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Tracing the Miracle

The new monograph about Norwegian film in the context of research available in this field

Gunnar Iversen, Ove Solum: **Den norske filmbølgen**. Universitetsforlaget, Oslo 2010, 350 p. ISBN 978–82–15–01547–7

Let us start with a few brief facts outlining the current Norwegian cinema landscape. The Norwegian cinema is not very extensive compared to those in other smaller European countries. By the year 2009, the number of feature films produced in Norway stood at 741, which is indeed rather low. This status quo has several reasons, the most important being the very specific municipal cinema system introduced as early as 1913. This system effectively generated no production capital since all the profits were used by municipalities for local purposes such as for example subsidies of other cultural events and institutions, or building schools and hospitals. As Gunnar Iversen claims in his chapter about Norwegian cinema in the book *Nordic National Cinema* (Routledge, 1998) „(...) municipal cinema is thus seen less as a commercial enterprise and more as a cultural service institution, as part of local cultural life.“

There is no doubt that this generous system has, on one hand, helped the Norwegian culture to achieve greater plurality. However, at the same time it has inhibited production of Norwegian films. Luckily for both Norwegian producers and spectators the situation has changed enormously during the past two decades. The multiplication of sources of financial support, together with the clearly formulated support from the Norwegian Parliament (Storting), has led to increasing quantity of produced films (in 2010 it was 20 feature films, cf. the Czech production in 2010 was 22). Since the 1990s, Norwegian films also regularly score well at international festivals (e.g. *Elling*, the Norwegian nominee for the Academy Award in the category Best Foreign Language Film in 2001, and the animated movie *The Danish Poet*, Academy Award winner for best animated short film in 2007). The Norwegian cinema has also succeeded in winning back national spectators (the blockbuster *Max Manus* from 2008 was seen by one million Norwegians, while Norway's population is 4.8 million).

It is possible to say that reflection of the Norwegian cinema has been (at least till the 1990s) as modest as the production itself. This might be a bit surprising considering the fact that the Norwegian Film Institute (Norsk filminstitutt) was established already in 1955. But it should be noted that research and writing about Norwegian film history was never the priority of this institution. Books about Norwegian cinema are just few and far between. If we let aside the encyclopedic work *Filmen i Norge. Norske kinofilmer gjennom hundre år* (Gyldendal, 1995) we are left with one monograph by the writer and journalist Sigurd Evensmo *Det store tivoli* from 1967 (Gyldendal), which is charting the history of Norwegian cinema since the 1890s till the late 1960s. For a long time, this book was the only source about Norwegian film history and gained a slightly dangerous canonic position since everyone writing about Norwegian film took everything which stood there for granted. The book was reprinted in 1992 with a chapter added by Per Haddal entitled *Norsk film 1967–1992* to fill the gap which opened up over time. The newer book in this field was “the little

Norwegian film history” as was the subtitle of the brochure called “*Bedre enn sitt rykte*” (note the ironic title *Better than Her Reputation* quoting the film of the same name from the 1950s) written by Øivind Hanche, Gunnar Iversen and Nils Klevjer Aas in 1997 (reprinted with information about the latest developments in 2004). However, this book is meant for students and more than anything it is a comprehensive yet concise summary of what the Norwegian film represents. Finally, the Norwegian film history research also includes monographs dedicated to some of the outstanding directors (for example Rasmus Breistein, Arne Skouen or Edith Carlmar) published recently by the Norsk filminstitutt. Of course, many articles in specialized magazines and theses have also been written. However, it looks as if Norwegians are not very keen on writing extensive works devoted to their own film history, or even about its particular aspects.

We must not omit sources written by foreigners or by Norwegians in English. Not surprisingly, they are also just a few. The comprehensive one is only Peter Cowie’s *Scandinavian Cinema* (The Tantivity Press, 1992) and the already mentioned and very useful *Nordic National Cinemas*, which includes chapters devoted to Danish, Finnish, Icelandic, Norwegian and Swedish film history written by two Swedish and one Norwegian film historians.

The new book by Gunnar Iversen and Ove Solum (both professors in film or media studies at the University of Trondheim or the University of Oslo, respectively), which is the subject matter of this review, is thus an important work aiming to cover the as yet unexplored parts of the most recent Norwegian movie history.

Its name is slightly misleading. Calling it *The Norwegian Film Wave* one would expect the authors are exploring some closed period or analyzing a bunch of films which have something in common. It is not so. The book wants to be above all the chronicle of success. It builds on the premise that the Norwegian film became an international success over the last 30 years. The work points out 12 films which could be seen as canonic in the Norwegian context. The authors don’t deny that their selection is subjective. As it was said a year ago at the film conference organized by the National Library in Oslo, where one of the themes was the national film canon, the most tricky question regarding compiling any canonical list is to decide which criteria to use (should one consider the aesthetic qualities only or take into account visit rate, prizes won at festivals or other indicators). The authors of the book decided (according to the preface) to select the films with respect to how they represent trends, themes, genres, motifs and central directors. They haven’t ignored the criteria of accessibility either. Except for one all the chosen films are available on DVDs. This makes the book extra reader-friendly along with the light style in which it is written.

