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PRESENT



Locarno Film Festival  
Concorso internazionale

# ECHO

A FILM BY RÚNAR RÚNARSSON

79 min - Iceland, France - DCP - 1.85 - 5.1 - 2019

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## SYNOPSIS

Iceland, Christmas time.

As everyone prepares for the holidays, a peculiar atmosphere falls upon the country revealing emotions of both excitement and concern. In the middle of the countryside, an abandoned farm is burning. In a school, a children's choir is singing Christmas carols. In a slaughterhouse, chickens are parading along a rail. In a museum, a mother is arguing with her ex-husband on the phone. In a living room, a young girl is making her grandmother try on her new virtual reality headset... Through 56 scenes, *Echo* draws a portrait, both biting and tender, of modern society.



# RÚNAR RÚNARSSON / INTERVIEW



## HOW DID THE IDEA FOR *ECHO* START?

It's a really old idea that re-occurred to me after *Sparrows*. I was getting a little bit tired of the usual Greek storytelling tradition, always grounded in an initial situation, twists and outcome. It's important to me to be honest with myself and honest with what I'm portraying. I felt like I was lying with other film drafts I was starting to write, they all had the right twists and turns, but they were not representing me at the time. When I started on *Echo*, it was different, and I felt quite alive as an author.

## WAS IT SCARY TO MAKE A FILM THAT WAS DIFFERENT FROM YOUR FIRST TWO FEATURES?

Yes, in a good way. It was only when I had finished shooting a few of the last scenes that the whole structure of the film became obvious to me. At the same time, it was just something I had to do. One part of being alive and being an author is to challenge yourself. There were people who pointed out that it might not be the most rational decision for my career to do a film like this. But I always try to capture





some kind of reality, or my observations on life. Every film is a personal journey for me. And *Echo* is no different.

Also, it sounds more experimental on paper than it actually is. Normally my other films always had a main character in each and every scene. This film isn't different from that, but the main character is society.

### **HOW DID THE SCENES EVOLVE, BOTH WITH THE MORE OBSERVATIONAL DOCUMENTARY SEGMENTS AS WELL AS THE SCRIPTED SEGMENTS?**

The narrative approach is like picking up stones on a beach, each stone is special in its own way. They can look smooth, or rough, or like nothing special, or there can be a glass fragment from a cola bottle that is ground down. When you come home from the beach and you put all the stones on the kitchen table, and shuffle them, you can shape it into a mosaic and they create a whole.

During the financing stage, we would say that "*Echo* is a film where reality will be captured, initiated and staged." It has always fascinated me how people experience films. People tend to take documentaries as given truth. But there is always some author behind them, someone with a point of view. In purely fictional films, it's more obvious that it's the viewpoint of the filmmakers. In this film, it doesn't matter which scenes are documentary and which are fiction. There are on the other hand some dogmatic rules we kept to as we shot the film, like each person only appearing in a single scene and each scene being one static shot on a tripod. The passage of time is only broken when we cut from one scene to the next.

### **WHY DID YOU WANT TO SET THOSE RULES? HOW DO YOU WORK WITH TIME TO BEGIN WITH?**

In my fiction films, I have always portrayed time as a continuous element, insofar as it's possible. The fewer breaks in time, the more realistic the experience is for the viewer. This film allows viewers to see these different fragments of life and emotion, and offers them stories to interpret reality. Whether it's staged, initiated or captured, it doesn't matter, it's a sense of reality that we are trying to portray.

### **WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO SET THE FILM OVER THE HOLIDAY PERIOD?**

There is a certain arc that lies within the days leading up to Christmas and then the days between Christmas and New Year's Eve. Then the New Year starts. Christmas time amplifies our emotions; whether or not we like the season there are definitely feelings about certain as-

pects of this time of year. It's a time of reflection as well, it's the end of the year, and whether you are religious or not, it stands for a time that society says is supposed to bring out the best side of you. So that can also mean it can bring out the worst side of people.

Was it difficult shooting with so many different people and so many different locations?

It surprised me as well when I started preparing with my crew just how many people there were. I had a good team helping me to find the right people and locations.

### **YOU USED MOSTLY AMATEUR ACTORS?**

Because Iceland is small it was important for me that those cast members who did have acting experience were not known faces. It's good to have people who are a little bit anonymous. If a famous actor is in one scene then the viewer automatically becomes aware of the film being a construction. That would send the wrong signal and diminish what we would like to achieve.

The biggest challenge for me was the magnitude and sheer number of people in the film. In my past films, I have had a long preparation process with my actors. I couldn't do that in the same way in this film. That was a new thing for me and that was quite a challenge. The first thing I said to all my actors is: I'm interested in your heart but not your brain. Everybody has some kind of spectrum: they can identify themselves in a situation, and based on this portray a version of themselves.

### **DID YOU ALLOW FOR SURPRISES AND DISCOVERIES WHILE SHOOTING?**

The film is a living organ and every film is developing in some way throughout the shooting period. You have to be open to that and let the film take its own path. If I had planned to have the image of an angry woman in one scene, maybe it ended up better as a man who is sad. You have to be open as a director to adjust for the greater good.

### **HOW DID YOU DECIDE HOW MANY SCENES TO INCLUDE AND WHAT ORDER TO PUT THEM IN?**

There are 56 scenes. There is no meaning in that number for me. It's a feeling. We shot many more scenes. In the editing that was the number that kept my attention and I knew also because of the lack of normal hero's journey that this film couldn't be three hours long.

