

Moss on Your Transmitter: TV in the Faroe Islands

Jerry White

A brief chronicle of the introduction of television and film – both foreign and domestic – to The Faroes, a cluster of islands midway between Scotland and Iceland. Jerry White explores the Gaelic-Faroese connection throughout the region’s short mass media history. He muses on possible cultural implications in years to come of increasingly foreign-dominated television programming.

The Faroe Islands (sometimes spelled Faeroe Islands, properly called Føroyar, pronounced “fur-uh-yer”) lie halfway between Scotland and Iceland. They are an archipelago of 18. The population is about 50,000, 15,000 of whom live in the capital city Tórshavn. The language of the islands is Faroese, which is very close to Icelandic (so close that the two languages are basically mutually intelligible); most Faroese also speak Danish, which they are required to learn in school. The Faroe Islands are technically a Danish possession, but have the same semiautonomous status as Greenland.

I run through all of this because it answers the questions that *everyone* asks me when I tell them that I have been spending time in the Faroe Islands, trying to learn the language, with an eye to making them part of my book on film and broadcast in the North Atlantic. The next question, usually, is “oh, part of a book. Um... is there much film in the Faroes?” The answer there is more complicated.

The Faroes were the last society in Europe (if you want to think of them as a “society in Europe,” and I tend

to) to get television. Until the late 1970s, you couldn’t get any signals on the islands at all. But in 1979, a small group, led by schoolteacher Jogvan Asbjørn Skalle, decided the time was ripe to change all that. A lot of Faroese young people would go to University in Copenhagen,¹ and buy TVs when they were there. When they graduated and travelled back to the Faroes, they would opt for a shipping container to bring their stuff back by boat. But in 1973, Denmark switched from black and white to colour television. This meant that Faroese students who had bought TVs there suddenly couldn’t sell them when they were done with their studies. Since their shipping containers almost always had extra space, returning students tended to just toss these black and white TVs in with their crappy sofas and engineering textbooks. The result for life in the Faroes, as Jogvan Asbjørn Skalle told me when I interviewed him at Tórshavn’s Café Natur on 9 July 2004, was that the Faroese were equipped with “for seven years, lots of televisions, but no television!”

So Skalle and his compadres (many of whom were schoolteachers) decided to try to set up a pirate TV station for the entire archipelago. They christened their group Sjónvarp Felagið í Havn, or the Tórshavn Television Association; they came to cooperate with the emergent Esutroy Sjónvarp Felagið, the group that, in 1980, had actually bought a transmitter (Esturoy is the island just North of Tórshavn, which is on the island of Streymoy). A group in Klaksvík (a “second city” for the Faroes, pop. 6000) soon followed, and reasonable signals could now be sent over all 18 islands.

At first, this collective was mostly re-broadcasting week-

old Danish news and English soccer matches (tapes would come in on the weekly flight from Copenhagen, semi-surreptitiously passed by a sympathetic staff member at Danish TV). But they also produced their own material. Skalle spoke particularly fondly of a work called *Kalsoy*, a 9-part series devoted to Trøllanes, a small village on the island of Kalsoy that is also the northernmost village on the Faroes. They also did a series called *Christmas Calendar*, a series structured in the pattern of an advent calendar (one episode for each day of advent) that was set on Fugloy, the easternmost Faroe island (which is very hard to get to in the best of times, since it is so exposed to the North Atlantic storms). Skalle thought it was really important for people in the Faroes (especially folks in Tórshavn) to see how other Faroese lived. Toronto, after all, has too long been allowed to hold far too much sway over Canada's media culture; these Faroese TV pirates were determined not to allow that sort of media domination by the metropolis.

This loose collective went on to produce their own programmes for several years. Skalle wanted to make documentary images that reflected the daily life of the Faroes. Speaking of life on one of the Faroes' southernmost island, he told me that he would tell his correspondents, "if you are in Suðroy, and you see a boat coming, make an interview with him. That is news in the Faroes!" He admitted, however, that "if you get out of Tórshavn, you have to construct the news." Maybe a house is being built in a small village somewhere. "There were 4 houses. Now there are 5!" Lest anyone think of this as yellow journalism Faroese-style, it strikes me as quite consistent with a creative approach to making the everyday life of isolated areas cinematic, an approach that is quite common throughout the North Atlantic. Pierre Perrault did this on Île-aux-coudres; Colin Low did it on Fogo Island. And Bob Quinn did it in the Irish-Gaelic-speaking area of Conamara.

