic fishermen, but by British sailors fishing near the Icelandic coast, just at a very delicate moment in international relations. Indeed, the film titles indicate fishing with trawlers and the Icelanders did not have trawlers then; they arrived from 1902 onwards, and only in 1906 was the first Icelandic trawler company established. Noggerath, being Dutch in origin, could have acted as a neutral third party in all the hostilities and thus still accomplish his task.

The political situation might also explain why, until now, nobody has written about the exhibition of these films in Iceland: foreign representations of the local natural scenery such as the Big Geyser could be shown without any reserve, but images of foreign trawlers emptying the fishing waters of Iceland might not have been at all welcome. It is not known what sentiments were expressed in Britain when the films were shown there, but they might have inspired some national pride. Nevertheless, Warwick films were widely distributed and possibly the American travelling exhibitor Lyman H. Howe showed the films as he projected many Warwick films.26 Noggerath’s father at the time was agent for Warwick for the Netherlands, Denmark and Norway, so he might have had a hand in showing and distributing

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24 Hauling the nets. Pêche à la morue en ligne de fond en Islande (Pathé Imperium Film 1911)

The rich fishing grounds, however, attracted fishermen from other nations, such as Norway, France and Britain. Around 1900, offshore fishing was largely in the hands of foreigners. Many Breton fishermen from towns like Paimpol and Dunkirk came to Iceland to fish from February to mid-August. The life of the Breton fishermen inspired the famous French novelist Pierre Loti to write his immensely popular and often-reprinted Pêcheur d’Islande (An Icelandic Fisherman, 1886). Similar works by other Frenchmen followed. The first French films dealing with Iceland would also focus on the Breton fishermen, such as Pêche à la morue sur les bancs de Terre-Neuve (Gaumont, c. 1906), Pêche à la morue en ligne de fond en Islande (Pathé Imperium Film, 1911), both on cod fishery, and Service des hôpitaux français en Islande (Pathé Imperium Film, 1911), on the special service of a French mission of doctors and
his son's films, too. However, no evidence has yet been found about reception of these films in the Netherlands, Denmark, Germany, Britain nor the United States.

There is also another very simple reason for the absence of screenings in Iceland. In 1902, despite foreign ships arriving regularly in the harbor of Reykjavik, no location for film shows existed in Iceland. Travelling cinema or film in vaudeville did not exist. It was not until 1906 that Alfred Lind (1879–1959), later a director of early Danish films such as Den hvide Slavehandel (The White Slave Trade, Fotorama, 1910) and De fire Djeavel (The Four Devils, Kinografen, 1911), opened the first cinema in Reykjavik. Lind, who had started out as an equipment constructor and cameraman in 1906 at the Danish Nordisk company, left the company after quarrelling with managing director Ole Olsen, and started out for himself as independent cameraman shooting actualities all around Scandinavia. His first stop was Iceland, where he opened the first cinema there, on 2 November 1906. According to Peter Cowie, Lind shot a three-minute documentary in Iceland.27 As he was a professional by then, he must have shown his own films and might even have made actualities on the spot. There is, however, very little known about Lind's activities in Reykjavik, how he fared with the cinema, what he showed and what his screenings were like. Lind did not stay long and went to Sweden, then in 1909 back to Denmark again.

Films about Iceland after Nöggerath

Peter Cowie reveals that it took more than ten years after the opening of the first cinema in Reykjavik in 1906 to get native film production underway:

In 1919 a team from Nordisk Film Kompagni in Copenhagen came to Iceland to shoot Saga Borgarøttarinnar (The Story of the Borg Family, 1921) ... Local film-makers remained in the shadow of the better-equipped Danes who visited the country regularly. Sometimes collaboration occurred. Gunnar Robert Hansen and the gifted playwright and novelist Guðmundur Kamban together directed one of the most respected of Danish actresses, Clara Pontoppidan, in Hadda Padda (1923).28

According to Cowie, Icelandic cinema only started after the Second World War because of ‘the activities of the British and Americans who swarmed over Iceland in the postwar years, photographing everything in sight with their 8mm cameras. Icelanders were stunned to find that their country was something that could be filmed.’29

Cowie neglects to mention that since Nöggerath's visit, and certainly around 1910–14, several foreign cameramen filmed in or near Iceland. Because of his focus on fiction film, he is blind to the non-fiction footage shot on Iceland in the silent era. Namely, after the Warwick films by Nöggerath in Iceland, other Western European and American companies followed in subsequent years. In 1906, the Danish company Nordisk filmed the visit of the Icelandic Althing to Copenhagen, and also the counter-visit of the Danish King to Iceland afterwards in 1907, released as Kongens Islandsfaerd or Kong Frederik VIII besoger Island (The King's Iceland Trip or King Frederik VIII Visits Iceland, Nordisk, 1907).30 Most companies, however—such as the French companies Gaumont and Pathé, the Swedish Svea, the Italian Ambrosio and the American Vitagraph—filmed either fishing topics or the natural scenery.31 Remarkable is the range of films shot in 1911 on Iceland, also being noteworthy for their greater focus on natural scenery, on strangely shaped volcanic rocks, on hot wells where you could boil an egg, and on waterfalls. They thereby combined scientific subjects with a Romantic taste for the picturesque. Thus, the fishery films of Nöggerath, Gaumont and Pathé were rather 'documentaries', as understood in the terms of the 1910s: literally documenting industrial processes and crafts, in contrast to travel films, which just showed either images of travel or images of the destinations without the travel.32

