Norðfjörð, Björn. 2010. *Dagur Kári's Noi the Albino.* Seattle: University of Washington Press. 165 pages. ISBN: 978-0-295-99009-5.

Icelandic film director Dagur Kári made an impressive entry onto the international cinema scene with his debut feature, *Noi Albinoi* [*Noi the Albino*] (2003), a brooding, outlandish, and unsettling tale of teenage alienation set in a small village in the remote Westfjords region of Iceland. Originally intended as a stepping stone to bigger and better things, the modest, low-budget film went on to become one of the most widely seen Icelandic films of all time, garnering numerous international awards and enjoying considerable commercial and critical success. International film critics noted its potent combination of "characteristically Nordic comic melancholia" with a universally familiar story of small-town teenage angst, recognizing in this small and unpretentious offering from the outposts of the filmmaking world a work of truly global reach and resonance. It is the transnational appeal of this uniquely Icelandic film that is explored in Björn Norðfjörð's book *Dagur Kári's Noi the Albino* (2010).

Noi the Albino is a strange film indeed. The title character, Noi, is a teenage boy with a preternaturally pale complexion who lives with his grandmother in a small village wedged between a snow-covered mountain and a frigid sea. From the moment his grandmother fires a shotgun out his bedroom window to wake him up for school, we know we are in a place where the mundane and the fabulous combine to create a cinematic world that is quite out of the ordinary. An outsider and a loner, Noi struggles at home and at school and takes refuge in a secret hideout beneath his grandmother's basement floor. Things seem to look up when a new girl comes to town, and in the glow of their brief romance Noi dares to dream of escaping with her to a tropical island paradise that is worlds away from the icy grasp of his own island home. But the fantasy disintegrates when the girl refuses to run away with him, and after botching a bank robbery, stealing a car, and being bailed out of jail by his deadbeat dad, Noi finally retreats once more to his basement hideout. Safe in his underground den, he survives a catastrophic avalanche that descends on the village, killing everyone he has ever cared about and leaving him utterly alone. The end of the film finds him sitting alone in the snow-covered rubble of his grandmother's house, gazing into a 3D Viewmaster in which he sees an image of a sun-drenched tropical island that slowly comes to life before finally fading to black.

Given Dagur Kári's limited film oeuvre—he has directed only two feature films and a handful of shorts—Björn Norðfjörð has eschewed an auteur approach

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to his study of *Noi the Albino* in favour of exploring the film as "a text shaped by various industrial, cultural, and geopolitical factors spanning the local/global divide" (27). Norðfjörð is Assistant Professor and Director of the Film Studies program at the University of Iceland, and his expert knowledge of Icelandic national cinema and world cinema is much in evidence here. His detailed and wide-ranging study of *Noi the Albino* begins with a general introduction to the film, aptly titled "Icebreaker," that includes discussion of Dagur Kári's previous work, the film's complicated transnational production financing and distribution, its enthusiastic reception by both audiences and critics, and, most helpfully for readers not acquainted with the film, a succinct but vivid narrative summary of its main characters, plot and thematic concerns. Chapter 2, "Islands," is a fascinating exploration of what constitutes an island (with references ranging from John Donne to the Kinks) and, by extension, what might characterize island cinema—a particularly pertinent question in relation to Icelandic cinema. Norðfjörð sees *Noi the Albino* as "the ultimate island film, a rich text that offers a variety of ways to approach the island—real or imagined" (42). This discussion of the relationship between geography and cinema is further developed in Chapter 3, "Iceland," which provides an overview of the history of Icelandic national cinema and its more recent transnational evolution. Here, Norðfjörð argues that *Noi the Albino* can be seen as a prime example of cinematic transnationalism, illustrating the multiple ways in which the local and the global intertwine throughout the film—from its young multinational production team to Noi's father's poignant karaoke rendition of Elvis Presley's "In the Ghetto" in a bar in Iceland's Westfjords. Norðfjörð's detailed discussion of the film concludes in Chapter 4 with a closely-observed analysis of its cast of characters, its exotic yet oddly generic setting, its almost cut-and-paste narrative structure, and its relatively restrained but highly unusual use of colour, sound and music that "makes the ordinary extraordinary." Titled "Isolation, or the Nausea of Noi," this final chapter culminates in a detailed, shot-by-shot analysis of the film's climactic scene, the avalanche—a key element in Norðfjörð's reading of *Noi the Albino* as a quintessentially existential film.

