

A black and white, close-up portrait of a woman with dark, curly hair, looking slightly to the right of the camera with a serious expression. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting her features against a dark background.

# Nordic National Cinemas

Tytti Soila, Astrid Söderbergh Widding and Gunnar Iversen

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## Nordic National Cinemas

*Nordic National Cinemas* explores the film histories and cultures of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden and examines each country's film production, social and political context and domestic audience.

*Nordic National Cinemas* traces the development of the cinema in the Nordic countries, from its origins in the early years of this century, through the golden years of film-making in the 1920s and 1930s, to film production and censorship during the war years, the new-realism in the 1950s and 1960s, the influence of American cinema and the international commercial and critical success of films in recent years. The authors not only explore the work of internationally-renowned film-makers such as Mauritz Stiller and Victor Sjöström, Carl Dreyer and Ingmar Bergman, but also nationally important film-makers such as August Blom, Gustaf Molander, Lau Lauritzen and Nils Malmros. They also discuss the films of contemporary film-makers such as Gabriel Axel, director of *Babette's Feast*, the Kaurismäki brothers, directors of *The Match Factory Girl* and *The Leningrad Cowboys* and Lars von Trier, director of *Breaking the Waves*.

The authors examine the phenomenon of Nordic cinema and, despite the similarities and collaborations between the countries, stress that Nordic cinema is the cinema of five particular traditions. Each chapter discusses the history and film culture of the individual country and considers three specific questions: state control and support of film production; the cultural characteristics of Nordic film which both unify and define peculiarities of each country; film production, content and form. In a final chapter, the authors assess the direction and future of the Nordic cinemas.

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Tytti Soila, Astrid Söderbergh Widding and  
Gunnar Iversen



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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### Film production as a national project

*Ytti Soila, Astrid Söderbergh Widding and Gunnar Iversen*

The concept of national cinema has been central in several film historical texts and debates in recent years. As a departure point for the discussion of film in national terms, we find the assumption that a country's film history can be considered from certain stylistic or thematic parameters, related to the country's culture and the general background of the films which unite the country's production, to be a more or less homogeneous phenomenon. As a typical example one could mention France, where among other features poetic realism is often mentioned as a specifically national tendency in French production, or Germany, where expressionism or the new German cinema play a similar part. These national film cultures have often functioned as a counterbalance to the hegemony of Hollywood. During some periods, as, for example, in the new German cinema, the ambition to create a domestic film has been the expressed intention of the film-makers. In films by Fassbinder or Wenders there is clearly inscribed a critique of the Hollywood cinema, yet at the same time these films relate to Hollywood on several levels. They constitute an antithesis, a formulation of an individual alternative, and they have been interpreted as such by the audience. At other times it seems more reasonable to regard the national element largely as a reflection of the audience, as something that arises in the film's reception.

The concept of national cinemas has at the same time been questioned from many quarters. For example, Andrew Higson and Stephen Heath both claim that the device is a theoretical construction. The criticism of the concept originates among other things in the fact that, at the level of production only, it is difficult or impossible to isolate the films of individual nations from other countries' production. However, the device's characteristic of construction does not necessarily mean that it needs to be dismissed: it can after all be justified as an analytical tool. Furthermore, the degree of construction attributed to the term is dependent on whether, for example, one places the stress on production or reception. On revising sources like the companies' material, reviews and the like, it has become apparent in Nordic contexts that there was an early and distinct awareness of national distinction, which has remained permanent through the decades regardless of whether the films of that particular country have been fostered or rejected by the critics and the audience, and regardless of

the national distinction simultaneously being subordinate to various changes as far as thematic and stylistic design is concerned.

The purpose of this study is twofold. The first is to offer a detailed description of the marginal film culture which the Nordic countries constitute in an international language, and thereby give them a place on the map of film history. The thought behind this is also to contribute with a corrective to the international film canon where Bergman and Dreyer, as virtually the only major names, have been made to represent Nordic presence. As we have observed, film and nationality today constitute one of the most vital fields of discussion within cinema studies—the existence of the National Cinema series, of which this book is a part, is but one example. This clarifies the second purpose behind this study, namely to allow this book to make a contribution to the debate on national film. The starting point of this contribution is to be found in the unique situation that exists in Nordic film contexts where there is a high degree of integration and exchange between the countries but it is also apparent that popular themes and genres specific to each country respectively can be traced through history.

### **PERSPECTIVES OF THE NATIONAL ELEMENT**

In discussing Nordic cinema from a national perspective we have proceeded from three different ways of approaching the national element.

1 As opposed to several other countries' film cultures, Nordic cinema has been national in the specific sense that it has not, or to only a limited extent, been exportable to other countries. This means that it is national in a basic sort of way: a culture that stays within itself, something which exists only for that country.

Even within the Nordic countries the different nations' domestic films are only exported to a limited extent. As an example, we will look at cinema in Norway during the 1980s. During this period, an average of ten Norwegian films were produced each year out of which only one was exported to Sweden, whereas some ten Swedish films were imported into Norway in the same period.

An important exception to this trend was the large Swedish export of films following the so-called breakdown of the sex barrier. The reason for this is that Swedish films are not only exotic but also sensational. In the latter concept there is the preconception of news value. Thus a rough borderline is established where the aberration in Swedish film production in comparison with other countries (and in particular with the normative American production) suddenly appears to have acquired such news value. This also gives rise to a number of questions. How and when does the difference become sensation? The whole problem of the dichotomy of the difference-similarity, which is at the heart of every discussion on national cinema, is topicalized in this context.

