

A Woman Against the Mega-Machine

Film review

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2019

a review of

Woman at War

Director: Benedikt Erlingsson

104 min. (2018)

You might be surprised to find the protagonist in this action-packed movie about a saboteur, **Woman at War**, is not a buxom blonde nor a dark-skinned foreign terrorist, but a white, middle-aged woman with a few visible wrinkles that appear around the eyes.

This is not the only surprise in this intelligent film, set in Iceland, that turns society's stereotypes and presuppositions on its head while still managing to keep the audience's attention glued to the screen.

It opens with a 49-year-old woman, Halla, successfully shooting a wire with her crossbow across a set of overhead electrical power lines, creating a spectacular rain of sparks, as the line is successfully shorted out. Not long after beginning her getaway across the vast heath of the Icelantic Highlands, she is pursued by a drone that has been patrolling these lines in the wake of a series of similar sabotages aimed at shutting down the energy supply to the Rio Tinto aluminum smelter.

In a fortunate twist of fate, she comes upon a Highland sheep farmer who agrees to hide and help her escape the authorities. And, so begins a recurring relationship with a man, who refers to himself as her "alleged cousin" when he realizes that she is related to the local people who have been grazing their sheep in the Highlands for thousands of years.

This is the first of many plot devices that are used by the Icelantic director, Benedict Erlingsson, to politically contextualize the plot and to challenge social stereotypes. Not long after Halla's sabotage, the cops arrest a young dark-skinned man, a "foreign national" outside the plant riding a bike and wearing the iconic image of Che Guevara on his t-shirt. He is both the classic terrorist stereotype, and the mirror opposite of the true saboteur, a middle-class white woman.

We are reminded throughout the film of the tragic consequences for those who fit this stereotype as the same young man is arrested each time the electrical lines are sabotaged.

Full disclosure. I am a first-time film reviewer whose main qualification is my personal history. I am on parole now after being sentenced to life for waging a guerrilla campaign in British Columbia with a group, Direct Action in the 1980s [see Related FE articles, below]. One of our first actions was sabotaging a transformer to prevent a hydroelectrical line from being completed that would facilitate the expansion of the pulp and paper industry on Vancouver Island.

If films could be transformed into humans, almost all films dealing with revolutionary subject matters would be skeletons. However, Erlingsson creates a multi-dimensional human by using background images—posters on Halla's living room wall, Che images on a t-shirt, newscasts playing on televisions in peoples' homes, the weather (flooding from climate change), and even surreal trios of musicians and singers—to flesh out this film.

Large posters of Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi on her wall create a political context for her campaign of sabotage; that the violence of sabotage is directed at the physical infrastructures of capitalism, but not at human lives.

Perhaps the most surreal plot device is the recurring presence of a trio of traditional Icelantic musicians and Ukrainian folk singers who create an emotional landscape through music that accentuates Halla's inner turmoil. However, only she and the reappearing young "foreign national" in the Che t-shirt can actually see and hear these trios.

Mainstream reviewers such as one in *Variety*, used the expression "witty intelligence," while the *Hollywood Reporter* saw "moments of deadpan humor," and *Rotten Tomatoes*, "jet black comedy" to describe this film.

Maybe my sense of humor, like my politics are outside the box, but I did not find this a funny or witty film. And, considering that Erlingsson found inspiration for the film in Berta Caceres and Yolanda Maturana, Honduran and Columbian Indigenous environmental activists respectively, who were murdered by paramilitaries, it is unlikely he was going for humor or wit when making this film.

Perhaps some reviewers and viewers will be mistaken in interpreting his use of surreal plot devices as attempts at humor rather than ones to create a fuller political context to the plot.

After Halla's confidante in the government warns her it is time to take a break, she decides to tackle one more sabotage of the electrical line, and to write a manifesto explaining her actions so "the world will know that heavy industry in Iceland will be costly."

Through television newscasts that play in the background in her apartment, and in homes she passes on her bike, we can hear the press regurgitating the fear campaign that the government has launched against the Mountain woman as Halla calls herself in her manifesto.

The message warns people that "the Bank of Iceland's interest rates are affected," and "ordinary people will experience wage cuts," and "a plunge in the credit rating in Iceland."

She climbs up onto the roofs of some buildings wearing a Nelson Mandela mask and throws her manifesto down to the streets below, where groups of young people pick them up.

They are seen taking selfies and sending them to their friends to read, clearly happy, excited and energized by the words of the manifesto. "The sabotage against our nature causing atmospheric warming is a crime against humanity and all life on earth. The globalized industry is the force behind this suicidal charge that not even democracy can stop. There are laws above human laws, ancestral laws which will not be stricken out tomorrow. It is our indisputable right to protect the lives of future generations..."

It becomes increasingly clear as the film progresses that the youth, the nonwhite segments of the population and the traditional people of the Highlands are the most sympathetic to her campaign.

Early on in the film we learn that Halla has an identical twin sister, Asa, who is played by the same actress. She is the polar opposite of Halla, teaching yoga and pursuing a life of meditation and personal growth which she argues is her way of contributing to social change.

Asa represents the dilemma so many political activists are often confronted with; should they sacrifice the safety and happiness of their families for their political activism? Rather than issue a spoiler alert, I will say that, just like the human form, nothing is perfect. Unfortunately, the ending of the film sends a dangerous and unrealistic message to activists: that the negative consequences of guerrilla-style actions can be avoided; that one can have their cake and eat it, too.

The reality in the 21st century more than ever, is that if one chooses to engage in a militant political campaign, one should also prepare for the consequences. As Nelson Mandela vowed, he would rather be prepared to die fighting for justice than live peacefully under oppressive regimes such as apartheid South Africa.

However, the strengths of **A Woman at War** far outweigh its weaknesses. It is a rare film that intelligently explores the politics of resistance within the context of a modern counter-intelligence campaign while still maintaining the excitement of an action-packed thriller.

You get to have your cake and eat it too.

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