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Exploring the impact of tourism on cultural representation in Iceland and Kenya: Navigating the complexities of authenticity

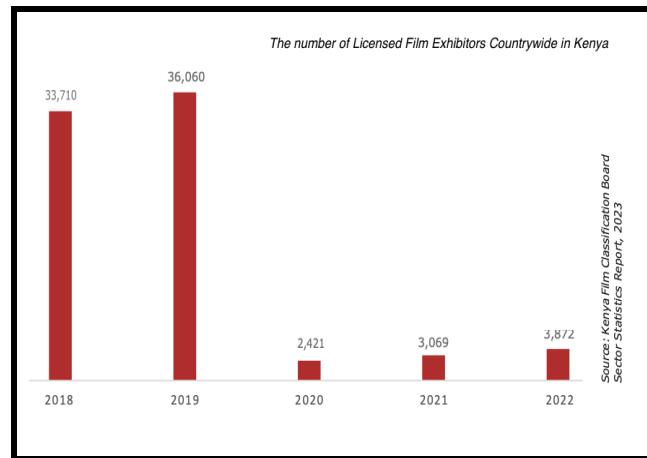
Written by Alex White

In countries where tourism serves as a substantial economic driver, there is a constant battle between maintaining an expected image within the media they produce and creating films that authentically reflect their culture, and more authentic films often encounter greater obstacles in reaching an international audience. Kenya and Iceland are two notable examples where tourism's pervasive presence influences the treatment of films and the resulting portrayal of their culture. As John Urry explains in "The Tourist Gaze," "mass tourism is a characteristic of modern society."¹ Yet that does not mean that the "tourist gaze" controls national identity. Films that do gain international recognition are often co-productions that function more as promotional tools rather than cultural expressions. In contrast, domestic films that are more faithful to national identity tend not to receive the same level of international exposure despite being better representations of a nation's cinema.

While the economic contribution of tourism in Kenya cannot be understated, it has led to the emergence of cultural tourism branding and has influenced the narrative preferences in Kenyan films. The Kenya Film Commission is designed to market and develop the Kenyan film industry with the specific intention of promoting local talent and resources to international

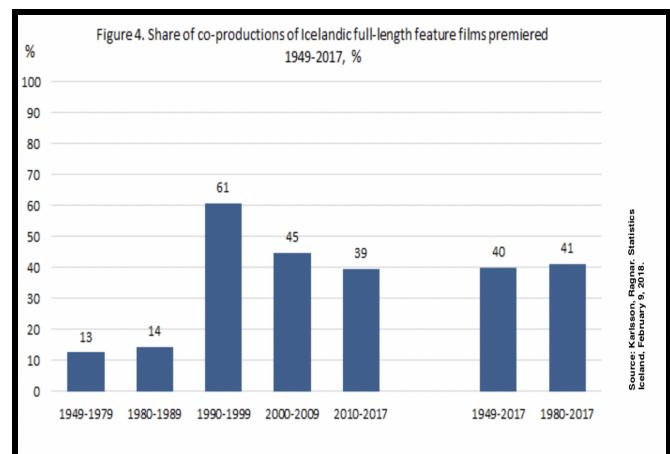
¹ Urry, John. "Chapter 7." Essay. In *The Tourist Gaze*, Seconded., 124–40.

filmmakers. Their vision statement, "Kenya, a global hub for Film Production,"² underscores the country's aspiration to become a leading destination for filmmaking on the global stage. This is evident through *Out of Africa* (1985), an Academy Award-winning American film that is



credited with sparking the Kenyan tourism boom.³ Despite being shot in Ngong Hills near Nairobi, it does not reflect Kenyan culture. Instead, it indirectly portrays how white foreigners and filmmakers utilize Kenya for its scenic landscapes while disregarding its rich cultural heritage. It also established the base of Kenya's cinematic "tourist gaze" based on white saviorism and eccentric wildlife and scenery.

Whereas in Iceland, a country equally dependent on international tourism and international film co-productions, early documentaries like *Iceland in Pictures* (1924) tried to establish a distinct "Icelandic" film identity before tourism became a necessary economic factor.⁴ Despite the domestic success of director



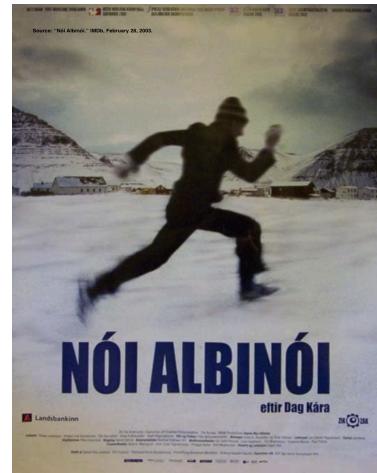
² "About KFC," Kenya Film Commission, accessed May 4, 2024

³ Holidays Mike, "Out of Africa - the Impact of Hollywood on Kenya's Tourism.," Kenya holidays, August 10, 2020,

⁴ Norðfjörð, Björn. "Iceland In Living Pictures: A Meeting-Place of Cinema and Nation." *STUDIA HUMANISTYCZNE AGH*, October 1, 2011, 169–83.