The divergence of Nordic film versus, for example, American film is interesting: this is both national and international, and its national specificity at the same time constitutes the very basis for its distribution outside the borders of the own nation.

If one speaks of Nordic national cinema in this specific sense, however, it means that the very concept of 'the national' must be redefined. This is because earlier definitions of national Nordic film have been based on the exceptions—on the films of a Bergman or a Dreyer, which are paradoxically at the same time the most international films in the Nordic countries. We have instead proceeded from the basis of popular film, which has been seen by a majority audience in the country where it was made and which has been perceived by this audience to be specifically national.

2 This brings us to a second aspect of nationality in cinematic contexts, namely the question of the audience and its expectations in relation to national film.

National quality is enhanced in an interesting way if one considers the example of France. With the complete setback in production caused by the First World War, the French film industry, which at the time was the international leader, entered a prolonged period of crisis. It was only the breakthrough of sound film that brought about a revitalization of the French film, and then it had clear national overtones. This obviously goes to show the importance of language to national identity, but above all it is also an indicator as to what extent the film as a national phenomenon is a *project*. National cinema came into existence to the extent that a nation actively attempted to construct it, in a situation where external conditions allowed it. The state's influence on Nordic cinema is something which to a particularly high degree accentuates this fact, but the awareness of what is specific for the nation and its marketability is also an important factor which plays a part in the concrete production decisions for the private producers.

The creation of a national cinema is thus a decision which originates in a need that is presumed to exist, and which is thereby also presumed to arouse sympathy in the audience. These presumptions are confirmed if one looks at the audience ratings. Within the different national cultures in the Nordic countries the audience favours domestic films in a most singular way, something that is clearly apparent from the history of Nordic cinema. This is true independently of cultural value patterns: during some periods the films of the home nation have been held up as models by the critics, yet during other periods they have been looked down upon.

It is thus with the audience in mind that one should seek the awareness of nationality in the first place. The knowledge that the rapids in the Finnish film version of the popular Finnish novel *The Song of the Scarlet Red Flower* (*Laulu tulipunaisesta Kukasta*) are in fact Finnish, for example—as opposed to the similar rapids in the Swedish version of the same film—created considerable differences with regard to the popularity of the

respective films in Finland. However, it can also be said that the audience is deceived, so that the national authenticity of the images is something that only occurs in the film's reception. An interesting example is the Norwegian film *The Magic Moose (Trollelgen)* (1927). This film has been defined by audience and critics alike as being prototypically Norwegian in its images. In reality it contains footage which the film-maker has retrieved from a Swedish documentary and then cut into his story. That the images deceive, however, does not alter anything as regards the film as a national symbol, which clearly indicates that national quality is a construction which should primarily be defined from the point of view of the spectators.

Nationality in the area of film thereby implies a relation to the topical and to the specific for the culture. A certain country's national film is determined by the separate life values, in relation to other countries, which have been worked at in the form of fictions, rather than from any singularly demonstrable difference in stylistic measures between different countries' productions. The concept of national cinema in other words both presupposes and relates to a context. To speak of a national cinema in a given country is a construction which thus becomes specific to the country only in relation to other countries, to 'abroad'. At the same time it is of interest to analyse how the relationship between nationality and internationality changes. Particularly interesting in Nordic contexts are the complex relations which arise in the field between, first, each country's individuality as it is conveyed in the films; second, the Nordic affinity and collaboration which unite the separate national projects, and third, the influence of other countries, especially the USA.

3 The third way in which we have sought to approach the national quality in Nordic cinema is via the search for specific elements in the actual film texts which constitute national markers. Common to film in all the Nordic countries is that one can view it as a distinct alternative to the dominant American film. In this way, Nordic film constitutes a corrective of sorts, a way of asserting not only each country's national individuality, but the joint Nordic unity as an alternative, however peripheral, in relation to Hollywood's style and mode of production. Here again, state influence enters the picture. The fact that these small nations also have numerically insignificant film production has made state regulation necessary to maintain production at a sufficiently high level both quantitatively and qualitatively, in order to resist the strong American influence.

### THE RESEARCH SITUATION

In all the Nordic countries there exists a paradoxical situation in the area of film research. The state's influence over the cinema institution is, as mentioned above, common to all Nordic countries. Despite this interest of the state, however, the film still has a low status in all these countries. It is from this perspective that

one must realize the fact that film as such, and more specifically film history in particular as regards national production, is a neglected area. It would also seem that the fact that Nordic cinema has had so few international hits has contributed to this. If Sweden to a certain extent is an exception to the situation outlined above, it is doubtless due to the fact that it was Sweden where Sjöström and Stiller, and later Bergman, were active. This inferiority complex seems to have been the most effective research obstacle. Only international success has been sufficient to legitimize research into the film history of each nation in its own right.

It has been only during latter years that a research proper into film has developed at the universities, and that a study of national film has become legitimate. This has also resulted in a situation which is in many ways problematic for the film scholar. Because of this, the literature on film has largely been made up of separate surveys, while the basic research proper has not been carried out until quite recently. Essential areas are still lacking basic research. The map of Nordic film history still has its blank areas.

