



# Godland

**Director:** Hlynur Palmason

**Country:** Iceland

**Date:** 2022

*A review by Manohla Dargis for **The New York Times**:*

Soon after the Danish priest at the center of “Godland” staggers onto Iceland for the first time, he falls to his knees. For the rest of this sly, brutal movie he will keep on staggering and falling, overcome by the harsh weather, the unforgiving land, his difficult venture and, most crucially, his vainglorious ego. He’s been selected to establish a new church in a small Icelandic community, but somewhere along his travels he has forgotten that crucial lesson about pride, destruction and haughty spirits.

A story of faith and struggle set in the late 19th century, “Godland” tracks the priest, Lucas (an effective Elliott Crosset Hove), as he sails to Iceland, which he trudges across by horse, foot and finally stretcher. Outwardly, his mission is familiar. The church will promote the faith and provide services to the coastal flock, a commission that he undertakes with confidence, a stack of heavy books and a large, cumbersome still camera that he straps to his back (his cross to bear). He hopes to photograph the people that he meets during his expedition, a ludicrous, paradoxical idea for a man who proves wholly incapable of seeing the world around him.



The rough beauty of that world is crucial to the movie’s appeal and its ideas. The writer-director Hlynur Palmason was born in Iceland and he makes quick, shrewd use of the country’s natural attractions from the moment Lucas lurches on a moodily gray beach, the wind lashing his thin, black-clad body. “You must adapt to the circumstances of the country and its people,” an older priest had warned Lucas, whose overweening confidence remains unshaken even when he hears that a volcano has recently erupted on the island. Like innumerable travelers, he has set out to conquer a land that won’t easily submit.

It’s summer when Lucas arrives in Iceland and sets off on horseback with a half-dozen others, including a translator (Hilmar Gudjonsson) and a watchful local guide, Ragnar (Ingvar Sigurdsson). Across a wild, geographically diverse expanse of lowlands, plateaus and jagged mountains, the party pushes relentlessly forward. It’s a hard and perilous excursion, one made increasingly more difficult by Lucas, whose self-confidence — inborn or instilled — rapidly hardens into dangerous willfulness. As Palmason steadily paints a portrait of the country with one panoramic image after another, Lucas’s mind and physical health crumble. He makes reckless decisions, endangers others and prays for deliverance.

Built on visual and thematic contrasts, spirit and flesh included, the bulk of the story is roughly divided between Lucas’s journey to the coast and what happens after he arrives. The journey is the strongest, most revelatory section, and the land’s extremes — its beauties and perils, its mossy-green stretches and outcroppings of black lava, its depthless gorges and sweeping plains — set the tone and mood while revealing Lucas’s character facet by facet. Working with a boxy aspect ratio and making expressive use of long shots that can turn travelers into specks, Palmason underscores the grandeur of this place and the puniness of those traversing it.

“Godland” gestures at several intersecting themes — belief, the struggle to hold onto faith, the impermanence of being — with greater suggestiveness than depth. It’s a sharp, dryly funny, at times cruel

exploration of human arrogance and frailty. And while it can be read as a critical commentary on organized religion (by all means, do), Palmason's primary focus throughout remains on Lucas's individual failings, his sour disposition, reckless impatience and stubbornness. He's a funny-strange, sometimes ridiculous, off-putting character, and Palmason and his actor's boldest touch is that they never try to make you like Lucas, which leaves you wondering where you should park your sympathies.



That uncertainty builds as the journey continues, nicely complicating the story and imbuing it with an unsettling thrum of tension. Is Lucas a fool or simply foolish, a villain or victim? Palmason continues teasing these questions after the priest and the other travelers arrive. There, in an overextended final stretch, Lucas oversees the church construction and enters into a progressively tricky relationship with a family that has a restless daughter of marriageable age (Vic Carmen Sonne) and a sharp-eyed patriarch (the quietly charismatic Jacob Hauberg Lohmann).

The final section of "Godland" is engaging and has a persuasively rooted sense of a people and a place as well as some self-conscious filmmaking flourishes (including hardworking time-lapse images of a dead horse decaying over the seasons). Even so, this later stretch doesn't productively expand on everything that has come earlier during Lucas's journey — that defining interlude when he encountered the natural world and its splendors, and catastrophically turned the Earth's divinity into self-aggrandizing tribulation.

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