Indeed, the Gaelic-Faroese connection is quite distinct, and is, in a way, the key to the whole idea of a North Atlantic cinema. Talking about the pan-Atlantic idealism of his friend Donncha Ó hÉallaithe, an Irish language activist (and lecturer in Math at the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology) Quinn told me in an email that "Donncha Ó hÉallaithe sailed on a Galway Hooker to the Faroes in about 1986. He came back with reports of their TV and it was one of the examples that incited us to put up the transmitter on Cnoc Mordaun in 1987." A Galway Hooker, by the way, is a very small boat. *Very* small. Anyway, this early, semi-legal and closed-circuit television in Irish Gaelic (which was detailed

in his son Robert Quinn's film *Cinegael Paradiso*, just shown in Montreal and Edmonton in the last month) was a radical experiment in community media, one that was also influenced by Low's Fogo Island films, which Quinn had seen when he worked at Radio Telefís Éireann in Dublin.² And those Fogo Island films, of course, were heavily influenced by Perrault's Île-aux-coudres films. Ah ha! This North Atlantic thing doesn't sound so insane now, does it?

The other important Gaelic-Faroese connection, I'm afraid, is more melancholy. Ireland eventually established a station that broadcast in Irish Gaelic, Teilifís na Gaeilge, in 1996. When I watched it in 1997, I did not hear a single word of English. Even the *commercials* were in Irish. Of course, there were only three of them, repeated over and over (Shell, Nestle and Guinness if memory serves). So perhaps it was not entirely surprising that in 1999, the station was rechristened as TG4, and now shows quite a lot of very cheap English-language material, such as Aussie-rules football and late-night cowboy films. There has been a similar loss of idealism in the Faroes. In 1984, as a result of the threats of lawsuit from various copyright holders who had not given permission for their stuff to be broadcast, Sjóntvarp Felagið became Sjóntvarp Føroya (SvF). At first, Skalle was happy about this. Speaking of the Danish and Faroese MPs who made this public station a reality, he said that "they knew it was matter of time before public television would come. That was always our intention." But what I found during my trip to Tórshavn in 2004 was a station staffed by highly committed and resourceful folks who are simply starved for resources. They were going through a financial crisis at the time, actually, and during summer of 2004, a takeover from Danish TV seemed imminent. ("Sjóntvarp Føroya sendir DR1 1.oktober" screamed the Faroese daily *Dimmalætting* on 3 August 2004³). That's not an entirely surprising turn of events. Most of the stuff that SvF now broadcasts is either British or American television subtitled in Danish, or Danish TV with no subtitles of any kind. The only regular material in Faroese, other than the commercials, is a 20-minute news broadcast on a few times a week, some goofy programming for kids, and a very sharply photographed gardening show.

Zakaris Hammar is a producer based in Klaksvík. He is a genuine auteur, and I saw a lovely 1992 film of his called *Manna Millum*, about a day in the life of an old fisherman, at the SvF office in Tórshavn. SvF has also issued a 2-tape set of Hammar's film *Reyðargullíð: Um Føroyska Rækjuveiðu* (2003), a tour around the high

Atlantic and low Arctic, including Greenland and Svalbard (find it on a map and gape). “His films are a little dull,” one staffer at SvF told me, sceptical that my very limited Faroese would be enough to get me through his stuff. “He’s like, the filmmaking of talking, you know?” “Cinéma de la parole!” I shouted hopefully. She looked at me like I was some sort of weirdo, but I felt thoroughly validated in my cine-scholarly intuition.

Teitur Árnason’s film *Burturbugur* (2002) (broadcast on SvF), about the previously mentioned island of Fugloy, has a very similarly contemplative, Perrault-ian sensibility. [4] But alas, watching SvF after my language class served largely to introduce me to the wonders of P.D. James adaptations. Don’t get me wrong, Roy Marsden is *divine* as Chief Inspector Dalgiesh, but this was not what I had hoped to find.

Like their North Atlantic compatriots in Ireland’s Gaeltacht, the Faroese are finding their cooperative-communaltelevision dreams very difficult to maintain. Shortly after I got home, the TV service shut down for a bit, and has now been forcefully merged with the very healthy and well-loved national radio station. There’s another Gaelic connection; Ireland’s Irish-language radio station Raidió na Gaeltachta enjoys a closeness to the community that the TV station TG4 can only dream of.

Indeed, this is the big reason I have called my projected book on this North Atlantic cinema “The Radio-Eye.” What we find in Québec, Newfoundland, the Faroes, and Ireland is an approach to film and TV that is quite close to radio, not only in its attention to language, but also in its civic sensibilities, and its aspiration to community integration. This Radio-Eye is in trouble in the Faroes, and in Ireland too, but it remains a subtext of an awful lot of the film and TV work there. Far from being a barren nowhere, the Faroes are a lush, rocky cultural landscape that is emerging as a crucial area of struggle for a definition, or re-definition of the role we want mass media to have in everyday life.