When one exposes the Nordic countries to closer scrutiny one will find that there are simultaneously vast differences in the research situation between the countries. In Sweden and Finland the literature is thus far more extensive than in Denmark or Norway. In Sweden as well as Finland there are also detailed filmographies which map the countries' production. In Denmark and Norway, however, there have been as yet only filmographic attempts. It is interesting to compare Swedish and Danish literature in the field of cinema studies. If the Swedish body of texts would appear to be far superior in volume compared to the Danish literature, this is partly misleading. In Denmark, for example, there is a thorough and detailed mapping of the history of film production which lacks a Swedish counterpart, but virtually no aesthetic film history. It is also the case in both countries that extensive areas of film history fall outside of the writing of history. In both Denmark and Sweden the interest has been exclusively tied to certain periods and certain great auteurs.

At the same time the historical research into Nordic film is at present at a stage of dynamic development. Film history has appeared on the agenda at a number of Nordic universities. In Norway, for instance, this has resulted in a vast project covering the history of moving images. The research ranges over a wide field, from analysis of aesthetics and production-related aspects to the study of the films' reception.

Yet another problem concerning research from an international perspective is that what is published in the international languages on Nordic cinema is written in the main by people who have not mastered the language in question or who have no knowledge of the national culture. It has also been difficult for such people to make a selection from each country's national cinema, and they have thus been forced to trust in the official picture traded by way of the survey literature: starting from which films the film institutes have chosen to subtitle, and so on. The emphasis on secondary sources is thus extreme. The selection of

films studied in these texts is also based on a consensus of sorts: it is exclusively the study of aesthetical masterpieces. In this book we are striving to place the exceptions in a particular context. International critics have not had access to the popular films and we think popularity is an important criterion in discussing national cinema. Which films have people actually seen? There is also a need for a comprehensive perspective on the complete production. The purpose of this work is specifically to fill this void by presenting a more complete picture of the film culture in each country respectively.

## Chapter 2 Denmark

*Astrid Söderbergh Widding*

### **THE SILENT YEARS IN DENMARK: A PERIOD OF GREATNESS AND DECLINE**

The history of Danish film begins in a grand way despite Denmark's smallness, as the story of one of the world's leading film nations. During the first half of the 1910s the so-called golden age of Danish film occurred, when Denmark, alongside France, had the status of being Europe's most influential country in the realm of film production. But this period of greatness was to be short, and Denmark has since remained a marginal film country, with the exception of a few directors who have become internationally known. Surveys of film history, with their focus on auteurs and great or artistic productions, give few or no clues to the consistent production of films in Denmark, apart from its relatively few international successes—films that have seldom been exported but on the other hand have had a solid native audience through the decades.

Denmark occupies a unique position among the Nordic countries through its dense population in relation to its geographic size. The natural scenery that in film history has often been pointed out to be the most characteristic feature in Nordic film also plays an important part in the history of Danish film. There is no wilderness however, only the cultivated agrarian landscape one meets in the films. Urbanization came earlier in Denmark and is more prominent than in the neighbouring Scandinavian countries. This is also evident in film production where urban types of film like melodrama, drawing-room comedy and street realism were already common from the earliest years.

The film came to Denmark only one year after its birth. In 1896 the first public screening took place, arranged by Vilhelm Pacht, the owner of a place of entertainment in Copenhagen. He had seen Lumière's showings in Paris and had brought home film and equipment. In that same year the first Danish film was produced by Peter Elfelt, who for ten years was virtually the sole film-maker in the country. From the beginning the film had an important, albeit limited, market in Denmark: films were shown regularly at the music-halls in Copenhagen, and there were some travelling cinemas as well. In 1904 the first permanent cinema opened in Copenhagen. It was followed by others in various parts of the country,



and from 1906 the growth was almost explosive. In the same year a cinema owner in Copenhagen, Ole Olsen, set up his own film production company, Nordisk Films Kompagni (Nordisk Film Company). It was almost coincidental that he as well as his equals—businessmen in the entertainment industry—came to invest in film as a possible new source of income, which would turn out to exceed their wildest expectations.

By 1910 the Danish film industry was established and a stable production of considerable size had begun. Nordisk Films had within a few years become the second largest film company in Europe, next to Pathé, with a staff of 1700 people. Production was soon standardized in the company, both on narrative and stylistic levels. A few genres were developed in accordance with patterns similar to the American ones: mainly melodrama, farce and thriller. Besides Nordisk there were also a number of small companies, twenty-five in all, most of which produced only a handful of films before disappearing for good.

The film historian Ron Mottram describes the typical film style characterizing Nordisk's productions. As a rule they comprise thrillers, tragedies and love stories with an intense acting style and marked lighting effects. Both interiors and exteriors are very realistic and natural scenery as well as urban settings are exploited in an ingenious way. A few stock characters appear and reappear in the Danish films of the period. Among these we find the circus performer, the prodigal son, the officer, the landowner and the earl. The film diva also makes her entrance in Nordisk's films, such as Clara Wieth Pontoppidan and Asta Nielsen. Nielsen made her name as a star in *The Abyss* (*Afgrunden*) in 1910, directed by Urban Gad. It contained some innovative devices, for example, the lack of intertitles, but it achieved its reputation mainly as an erotic film with a touch of dark fatalism. Nielsen appeared in two other similar films, both directed by Gad, before leaving Denmark for Germany: *The Black Dream* (*Den sorte drøm*) and *The Dancer* (*Balettdanserinden*), both made in 1911.