As for the order, it's also a feeling. Some things follow the timeline of the season. Other than that, it's intuition. Even in my previous films that are more straightforward stories, I always use intuition when I write, I hate doing treatments and getting too locked into plot.



### **WAS IT FREEING TO RELY LESS ON PLOT?**

I find in general that critics, viewers, commissioners, producers and people in the film industry today have a language that is quite often obsessed with structure. I think this element has taken over how we look at films.

So when this Greek storytelling tradition is being broken, then we also find a lack of a global language to talk about it. I wanted to challenge myself to work on the other end of things.

And as a viewer, I'm tired of really straight stories. There are some that are so well done and have a poetry to them, but the sense is that this has overtaken film; there is more and more emphasis on the story and less emphasis on narrative sounds and narrative visuals.

### **WHAT WAS THE HARDEST SCENE TO SHOOT?**

The one that took the longest was the child and young mother sitting together by the window. That took about six hours to shoot. There is so much authenticity and reality that come with children, but that was about kid number five or six we tried sitting in the window. It looks so simple!

### **IS THERE ONE SCENE THAT ENCAPSULATES THE FILM?**

My pick would vary based on the day.

### **YOU HAVE WORKED FREQUENTLY WITH KEY COLLABORATORS LIKE DOP SOPHIA OLSSON, EDITOR JACOB SECHER SCHULSINGER, COMPOSER KJARTAN SVEINSSON AND SOUND DESIGNER GUNNAR ÓSKARSSON. WHAT DID**

### **THEY THINK OF THIS SPECIAL APPROACH TO ECHO? FOR INSTANCE WITH SOPHIA, WAS HAVING THE STATIC CAMERA A FRUSTRATION OR AN EXCITING CHALLENGE FOR HER?**

She really embraced that. All my creative crew were surprised when they got the first draft since it was different from my previous writing. It looks effortless - you just put a tripod up and something happens. But it's actually extremely difficult to maintain the rhythm within the scene. Nothing can go wrong. There were challenges in finding the locations where this technique could be visually interesting as well. It was a great challenge that surprised us all. For Jakob, Sophia, Kjartan and Gunnar, the more we work together the more we understand each other. We have a foundation to build upon. Even though a project might be slightly different than we are used to, we have the same temperament. Even though I am the writer/director, this creative team expands my vision. They are intelligent, artistic people.

### **YOU'VE SAID THAT SOCIETY IS THE MAIN CHARACTER. ARE YOU TRYING TO SAY SOMETHING SPECIFIC ABOUT CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY?**

It's a portrait, and when somebody is portraying something you can read in between the lines to find the author's viewpoint.

With each film I'm asked, "What are you telling us?" There is this demand that films have to be like Bible stories with some clear moral. Life is more complex than that. In my other films I've always tried to portray the grey areas of life. Even though you encounter something horrible, there is something else beautiful lying on the horizon and vice versa. A film shouldn't end in the darkness of places with no hope, nor when everything is hunky dory and nothing at all is wrong. Life isn't that way. I want to depict life. There is no one moral I am trying to push.



# RÚNAR RÚNARSSON / BIO & FILMOGRAPHY

Rúnar Rúnarsson is an Icelandic filmmaker born in Reykjavik in 1977. In 2009, he graduated from the Directors' section of The National Film School of Denmark. His short film *The Last Farm* (2004) was an Academy-Award nominee and was followed by *2 Birds*, which competed for

the Short Film Palme d'Or at the 2008 Cannes Film Festival. His first feature *Volcano* premiered at Cannes Directors' Fortnight in 2011. His sophomore feature *Sparrows* won the Golden Shell at San Sebastian in 2015. *Echo* is Rúnar Rúnarsson's third feature-film.



## **Feature length:**

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**2019 ECHO**

**2015 SPARROWS**

*San Sebastian 2015 - Golden Shell for Best Film*  
*Les Arcs 2015 - Cristal Arrow for Best Film*  
*Febiofest 2016 - Grand Prize*  
*Warsaw 2015 - 1 and 2 Competition Award*  
*Sao Paulo 2015 - Best Film Award*

**2011 VOLCANO**

*Festival de Cannes 2011,*  
*Directors' Fortnight*

## **Short film:**

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**2009 ANNA**

**2008 2 BIRDS**

**2004 THE LAST FARM**

## **Documentary:**

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**2002 LEITIN AÐ RAJEEV**



# CREW

Written and directed by  
Director of Photography  
Editor  
Sound Designer  
Music  
Production Designer  
Costume Designer & Make-up Artist  
Casting Director  
Producers

RÚNAR RÚNARSSON  
SOPHIA OLSSON, FSF  
JACOB SECHER SCHULSINGER  
GUNNAR ÓSKARSSON  
KJARTAN SVEINSSON  
GUS OLAFSSON  
JÚLÍANNA LÁRA STEINGRÍMSDÓTTIR  
VIGFÚS ÞORMAR GUNNARSSON  
LIVE HIDE

Co-producers

LILJA ÓSK SNORRADÓTTIR  
RÚNAR RÚNARSSON  
SARAH CHAZELLE  
ETIENNE OLLAGNIER  
DAN WECHSLER  
JAMAL ZEINAL-ZADE  
JIM STARK  
IGOR NOLA

Executive producers

BIRGITTE HALD  
BO EHRHARDT  
SNORRI ÞÓRISSON  
EINAR SVEINN THORDARSON  
ELLI CASSATA

Associate Producer  
Line producer

JASMINE HERMANN NAGHIZADEH  
ELLI CASSATA

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In co-production with

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MP FILMS, NIMBUS FILM, HALIBUT

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