Jerry White contributed a moment from Solaris to our style gallery.

NOTES

1 There is a small, scrappy university in the Faroes, called Fróðskaparsetur Føroya. It’s a great place, possessed of a truly mediaeval spirit when it comes

to University life. Comprised of just a few buildings which house a tightly knit community of scholars, the place radiates commitment to a locally-rooted life of the mind. It has three faculties: Faroese Language and Literature, Science and Technology, and History and Social Sciences. It’s right across a lovely little park from the navigation college, an independent but complimentary institution from whom they sometimes borrow classroom space. I cannot speak highly enough of Fróðskaparsetur Føroya’s ability to recharge one’s academic batteries (my academic batteries, anyway).

2 For the truly oddball readers among us, I offer my comments on this film, delivered at the opening of the Irish Film Festival at Metro Cinema, 4 March 2005. “*Cinegael Paradiso*: seo scannán le Robert Quinn, faoina athair Bob Quinn. Is sé Bob Quinn an príomh-stiúrthóir scannán in nGaelige in Éireann, agus an príomh-stiúrthóir *neamhspléach* in Éireann. Bhí Bob Quinn in Edmonton ceathair blianna ó shin, agus nuair a bhí sé anseo, bhí suim aige faoi na cursai Ceanadanach. Bhí suim ag Bob i scannán Ceanadanach fosta. Nuair a bhí Bob ina stiúrthóir i Radio Telefís Éireann, i mBaile Átha Cliath, chonaic sé scannán Ceanadanach faoi Fogo Island, oiléain bheag in aice le Talamh an Iasc (Newfoundland), *Winds Of Fogo*. Tá an scannán seo le Colin Low, stiúrthóir as Alberta, ina chonaí i Montréal, agus ag obair i Talamh an Iasc. Nach tá *Winds Of Fogo* scannán le Colin Low agus scannán le muintir Fogo Island. Bhí Colin Low in a shampal tábhachtach do Bob Quinn. Nuair a chuaigh Bob go Conamara, bhí sé a súil go beidh sé in an scannán a déanfaidh le muintir Chonamara. Tá gach scannán diabh seo le Bob Quinn, agus le muintir Chonamara. Is doigh liomsa gur bheidh Bob Quinn an stiúrthóir is Ceanadanch in Éireann.” Corrections to my grammar (which my friend Frank Peters helped me iron out) and spelling (which is my responsibility alone) are most welcome.

3 Funny problem here on the translation front, one that says a lot about what it’s like for an Anglo trying to learn Faroese. Looking up the word “sendi” in the only Faroese-English dictionary available, G.V.C. Young and Cynthia Clewer’s *Føroysk-Ensk Orðabók / Faroese-English Dictionary* is not terribly helpful. There are lots of options there about sending and spending, neither one of which is what this headline is about. Most curiously, and not at all atypically for this dictionary, one also finds “sendu/brýni (loc): whetstone from a grindstone (*senda*) which has been smashed or broken.” The Young/Clewer dictionary is full of oddball localisms like this, and as a result it often confuses its reader as much as it enlightens. All due respect to those who want

to document arcane usages, but we need the standard usages too. This is all the more frustrating because this book is the only Faroese-to-English dictionary ever published and it is *really, really* hard to find (the English-Faroese dictionary, on the other hand, is still in print). I searched for over two years on every website I knew of, without luck; I finally found a copy in the basement of Cathach Books, an antiquarian bookstore in Dublin. Yep, Dublin. There's that Gaelic thing again. Anyway, *far* more useful is Gianfranco Contri's *Dizionario Faroese-Italiano / Føroysk-Italysk Orðabók*, just published in 2004 by Føroya Fróðskaparfelag (The Faroese University Press). There, we find the very straightforward and sensibly modern: “s*enda* v ... 4 (tecn.) trasmettere s. tónleik trasmettere musica.” Io no parlo Italiano, but I'll take Gianfranco's dictionary, no question. It's even pocket-sized, as opposed to the bricklike Young/Clewer tome.

4 Both *Burturbugur* and *Reyðargullid: Um Føroyska Rækjiveiðu* can be purchased at Hjalmar Jacobsen Sp/f, the best bookstore in the Faroes. Their phone is 298.31.15.84. I have no idea if they do mail-order. Both tapes are PAL format; *Burturbugur* is available with English subtitles.

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