The director August Blom, a former actor, was among the first to work to produce longer films—Ole Olsen had an aversion to productions lasting longer than one reel, that is, 15 minutes. In 1910 Blom staged *Hamlet* as a play in three acts, but the film company cut it down to a one-reel play. In the same year, however, the success of the 35-minute film *White Slavery* (*Den hvide slavehandel*)—produced initially by a smaller company, and immediately plagiarized by Ole Olsen—prompted the producers to begin to make longer films with up to an hour's running time. In this way more theatrical actors came to be tied to the cinema. In 1911 Blom took over from Viggo Larsen as the leading director of the company. His *The Temptations of a Great City* (*Ved Fængslets Port*) from the same year, an erotic melodrama which made Valdemar Psilander a star, was 45 minutes long. It was a box-office success even internationally, and was sold in 246 copies. *Atlantis* (1913), an adaptation for the screen of the Nobel prize winner Hauptmann, comprised eight reels—the longest Danish film to date. It also enjoyed an immense success both in Denmark and abroad. Among

its many spectacular scenes the sinking of an ocean liner is especially noteworthy, inspired by the Titanic catastrophe one year earlier.

The Danish melodrama of the same period was not exclusively popular, and was also criticized. The melodramatic subjects, the spectacular plots, the bold erotics and the descriptions of crime provoked a debate in wide circles, not only in Denmark. In Sweden many of these films were totally banned, and ‘Danishness’ became an abusive word referring to all films that were considered offensive to good taste.

As in the other Nordic countries, the Danish state also strived to establish a close relationship with the film industry. In 1913 state censorship was introduced as a consequence of the criticism from several sources that film-goers were inspired to commit crimes as a result of what they saw on the screen. As early as 1907 there had been local censorship, administered by the local police authorities. This foundered, however, on the inconsistencies of the system, with varying censor assessments in different countries. In the area of cinemas there is a state regulation in the law of 1922 which introduces restrictions on licensing, connected with an expressed purpose that the film should work in a manner ‘ennobling and educating for the audience’ (‘forædlende og belærende på publikum’). There was also an entertainment tax levied on the proceeds. The law was preceded by a debate, where some advocated a municipal cinema system as in Norway, and others spoke for free competition. The Danish state took a clear stand, however, towards counteracting the formation of cinema chains in accordance with the Swedish model. Thereafter, the debate recurred regularly in Denmark: the next time it arose was in the early 1930s in connection with new legislation in the area of film.

The two directors of the period who have been integrated into the international canon of film history, namely Benjamin Christensen and Carl Theodor Dreyer, are, strikingly enough, marginal phenomena compared to the production giant. This is the more remarkable as—in contrast to their celebrated Swedish colleagues Sjöström, Stiller and Bergman—they remain relatively marginal in Danish film as a whole. Not even Dreyer occupies a position like Bergman, as an unchallenged central figure. Christensen made only two films in Denmark during the silent period, *The Mysterious X* (*Det hemmelighedsfulde X*) in 1914 and *Night of Revenge* (*Hævnens nat*) in 1916, both of which are stylistically innovative—and both outside the boundaries of Nordisk Films. His next film, the experimental semi-documentary *Witchcraft Through the Ages* (*Häxan*) (1922) was made in Sweden and landed Christensen in some trouble with the censors. Dreyer for his part made only two films for Nordisk, and this after the decline of the film company had begun: *The President* (*Præsidenten*) in 1918 and *Leaves from Satan’s Book* (*Blade af Satans bog*) in 1921, inspired by Griffith’s *Intolerance*.

Independently of Nordisk, *Mikael*—from a novel by Herman Bang— was brought to the screen by Dreyer in 1924, a version inspired by Stiller’s Swedish adaptation of the same novel in 1916. This is a typical example of the circulation

that has prevailed within Nordic film through the decades, where a filmic idea from one country is taken over and realized as an independent project in one of the neighbouring countries, sometimes as an immediate consequence of the fact that the import of the film in question has turned out to be unprofitable. Dreyer also directed two films in other Nordic countries: in Sweden—*The Parson's Widow* (*Prästänkan*) (1920), and in Norway—*The Bride of Glomdal* (*Glomdalsbruden*) (1926). In 1925, the naturalistic drama *Master of the House* (*Du skal ære din hustru*) was shot by Dreyer in the Palladium studios. The film was a box-office success and brought its director international fame. This provided the opportunity for Dreyer to make films in France, where in 1926 he directed *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (*La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc*), generally considered to be one of the most innovative achievements of the silent era. There are features in Dreyer's earlier film style that are here carried to their extreme: the predilection for closed interiors, the focusing on faces, his framings that either mask the lens or allow objects and people to be cut by the frame, leaving only a limited part of the image visible. The same stylistic features remain through the whole of Dreyer's very sparse production history.

The period of greatness for Ole Olsen's company was waning. With the outbreak of the First World War the situation deteriorated, but it was only after 1916 that the disaster became a reality. Still, in 1915, 143 films were released. Danish film historians cite artistic as well as structural reasons for the decline. Ole Olsen exploited successful concepts to the extent that they became stereotyped. The market potential was simultaneously shrinking, among other things as a result of the foundation of the state-owned UFA in Germany. In 1917 film production was discontinued, and when it resumed after the peace of 1918 it began from nothing. Denmark was never to regain her position on the international market.

