

Book Review

Claire Thompson, Isak Thorsen and Pei-Sze Chow: *A History of Danish Cinema*.

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1 A Secure Brand?

Denmark's brand as a film nation used to be secure. In Cannes 2022, however, Swedish director Ruben Östlund chose to tease Danish film production with the following remark: "For a long time it has been told that the Danish were good at making films. I think that they are quite bad; they make conventional, boring storytelling film." (Ruben Östlund, *Kulturnyheter* SVT May 22, 2022). What Östlund arrogantly signaled by this verdict had a double purpose: to assert both that Danish cinema at present does not live up to former glory and that Swedish cinema is grossly underestimated. To which degree, if any, is he right? Evaluating the present level of Danish film is only possible if you consider the historical background. To this purpose *A History of Danish Cinema* is appropriate.

2 International and National Film History

According to David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson (2003), film history generally comprises the following basic approaches: 1) biographical history, 2) industrial or economic history, 3) aesthetic history, 4) technological history, 5) social/cultural/political history. Though biographical history and technological history are less important in *A History of Danish Cinema*, all these levels are represented. Bordwell and Thompson's *Film History* is international in scope, highlighting national film cultures when they have made impressive contributions to film history as such. Part of this international history are Nordisk Film Company, Ole Olsen, Urban Gad and Asta Nielsen, the Dogme 95 movement, and the auteurs Carl Dreyer and Lars von Trier.

When the perspective changes to national film history, the relationship between national and international levels become more complicated. Taking its point of departure in former minister of culture Brian Mikkelsen's *Kulturkanon* from,

A History of Danish Cinema asks the question: In which ways is the nation represented by national film? Though this question may be important for a national film history, it is not a guiding principle during the following chapters. Rather, the concept of “entangled history” as presented by Caspar Tybjerg, challenging the national framework, gradually appears to be the common ground of the contributors, forming the guideline of the anthology. In this respect, Carl Th. Dreyer serves as an illuminating example.

The broad scope of the volume highlights how Danish cinema’s engagement with the world is quintessential, from the silent era to contemporary films made by directors with immigrant backgrounds. Some of the choices may be questionable. On one hand, Greenlandic film is included because of its tight relationship to Danish production. For the same reason, and equally questionable, *Vinterbrødre* directed by Icelandic Hlynur Pálmason (2017, *Winter Brothers*), is included as one of most expanded analytical examples. On the other hand, the initial question of representation is gradually toned down in favour of a more inclusive approach.

A History of Danish Cinema applies a vertical point of view – a history of Danish films and film culture from the beginning in the silent age through different phases till today – as well as a horizontal point of view in focusing on examples ranging from feature films in “national genres” to films by well-known auteurs and transnational directors. Though feature films are the main interest of the volume, documentaries (written by Ib Bondebjerg/Anne Jerslev) and TV drama (by Eva Novrup Redvall) are included. Besides, the volume comprises chapters on regional productions (by Pei-Sze Chow), films for children and young people (Christa Lykke Christensen), and Danish institutions and production systems (Mette Hjort). Cross references abound and are easy for the reader to follow.

3 International Highlights

Most of Carl Dreyer’s films are international as they are produced abroad (in Norway, Sweden, Germany, France). While he admired the realism of Hollywood, Carl Dreyer, according to Caspar Tybjerg, opposed Hollywood and the Danish film industry for the same reasons: their tendency to be film factories. Tybjerg’s approach to Dreyer points out Dreyer’s exceptionalism, his status as an auteur – an auteur who would reach a worldwide audience.

The opposite way of reaching a worldwide audience is described by Isak Thorsen who sheds light on Nordisk Films Kompagni, established in 1906, as a professional film factory marked by an “entrepreneurial and pioneering attitude” (p. 22). Its centralized and industrial production mode of multiple reels and its international distribution system became a model for film production in other countries. Branding

and stardom began in 1911 with Waldemar Psilander and Asta Nielsen. The decline of Nordisk Film is often ascribed to difficulties in reaching the overseas markets. This may be true, but Thorsen points out another cause. In 1918, most of the company's values, for instance the cinemas in Germany, were nationalized by Universum Film Aktiengesellschaft (UFA). By then, the reputation of Nordisk Films Kompagni was already dubious among the allies because of its German connections. This represented a serious drawback. Nordisk Films Kompagni was liquidated in 1928, to be reconstructed in 1929. Today it is still going strong.

The theme of interaction between national and the international layers is further pursued by Julie K. Allen in her stardom chapter, exemplified by Asta Nielsen, Olaf Fønss, Clara Wieth Pontoppidan, and Valdemar Psilander. All were born between 1880 and 1884, all had a background in the theatre, entering the film stage mostly for economic reasons. However, all left a lasting imprint on international perception of Danish cinema.