To be concrete, the book highlights the following films – *Orion’s Belt* (Orions belte, 1985), *Pathfinder* (Veiviseren, 1987), *Stella Polaris* (1993), *Cross My Heart and Hope to Die* (Ti kniver i hjertet, 1994), *The Other Side of Sunday* (Søndagsengler, 1996), *The Wives III* (Hustruer III, 1996), *Junk Mail* (Budbringeren, 1997), *Elling* (2001), *Kitchen Stories* (Salmer fra kjøkkenet, 2003), *Kissed by Winter* (Vinterkyss, 2005), *Reprise* (2006), and *Max Manus* (2008).

The book opens with Iversen’s profound chapter analyzing Norwegian film’s way up from the deep crisis in early 1980s to the luminous present. It is already in the preface that the authors illustratively mention the funny story describing how one Norwegian producer was banished from a taxi in 1985 when he mentioned he works in the Norwegian film industry. The grim situation was also well expressed in the joke circulating in the 1980s I was recently told by a witness. It consisted of the question: “What do you think of Norwegian film” and the answer: “Oh yes, that would be a great idea!” Because the change Norwegian film industry has experienced couldn’t be bigger, it is obvious that the whole book is characterized by a very optimistic tone (for a foreign observer maybe almost uncritically optimistic). Today’s situation is denoted in the opening chapter as a miracle in relation to what the former minister of culture Trond Giske wished for in 2007 when he formulated the new film policy.

The book concludes with Solum’s chapter devoted to institutional changes where he discusses such issues as state film policies, the quantifiable indicators such as visit rate or percentage of women filmmakers, and the aspects of the latest technical developments.

Each of the authors has written six chapters (focusing on above-mentioned films), which have a more or less similar structure starting with putting the film into the context and continuing with a subchapter about the director, description of the plot and critical reception. The other subchapters vary according to what can be said about the particular film (the films based on novels are analysed in relation to the original books, the films interesting from the genre perspective include a subchapter about this issue, the war film *Max Manus* is being put into the context of occupation dramas and so on). Some of the subchapters tend to stick to the surface (for example the excerpts from daily press reviews quoted in the subchapters devoted to the film's reception often reveal how shallow and cliché-inclining the Norwegian reviewers may be). At this place one would rather expect quotations from competent analyses published in specialized publications and their critical evaluation. Although one understands that detailed description of the plot is a good starting point for further analysis, these subchapters are for such a book unnecessarily simplistic (this becomes apparent when it comes to the analysis of the films which cannot be described in this way because their narrative structure omits the plot completely). On the other hand the contextualization is usually precise and pregnant. Where the authors decide to analyze a certain aspect of the film with the help of contemporary writing about the movie (quoted works by Bordwell, Thompson or Gunning), it results in interesting essays (for example the analysis of the thriller *Orion's Belt* or modernistic *Stella Polaris*).

One comes across really interesting and useful information while reading Iversen's and Solum's book. Still, it is difficult to resist the feeling that all this is just a beginning. Not in all cases the analysis of selected films goes deeper and the films' aesthetics is discussed profoundly. In some cases, the authors put up with just selecting and organizing the factual materials (*The Wives, Elting*), which is a pity.

However, *Den norske filmbølgen* is an important book in the national context and it focuses on the broader audience like journalists, students and film fans. Let us hope this will be the starting point for a "new wave" of both academic and popular writing covering the phenomena so symptomatic of the Norwegian film and interesting also for foreign film researchers and critics. The issues immediately coming to my mind when pondering the newer Norwegian film history are for example the genre spectrum in the 1970s, the work by women filmmakers such as Anja Breien or Vibeke Løkkeberg, the criticism in the films by Wam & Vennerød, the films about and by Samis, the outsider hero in so called buddy films (kompisfilmer) just to name a few. To put it bluntly, the time is ripe for more than survey publications.

And one last remark – to be persuaded about the Norwegian miracle the international audience should get better chances to see new Norwegian films. So far the Norwegian producers are unfortunately very reluctant to send their films to smaller festivals or non-competitive shows. It is even greater pity in the light of the fact that the film production from the other Scandinavian countries is usually represented very well on such occasions.

Karolína Stehliková

Vachková, Marie: **Das große akademische Wörterbuch Deutsch-Tschechisch. Ein erster Werkstattbericht.** Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang 2011, 198 Seiten, ISBN 978-3-631-60567-7.

Der Bericht vom *Großen akademischen Wörterbuch Deutsch-Tschechisch* (GAWDT) stellt ein langzeitiges, im Jahre 2000 begonnenes Forschungsprojekt des Instituts für Germanische Studien an der Karls-Universität Prag vor. Die Projektleiterin und Begründerin der Lexikographischen Sektion des Instituts Marie Vachková fasst in diesem Buch die Methodologie der Bearbeitung des GAWDT bzw. der ganzen dem Wörterbuch (WB) zugrunde liegenden Datenbank zusammen. Im Zusammenhang damit behandelt sie Problembereiche, die bei der Bearbeitung der Daten auftauchen und als Impulse für lexikologische und korpuslinguistische Untersuchungen ausgenutzt werden, an denen fortgeschrittene Germanistikstudierende (Diplomanden und Doktoranden) beteiligt