The development of film in Denmark thus goes in the opposite direction from that in Sweden, where the 'golden age' took as its starting point Sjöström's *Terje Vigen* in 1917, and continued during the 1920s with an investment in quality and cultural hallmarks, secured through filmings of, above all, domestic literature. In Denmark, however, only a handful of films were made from literary originals during the period 1915 to 1930. The venture into quality film-making made by the resurrected Nordisk Films never achieved any real success. The only consistently renowned director from this period is Forest Holger-Madsen, August Blom's challenger as first director with Nordisk. He made an outstanding early production, *The Evangelist* (*Evangeliemændens liv*) (1914), with Valdemar Psilander in the leading role. The film has been provided with a narrative frame, introducing a flashback that occupies the greater part of the narrative, where a preacher tells a young man how he spent some time in prison, wrongfully accused of murder, thus saving the young man from a path of crime. The obligatory *femmes fatales* are there, as they were earlier during the decade. The cameraman Marius Clausen, however, gives an original touch to the film as well as to Holger-Madsen's other productions, with a marked feeling for setting,

avant-garde lighting and inventive camera angles. Holger-Madsen also directed two films, *Down with Weapons! (Ned med vaabnene)* (1915) from a novel by Bertha Suttner, scripted by Dreyer, and *The Sky ship (Himmelskibet)* (1918), the former dealing directly with the subject of war and the latter indirectly, within the frame of a science fiction story. These contemporary commentaries on the First World War occupy a unique position in Nordic film. Furthermore, their social commitment is exceptional for this period. Among the genres light comedy occupied an increasingly dominant position, followed by a handful of dramas. Lau Lauritzen was the singularly most active film-maker among the directors of light comedy. He was the force behind the international success of *Long and Short (Fyrtornet og Bivognen, literally 'The Lighthouse and The Trailer')*—forerunners of Laurel and Hardy. Lauritzen had left Nordisk in 1920 to be a party in founding Palladium, which, thanks to the success of *'Fy og Bi'*, temporarily held a stronger position on the market than the former giant. Forty-six Long and Short films were produced in all, of which Lauritzen directed thirty. The films are set in a poor working-class environment and the two heroes who are the opposites of one another—as is indicated by their names: Long is lanky and Short is square—bear a resemblance to, among others, Charlie Chaplin.

### SOUND FILM AND STATE REGULATION

The transition to sound film in Denmark was gradual and did not differ significantly from other countries. The system using gramophone records was the first to reach the cinemas, in 1926–27, followed by optical sound in 1929 after various experiments in the intermediary years. Among others *The Jazz Singer* was shown in the cinema with live music. The first Danish sound films premièred a few months before the American sensations arrived in Denmark. They were modest and small productions, but technically acceptable. The company Nordisk Tonefilm (Nordic Sound Film) was founded in 1928, and merged the following year with Nordisk Films, which had gone bankrupt but was subsequently revived. This created a new dominant film company in the Danish market which had ready access to an experienced production team, up-to-date equipment, as well as capital and patents.

In May 1931, the first domestic feature film with sound had its première in Denmark: *The Clergyman of Vejlbj (Præsten i Vejlbj)*, directed by George Schnéevoight and produced by Nordisk Tonefilm. The film was an immediate success, and made three times its production cost. This promoted optimism for the future. It was apparently profitable, despite the diminutive domestic market, to make Danish films. Furthermore, the continued progress during the 1930s was to fulfil expectations, in spite of the pressure from American imports. Around 1930 many more American films were shown in Denmark, with German films in second place; the third place was held by Danish films.

In 1933 a new cinema law was introduced in Denmark. This law is a clear example of the social democratic politics of this period, which headed in the direction of increased state regulation with the purpose of creating protection against the unrestrained influence of foreign capital. The idea of the education of the nation was also a strong feature of the social democracy of the time. This is notable in the legislation which promoted the notion that better use be made of the film's cultural and social value and that it be made accessible to the Danish population.

With this in mind it was decided, among other things, that every cinema company was to be headed by a film expert with real control over the company, and who could not simultaneously head other cinemas. Moreover, prohibitions were introduced against the distributors investing in cinemas, which meant in practice that there was state regulation of film distribution. The law also strengthened the position of the cinemas in relation to the distributors for many years. In 1938 it was replaced by a new cinema law where several new state institutions were added, including a central purchase and letting body.

During the 1930s, sharp criticism was directed at the high entertainment tax (40 per cent of the price of a ticket in 1933), and there were demands for a state subsidy for film. It was some time, however, before these demands were realized. The pressure of taxation resulted in the situation that a Danish-produced film at this time had to be seen by half a million viewers in order to break even, a large percentage in a country with approximately four million inhabitants. This led to a certain conservatism in the industry, where staking safe bets came to the fore. Investors were especially sensitive to savings on the market: for example, when the audience polls of 1937 showed that three-quarters of the audience lived in the countryside, this was immediately followed by a venture into rural films. Towards the end of the 1930s there were three production companies in Denmark: besides Nordisk and Palladium there was also the recently started ASA. The rhythm of production became fairly steady: about nine Danish films were made each year.