'Iceland' or 'Icelanders' as concepts and representation, were also disseminated by cinematic fiction. These kinds of 'representations' of Icelanders were again preceded by literary examples such as the sadistic Icelandic bandit Han, terrorizing seventeenth-century Norway in Victor Hugo's first novel, the quite Gothic Han d'Islande (Han of Iceland, 1823). Eventually, these discourses on Iceland and Icelanders would contribute to the production of fiction films situated in Iceland even when not filmed there, such as the 1916 Fox film The Bondman, starring William Farnum, and Victor Sjöström/Seastrom's film Berg-Ejvind och hans hustru (The Outlaw and his Wife, 1918), based on a play by Icelander Johann Sigurjónsson, but shot in Northern Sweden.33

Conclusion

Classical anthropology often deals with the knowledge obtained by alien observers, a foreigner's view of a territory and its inhabitants. Film culture often does the opposite, focusing on national production, excluding what foreigners filmed at the same place or excluding the exhibition of foreign film in the country itself. The case of the exhibition of foreign films has begun to receive more attention, such as Richard Abel's recent study about the presence and domination of
French cinema in the United States in the early years of film history.\(^{34}\) However, the case of foreign film production in the home country still requires more attention. It is high time that we consider film culture as something that crosses borders, and we therefore cannot limit ourselves to national film production research, even in countries with a rich history in production. Connected to this problem is the lack of research conducted in non-fiction cinema, which, even if significant progress has been made, still demands more study. Too often is film identified as fiction film.

**Notes**

1. I owe gratitude to Amy Sargeant, Alan Burton, Geoffrey Donaldson, Stephen Bottomore, Film History, my fellow film historians both within and outside Domitor, and the film archives of Amsterdam, Copenhagen, London, Reykjavik and Washington, DC. This text is based on papers I previously presented at the 2000 Conference of the Society of Cinema Studies in Washington, DC; and the 2003 Silent Cinema Weekend in Nottingham.


3. Ivo Blom, ‘Chapters from the Life of a Camera-Operator: The Recollections of Anton Nögerath—Filming News and Non-Fiction, 1897–1908’, Film History, 3 (1999), pp. 262–81. Nögerath’s recollections were originally published in the Dutch trade paper De Kinematograaf. The following numbers deal with his trip to Iceland: 9 (12 April 1918); 10 (19 April 1918); 11 (26 April 1918); 12 (3 May 1918).


5. English botanist Sir Joseph Banks went to Iceland in 1772, thus undertaking the first scientific expedition there by foreign naturalists. After the publication of Banks’s Journals, many other followed: John Stanley (1789, published 1811), William Jackson Hooker (1809, published 1811), Henry Holland and George Mackenzie (1810, published 1811), and Reverend Ebenezer Henderson (1814, published 1818). After these came X. Glaciers (1860), Reverend Sabine Baring-Gould (1863), and Sir Richard Marmier, Lettres sur l’Islande (1837), Lord Dufferin, Iceland: Its Volcanoes, Geysers and Glaciers (1860), Reverend Sabine Baring-Gould (1863), and Sir Richard Francis Burton (published in 1875 as Ultima Thule: or, A Summer in Iceland). Novelists Anthony Trollope visited Iceland in 1878.

6. Re-edited, they are available as William Morris, Iceland Journals (London: Mare’s Nest, 1996).

7. The famous travel guides of Karl Baedeker of Leipzig, however, did not include Iceland until the 1910s.


16. Ibid.


24. Hjalmarsson, p. 117.


28. Cowie, p. 11.

29. Ibid., p. 13.

30. The last-mentioned film can nowadays be seen on the excellent DVD issued by the Danish Film Archive, Det første Filmarkiv/The First Film Archive (2002).

31. I have already mentioned the films Pêche à la morue sur les bancs de Terre-Neuve by Gaumont, and Pêche à la morue en ligne de fond en Islande and Service des hôpitaux français en Islande, both by Pathé. Pathé Impérium also shot L’Islande ou terre des glaces (1912); Ambrosio shot Iceland (1911); Svea shot Iceland’s Hot Wells (1911); and Vitagraph shot Scenes in Iceland (1916).