The theme of the relationship between national and international levels reappears in the chapters on "Heritage film, Dogme 95 and the new Danish cinema" and "The transnational Danish Directors" – this time seen from the angle of innovation. Claire Thompson points out that the heritage film *Babettes gæstebud* (*Babette's Feast*, Gabriel Axel 1987) "feels like the end of an era – and yet it was the beginning of a new one." (p. 164) Convincingly, she argues that the Dogme film *Festen* (*The Celebration*, Thomas Vinterberg 1998) represents a sort of continuation of or answer to *Babette's Feast*. Both films are "structured around a dinner party during which etiquette, ritual and scandal are held in productive tension." (p. 165)

However, one of the results of the Dogme movement was that "the position of the heritage film has been usurped by original stories largely set in the present day" (p. 171). Meryl Shriver-Rice takes up this hint by showing how some of the most internationally acclaimed directors of the 21st century launched their transnational careers by way of the Dogme movement – not only Thomas Vinterberg, but also Susanne Bier and Lone Scherfig.

4 National Genres

In an international context, the Danish "national genres" are usually neglected. In this context, they are highlighted, signaled by the photo of the Olsen Gang on the cover of the book. In his chapter on the Danish 'folkekomedie' tradition, Niels Henrik Hartvigsson thoroughly reassesses the popular folk comedy, emphasizing that it represents a movement from the cosmopolitan cityscape in Copenhagen into the Danish countryside and small towns, combining increasing attention to dialects with the sounds of modernity in modern media:

The importance of the sound comedies of the 1930s cannot be overestimated in their ability to reinvent Danish film culture in the wake of film sound; their fictions played an essential role in securing an active Danish film production in the sound era. They successfully appealed to and became common property of the small nation. (p. 71).

Under the heading “Enduring Prototypes”, the chapter encompasses examples from 1909 to *Far til fire* (*Father of Four*) from the 1950s and the Olsen Gang-tradition from the 1960s. In this way, recurring types are illuminated, such as the family ‘folkekomedie’ and the ‘crew film’. While Ib Bondebjerg (2005) prefers the term “det folkelige melodrama” to ‘folkekomedie’, Hartvigsson embraces the latter term. However, following the inspiration from Thomas Schatz (1981), both discuss the function of integration in the genre. Hartvigsson draws attention to the ways in which the sentimental dimension, often thought vital to the genre, is downplayed in for instance the Olsen Gang, offering difficult conditions for integration. Similarly, Bondebjerg points out the critical dimensions of *Far til fire*, for instance the advanced form of family ideology (“In this family we don’t educate by beating”, Bondebjerg 2005, p. 127).

Morten Korch-films are chosen as the main example of homeland films, opposing the Copenhagen based intelligentsia and its tastes in a series of films produced by ASA, with music and songs by Sven Gyldmark and directed by the female directors Alice O’Fredericks and Grethe Frische. Just as Hartvigsson applies an untraditional point of view vis-à-vis the Danish comedy tradition, he regards the homeland tradition as more than a “reactionary, regressive, escapist exploitation of a potentially dangerous ideology” (p. 106). The broad appeal of homeland films is a fact that cannot be questioned, but the question why, is a difficult one to answer.

Another significant and traditionally more acclaimed “national genre” is the social realism of the 1940s. Birger Langkjær establishes how filmmaking “took the trivialities of life and made them into dramas of the everyday” (p. 81). This took place in two prevailing forms – the “problem film” and the broader social realism tending to critique social structures yet dignifying the protagonists. Both have had a long-lasting afterlife. More than the ‘folkekomedie’, this tradition keeps renewing itself. Looking at the Danish film production of the last years, social realism in different versions and genre blends might answer the initial question from the introduction – in which ways is the nation represented by national film? As it seems, mainly in critical ways.

5 Ups and Downs

The *History of Danish Cinema* shows that there are moments of striking innovation and moments of keeping up traditions in Danish cinema. At present, films in different

genres abound, from historical dramas such as *Bastarden* (*The Promised Land*, Nikolaj Arcel 2023) to the social realist drama *Fuld af kærlighed* (*Matters of the Heart*, Christina Rosendahl, 2024). Their predecessors can all be found in *A History of Danish Cinema*, which provides a valuable resource of placing current movements in a relevant context. To the film-interested audience who do not read any of the Scandinavian languages, *A History of Danish Cinema* is a very good opportunity to obtain solid knowledge of present and former states of Danish cinema, its ups and downs, its ambition for an international outreach as well as being true to its Danish origins, and its perpetual attempts of combining the two perspectives.

A History of Danish Cinema is written by acclaimed specialists in their field. In this way, it represents the state of art in Danish film history. This is even valid for the anthology format, which during the 1990s up till the turn of the century has given valuable contributions to Danish film history. The latest comprehensive histories of Danish cinema have been written in anthology form, such as *Dansk film 1972–97*, edited by Jesper Andersen, Ib Bondebjerg and Peter Schepelern (1997), or *100 års dansk film* edited by Peter Schepelern and Eva Jørholt (2001). Seen in this context, *A History of Danish Cinema*, updating the Danish-language cinematic histories of the 20th century, adding the last 20 years' development, and overall combining a national and an international point of view, is valuable not only for foreign readers, but also for a Danish audience.

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