The 1930s was in many ways a paradoxical decade for Danish cinema. Simultaneously with the educative ambitions of the film law, a gulf had in reality to be bridged between the broad audience of film and the quality demands of the critics, something which has endured through the decades. As during the 1920s when light comedy was singularly the most dominant genre, this now expanded into various musical features. Popular favourites, stars like Marguerite Viby or the comedian Chr. Arhoff, played a significant role during this period.

A typical example of Danish film of the 1930s is *Nyhavn 17* (1933), one of the films staged by George Schnéevoigt, which was denigrated all the more as he had previously enjoyed a certain goodwill from the critics after *Præsten i Vejlbj.* In *Nyhavn 17* we meet the café owner's daughter Primula, who lives in the docklands area and who, while cycling to her work selling furniture at a department store gets hit by the store director's car driven by his future son-in-law. The director fires Primula for being late for work. The future son-in-law,

however, who is there to buy furniture, falls in love the same day with Primula. Their meeting introduces the first of a series of musical acts in the film. Primula also turns out to be the director's illegitimate daughter, whose true populist heart is revealed when he goes to the café for a reunion with her mother, and eventually the young lovers can, after a few more complications, be united.

A comparison with Sweden in the 1930s shows striking parallels. In both countries film was a denigrated phenomenon. Explicit treatment of contemporary problems cannot be found. The economic crisis was largely presented as financial jams, which are consistently solved. The tension in the films was almost always based on some form of class difference or conflict which had to be resolved, usually through social climbing. The collision between two contrasting environments offered abundant opportunities for comic scenes. At the same time there was a fundamental mistrust of the upper class, whose stiffness and conventions are contrasted with the true joviality of the Danish. The stable idyll presented in the films was to be overturned, however, with the outbreak of the Second World War.

### WAR AND OCCUPATION

Denmark, like Norway, was occupied by Germany in 1940, and thereafter the situation there was to be radically different from that in Sweden. Film production and the demand for film certainly increased throughout Scandinavia. But the German Occupation forces at the same time endeavoured to control all three levels of the film industry: production, distribution including import, and cinema screenings.

Already in 1940 all import of films from England had been banned, and American film was also subject to restrictions. There was also a severe and increasing pressure during the years of the Occupation to show more German films in the cinemas. Various state regulations were introduced to secure this. The Danish resistance to German films was striking for political as well as economic reasons. The German productions, made in a steady stream and often with low standards of quality, did not break even. Swedish films became very popular however; they could be imported thanks to Sweden's neutral status but were none the less completely free of German influence. The example of *The Inn of Kalle on the Footbridge* (*Kalle på Spången*) (1939) deserves a mention. This Edvard Persson film ran for a year and a half in the same cinema in Copenhagen, and the citizens of the capital went to see it time and again to keep it on the repertoire as an act of resistance. In the years from 1941 to 1943 the Swedish film made up no less than 10 per cent of the total turnover. In Denmark too, ninety-two domestic films were produced during the years of occupation: here, as in Sweden, the import restrictions came to be important for film production.

The entertainment film—light comedy, comedy and farce—dominated to a large extent. Some were blatantly copied from American and English concepts to fill a gap in the market. But at the same time another genre was beginning to

make itself known, which was given the term 'problem drama'. This has been called a Danish variation of the film noir: black film distinguished by psychological realism, not all that different from its contemporary Swedish counterpart. Examples are Bodil Ipsen and Lau Lauritzen's *Astray (Afsporet)* (1942), a violent and realistic portrayal of the life-story of a woman in the underworld of Copenhagen, or Ipsen's *Occupation (Besættelse)* (1944) (the Danish 'besættelse' means both occupation and possession). Carl Th. Dreyer's historical drama of the seventeenth-century witch burnings, *Day of Wrath (Vredens dag)* (1943), which can in its stinging depiction of intolerance be effortlessly interpreted as an allegory of the contemporary, is also a milestone in the Danish film history of the war years.

### PEACE AND PROBLEM DRAMA

In Denmark, everyone looked forward with anticipation to peace, in the cinema business as in society in general. The demand for feature films from the allied nations was great, and many films were awaiting distribution. However, it turned out that once the first flush of victory had subsided the situation was to be far from straightforward.

First and foremost, audience ratings did not increase to the extent expected by the cinema owners. Certainly the lack of consumer goods in the wake of the war, which went hand-in-hand with the country having become financially strong, contributed to there being money to spend on film-going, but state regulation led simultaneously to severe restrictions on film import. At the heart of this policy was the belief that more urgent financial problems had to be resolved before the country could be allowed luxury items. Concurrent with these restrictions the entertainment tax for the cinemas was raised, and the film prices were fixed at a level that was unacceptably low to the American studios. Hollywood on its part began to exert pressure, and several film boycotts during 1947, of Sweden as well as Denmark, resulted. This rid the Danish cinema of its most dangerous competitors, and in this relatively undisturbed period producers were able to secure the domestic market. A newly set up company still bought and distributed a number of American films in the intermediary period, mainly B and C productions. Denmark thus handled the film boycott without any major difficulties, and it was the Americans who had to ask for renegotiations to once more get a share of the Danish market.