As a documentary filmmaker I am always drawn to what filmmakers have to say about their work, and while I appreciated Norðfjörð's analysis of the film—particularly his ruminations on "islandness" and his richly detailed and insightful discussion of *Noi*'s aesthetics—I was most interested in his interview with director Dagur Kári that is appended to the book. In many ways, Dagur Kári epitomizes the new generation of twentyfirst-century transnational filmmakers: born in Provence and raised in Reykjavík, he attended the National Film School in Denmark and cites an eclectic range of cinematic influences, from American independent filmmakers such as Spike Lee and Jim Jarmusch to Francois Truffaut and the French New Wave. He also admits to being heavily influenced by television

sitcoms, especially *The Simpsons*, and describes Noi as a Bart-like character and the film's village setting as his own fictional Springfield. While the film initially struck me as very dark, on second viewing I became much more aware of its deep comic undertones and its masterful synthesis of humour and tragedy—storytelling technique that Dagur Kári nicely sums up as "89 minutes of laughing with one minute of crying at the end" (136).

Tellingly, when asked about the existentialism that Norðfjörð sees running throughout the film, Dagur Kári is very clear that he did not set out to make an existential film, though his response—that the film was simply a summary of what he found funny or tragic during that period in his life—seems to me quite unsatisfactory in helping to answer the question of whether the film can be seen as an exercise in existentialism or not. Certainly, a director's intent and viewer interpretation are two very different things, and we each come to the viewing of a film with a complex set of personal biases and cultural assumptions that affect how we interpret and find meaning in any film text. For example, Norðfjörð sees in Noi an ideal existential character, an isolated and alienated figure who is unable to connect with others and who ends up bereft of everything he ever loved and utterly alone—not unlike Roquentin, the main character in Jean-Paul Sartre's classic existential novel *Nausea*. But Norðfjörð goes on to suggest that Noi's situation at the end of the film also offers a kind of freedom—"a chance to act in the world—to exist—free of everything that previously tied him to the village and governed his daily life … Separated from fellow man and God, Noi the albino is all that exists" (110).

I would like to offer a somewhat different interpretation. I would suggest that Noi's isolation and disconnection—and indeed that of all the other characters in the film—stems from a more fundamental disconnect between the people who populate Dagur Kári's fictional village and the land they call home. The land in *Noi the Albino* is a forbidding, seemingly incomprehensible force that apparently exists only as an inconvenient obstacle and eventually a mortal threat. The mountain is a looming and ominous presence throughout the film, and the snow that prevents Noi from opening his front door at the beginning of the film has, by the end, become a killer avalanche, wiping out everyone and everything in its path. The characters' alienation from the land is both foolish and profound: no one dresses appropriately for winter, they try to dig graves in the frozen earth, and the one scene in which we see Noi out on the land finds him shooting a shotgun at giant icicles that hang from the mountain's cliffs while flocks of birds scatter in fright. For Norðfjörð, this scene represents Noi metaphorically screaming "I exist!" while, for me, it epitomizes the uneasy relationship with the land that pervades this film. I can't help but note the contrast between Noi and the work of Inuit filmmakers such as Zacharias Kunuk whose *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (2000), while never minimizing the harsh realities of human survival near the Arctic Circle, nevertheless offers an alternative view of a land that can nurture

and sustain a people as well. Kunuk's characters are utterly dependent on the land and what it can provide—as they are dependent on each other, and a finely woven web of familial and communal relationships that must be maintained at all costs. For them, no man is an island and there is no true freedom and no real existence outside "the village," a message we might all do well to contemplate in our brave new transnational world.

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