Loftur Guðmundsson, international audiences were more captivated by the breathtaking environment than the local culture. It wasn't until the release of *Children of Nature* (1991) that said films received international attention.⁵ Tourism in Iceland picked up substantially after the release of *Children of Nature* (1991) and, since then, has had a considerable impact on the country's economy, cultural landscape, and film production. Similar to Kenya, a substantial number of foreign filmmakers come to Iceland specifically for the unique natural setting. However, these films either do not take place in Iceland at all but only use the environment to portray a fictional world or have plots focused on tourists in Iceland, ignoring the cultural identity of the country. Films like *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* (2013), which was filmed in Seydisfjordur and Stykkishólmur in the Snæfellsnes Peninsula,⁶ exemplify the "tourist gaze" as Iceland is illustrated in its stunning scenery while only using Icelandic culture for comedic relief and convenient plot points.

Co-productions in Kenya and Iceland ensure international exposure and economic opportunities. While that can lead to support for the domestic film industries, local filmmakers often prioritize authentic depictions of their country over catering to the "tourist gaze," resulting in a lack of international attention. In the 2003 Icelandic film, *Nói albinó* director Dagur Kári captures small-town youth in Iceland with the classic "unfulfilled man" trope of Icelandic

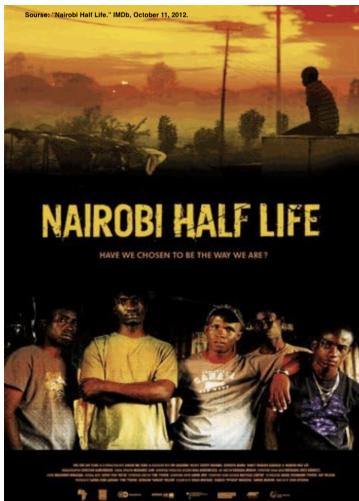


⁵ Norðfjörð, Björn. "Iceland In Living Pictures: A Meeting-Place of Cinema and Nation." *STUDIA HUMANISTYCZNE AGH*, October 1, 2011, 169–83.

⁶ "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," IMDb, December 25, 2013

Cinema.⁷ *Nói albinó* catches the essence of Icelandic traditions, humor, food, and even counterculture, yet it was only screened domestically and in small film festivals.

Unlike Iceland, Kenya lacks a strong integration of national identity in its film industry, which presents challenges for Kenyan filmmakers aiming to transcend the "tourist gaze." This difficulty is exacerbated by the tendency of non-native audiences to impose superficial stereotypes on authentic characters, undermining the complexity and nuance of local narratives. Also, despite Iceland's 78.9% native population⁸, international audiences view their stories with a closer affinity to "whiteness" and Western cultural norms. As Kenya is not connected to the West and "whiteness," the challenge of breaking through the "tourist gaze" includes breaking through racist views and stereotypes.⁹ Despite the challenge, Kenyan filmmakers still prioritize



authenticity over catering to foreign audiences—for example, *Nairobi Half Life*, directed by David Tosh Gitonga. In *Nairobi Half Life*, the importance of national Kenyan identity is depicted through the protagonist's pursuit of acting while handling the realities of urban life in Nairobi. Gitonga manages to capture the complexities of modern Kenyan society and the clash between traditional values and urban realities while also celebrating the richness of Kenyan culture without catering to the "tourist gaze."

⁷ Asch Mark, "From Iceland - the Saga of Icelandic Cinema: 'Nói the Albino,'" The Reykjavik Grapevine, August 12, 2016,

⁸ "Iceland- Country Summary," Central Intelligence Agency, May 1, 2024

⁹ Mugubi John and William Mureithi Maina, "Concomitants of Socio-Cultural Exigencies on Narrative Preferences in the Kenyan 'Riverwood' Film," Concomitants of socio-cultural exigencies on narrative preferences in the Kenyan "Riverwood" film | Nairobi Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, March 15, 2017

Does the proposition that international film production in nations with relatively limited film industries is beneficial to their expansion perpetuate the idea of Western saviorism, or is a balance between domestic and international production a crucial component of all film industries? While co-productions ensure international exposure and economic opportunities, they often prioritize the "tourist gaze" over authentic cultural representation. Local filmmakers, on the other hand, face challenges in transcending this gaze due to superficial stereotypes and a lack of international attention. Breaking through these barriers requires a delicate balance between considering international audiences and preserving national identity. Ultimately, the treatment of films in Kenya and Iceland illustrates the complex interplay between tourism, international co-productions, and national identity.

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