A new agreement was struck which came into effect in 1948, where free import on a licence basis was secured by the American studios, but where, in the event of any surplus on the films, this would be fixed and taxed in Denmark. The agreement was undoubtedly a victory for Danish interests. Its immediate effect was that the supply of American films grew, which, although advantageous for the cinema business, treated producers and distributors unfairly. Parallel to this development, however, there was the onset of a decline in cinema ratings. This had to do with changes in the market: the financial surplus from the end of the

war had been spent at a time when the supply of goods had reached a normal level. The decreasing audience ratings were yet another blow to Danish film production, which had to adjust to drastic cut-backs. This struck all the more hard since the different parts of the industry had been kept separate as a result of Danish politics. Now the producers strove to find underhand ways of simultaneously being able to distribute film, and thereby secure some profitability.

Between 1945 and 1949, the average production rate was ten films a year for Danish cinema (Dinnesen and Kau 1983:264). Four major production companies were responsible: ASA, Nordisk, Palladium and Saga, which were now all integrated companies, apart from ASA. However, in 1950 ASA also opened a large cinema in Copenhagen and thus became equal to the other companies.

Technically, the end of the war meant a modest revival for Danish film. A cycle of films from the second half of the 1940s dealt with the years of occupation. At the same time and parallel to these films there continued some productions of light comedies as well as detective stories. The films about the Occupation were of various kinds: for example, there were documentaries like the one produced by Frihetsrådet ('The Freedom Council') in 1946, *Your Freedom Is at Stake (Det gælder din frihet)* (Theodor Christensen), which settled the score with the spirit of collaboration during the war years. Most famous, however, was a feature film, *The Red Fields (De røde Enge)* (1945), directed by Lau Lauritzen and Bodil Ipsen, which became something of a filmic monument to the struggle of the resistance movement.

A special genre that appeared during the 1940s was the travel film. It ceased to exist when the Danes began to travel abroad to a larger extent—only one or two stray films were produced in the 1950s. This was a very varied group of films, from lavish 35 mm colour films to cheap 16 mm productions. They were shown, not only in cinemas but also at clubs, church halls and the like. They had the advantage of being free to be shown on church holidays when there was otherwise a ban on film screenings. Furthermore, from the point of view of production the films had the unique characteristic of combining exoticism and escape from reality with a cultural hallmark and the prospect of a quality subsidy, since they were counted as documentaries.

Denmark has produced a number of distinguished documentarists, perhaps most notably Jørgen Roos, who worked in the Flaherty tradition, for example, portraying life in the Danish dominion of Greenland. Furthermore, the new generation of film-makers who stepped in after the war had often worked as makers of documentaries during the war years—for example, Bjarne and Astrid Henning-Jensen or Ole Palsbo. This becomes apparent in the unvarnished realism which began to appear in the narrative. The striving towards authenticity is noticeable in a predilection for location shoots, or in the changes in dialogue, for example, when a novel like *Ditte Menneskebarn* was filmed by Bjarne and Astrid Henning-Jensen as *Ditte, Child of Man* (1946), changes which have the purpose of increasing the degree of realism in the narration. Another expression of



realism was when documentary features were included in the fiction film. This occurred for instance in a crime drama from 1950, *Smedestræde 4*, where the film poster advertised: 'Filmed with the assistance of the Copenhagen police department.' This refers specifically to one sequence in the film which shows in great detail the work of the police at the scene of a murder, how to secure evidence and if possible establish the events that took place.

Among the realistic films of the 1940s we can also mention *While the Front Door Was Closed* (*Mens porten var lukket*) (1948), directed by Asbjørn Andersen from a Swedish script by Hasse Ekman, who filmed a Swedish version of it. The film is about the different tenants occupying flats in the same house, and the events which take place in their flats during the nocturnal hours. It constitutes an interesting example of the exchange between the Nordic countries at this time: instead of importing each other's films they imported the scripts, which were given a suitably Danish 'touch' when filmed. The two versions are in effect strikingly similar. They work with *Kammerspiel* aesthetics, and tell the story of the individual dramas that are conducted behind anonymous front doors in the city's interiors.

In Denmark, the dominating group of films during these years was the social problem films—a continuation of the genre that was introduced during the war years. There were films made about the difficult conditions of young people growing up, both in the city and in the countryside, about alcoholism, crime and social outcasts. One of the more spectacular films was *We Want a Child* (*Vi vil ha'et barn*) (1949) by Lau Lauritzen and Alice O'Fredericks, which caused something of an outcry because it showed an authentic childbirth. Thus, it was considered to be breaking the sexual taboo. Towards the end of the 1940s there was a new censorship debate, which had its origin in the social problem film. The demands for tightening state censorship were largely motivated by the critics of the too realistic portrayal of a bank robbery in the film *Kristinus Bergman* (1948). Denmark had at this time a censorship law dating back to 1933. After a new inquiry this was largely retained—it was only twenty years later that Denmark was to abolish its adult censorship.

A specific set of circumstances was associated with the upswing in the fortunes of the social problem films. In 1949 a change in the legislation brought about the possibility of the Danish state partially or completely granting exemption from entertainment taxation for films with an educative content. Here the aforementioned sequence with the police seen at work is an excellent example. The productions were thus not without underlying financial motives. This caused many of the films to lack the dark and sharp qualities which made their Swedish counterparts so well worth seeing. Here the uncompromising social criticism ran the risk of being replaced by sermons. In 1950 a state film subsidy was introduced in Denmark—as in Sweden—to help promote domestic productions. Part of the subsidy was determined by their possible effects on the common good, but a 25 per cent repayment of the entertainment tax was granted to all films, regardless of content and quality. Helped by this law of film

subsidizing, the Danish cinema was ensured some good years in the 1950s—and it was during the first half of this decade that the Danish film industry reached its absolute peak. The year 1955 marks the turning point when audience ratings began to decrease (Dinnesen and Kau 1983:256).

### THE 1950s AND THE GENIAL FILM

At the beginning of the 1950s, the notion of quality film appeared as one of the central concepts of the Danish film debate. The call for state subsidies was motivated by a need to guarantee a qualitatively superior production and to avoid a staking of safe bets, namely popular film. The film critics posed demands for a film production with serious overtones. As for Swedish film, several Danish films received international recognition during this period: *The Invisible Army* (*Den usynlige hær*) (Johan Jacobsen 1945), *The Red Fields* and *Ditte Menneskebarn*. There arises in this situation a clear dichotomy between the official and the unofficial film culture: the recognized quality films on the one hand and the popular culture on the other. The first group is in Danish contexts distinguished by its very issues of moral problems which are eventually resolved by some plan of action. The latter films, often represented by the so-called genial film ('hyggefilmen') with the Danish national virtue congeniality in focus, often treat similar problems, but solve them according to the patterns of the melodrama, which was condemned as simplifying when decisions were made about the quality subsidies.

Within the renowned quality film, nothing very much happened during the 1950s. Only one film followed up the international successes of the 1940s. This was made by Carl Th. Dreyer, who at the time ran the cinema Dagmar in Copenhagen, and who returned to film-making after twelve years of silence since making *Day of Wrath*. In 1955 his film *The Word* (*Ordet*) opened, a film of a play by the clergyman and resistance fighter Kaj Munk who was murdered by the Nazis. The play had incidentally already been filmed in Sweden during the war by Gustaf Molander. It is a strong drama of faith, and depicts a young woman in a farm on Jutland, her death and subsequent resurrection to life by a 'holy fool' (as in the great Russian tradition) in Danish shape. While Molander's film is a well-made melodrama, Dreyer's film becomes an incredibly naked drama, with slow, insistent camera movements that follow characters and objects. Dreyer's film won the Grand Prix in Venice that year and became a financial success, as well as one of the greatest artistic successes in the history of Danish film.

Paradoxically, however, the film subsidy law of 1949 was to bring about a decline in the general quality of films. Film production was secured, as was the audience turnout—but the fact remained: serial productions which were disdainfully termed 'trivia film' by the critics largely replaced the artistic ventures from the first years of peace.

A hit concept which was pioneered in this area was the film *The Red Horses* (*De røde heste*) (1950), directed by Jon Iversen and Alice O'Fredericks, the very prototype of a genial film ('hyggefilm'). It was based on a novel by Morten Korch and contained—in the words of the producer —'Danish humour and Danish scenery'. Its success ensured a number of sequels and the Korch films became legion: eighteen such films were made up to 1976. All of them take place in an indeterminate modern age, prior to the existence of war and misery. The family is at the centre, they often live in a country house, and the object of the films is to solve financial or practical difficulties which threaten to cloud such domestic bliss. The rural romanticism flourishes as never before. The iconography is familiar: a blonde-haired girl standing in billowing fields of corn, but also detailed and almost educational close-ups of various types of corn. The critics were horrified at the stereotyping of the narrative and the aesthetics. Imagewise, the films were often cliché-like copies of American models.

But the audience flocked to the cinemas. In a short period of time 2.3 million tickets were sold to see *The Red Horses*—Denmark had a population of 4.2 million in 1950. In terms of production, the 1950s were a golden decade thanks to these films. Investments in previously known, popular originals predominated—out of 138 films made during the 1950s no less than fifty-seven were based on other media products. Besides the Korch novels there were also plays, other films, and cartoons, such as the inestimably popular series *Father of Four* (*Far til fire*), in which eight films were made between 1953 and 1961, with one straggler in 1971.

The overall dominance of popular film also stands out clearly when examining the genres on offer. Of the 138 films, forty-eight were counted as belonging to the genre of folk comedies and thirty-eight as being light comedies. To this we can add twelve farces, six crime films, thirty-three 'serious' films and one travel film. Even Nordisk Films, for a long time the stronghold of artistic film, threw in the towel and prioritized financial concerns, following in the wake of ASA, Palladium and Saga. Thus the entire Danish film industry adopted a similar approach, even if there were differences in nuance. The reorientation meant among other things that Erik Balling became head of production at Nordisk in 1954. He backed light comedies, which had a somewhat higher status than the Korch films. The Danish film of the 1950s can in several respects be compared with the 1930s film in Sweden, a decade which heralded major popular successes for Swedish folk comedy, a remarkable mainstreaming of production and a unanimous critique from the cultural establishment. The Danish criticism was, however, somewhat milder of tone than the Swedish one, perhaps because the gap between the critics and the audience had not generally been as wide in Denmark as in Sweden.

The turning point in 1955 was the onset of a deepening crisis for film. Criticism of the charges on cinema tickets was sharpened. It was especially the charge to the State Film Fund (Filmfonden) which was attacked from time to time. Such criticism is hardly surprising. Towards the end of the 1950s only 60