

SCANDINAVIAN CINEMA

*A survey of the films and film-makers of
Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden*

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Time and nature have achieved an even distribution of the arts among the Nordic communities. Finland has always been to the fore in music and architecture, Denmark in philosophy and ballet, Sweden in film (and runner-up in just about everything else), and Norway in painting and – through Ibsen – in drama.

Not until the 1980's, however, did Norway excel in the art of the cinema. Indeed until the early 1970's, lack of adequate government funding meant that the domestic film industry was languishing in anonymity and mediocrity. Jan Erik Holst has pointed out the relatively large number of companies involved in production in Norway. 'A consistently recurring feature is that often a company was formed in order to make a single film: during the period 1908-75, 314 full-length films were produced by 105 companies. This remarkable distribution can be ascribed mainly to the economic factors which have played a decisive part in film production in Norway; during the early years the industry was dominated by purely commercial considerations.'¹

A few months after the Lumière brothers' first projections in Paris, the German pioneers Max and Emil Skladanowski presented their 'bioscop' at a circus in Oslo (then known as Kristiania). According to Nils A. Klevjer Aas, 'For the next ten years itinerant cinema exhibitors roamed the country setting up their gear at fairs and following the fishing fleet and the construction crews on railways, roads and building projects. Most of these early cinema pioneers were foreigners, as were their films – French and German, Swedish and Danish.'²

No individual, however, seized the initiative as Ole Olsen did in Denmark or Charles Magnusson in Sweden. Norwegians remained content in regarding the movies as a pastime pure and simple, and ironically the first recorded 'Norwegian' film, a tense, quasi-documentary entitled *The Dangers of a Fisherman's Life – an Ocean Drama* (*Fiskerlivets farer – ett drama på havet*, 1908), was directed by the Swedish cameraman Julius Jaenzon – with funding from Hugo Hermansen, the 'Cinema King' who at that juncture owned 26 movie theatres. This one-reeler described a fisherman whose son falls overboard in high seas. He and his wife try in vain to save the boy. He is pulled on board, but too late for him to be saved. The sea features strongly in Victor Sjöström's screen version of *Terje Vigen* (see SWEDEN), but not so frequently in Norway's own films through the decades. The mountains that run like a curved spine up through the country have attracted the filmmaker much more often.

Judgement on the work of Norway's lone pioneer before 1920, Peter Lykke-Seest, can never be definitive, for virtually all his films have been lost. He had begun his career as a screenwriter in Sweden, and he established the embryonic studio, Christiania Film Compagni, in 1916. He turned his hand to any reasonable story: the gypsy lad in search of happiness in *Paris* (1916), the romantic lovers in

Young Hearts (*Unge hjerter*, 1917), or the industrial strike in *Heroes of Our Time* (*Vor tids helter*, 1918). According to Jan Erik Holst,³ Lykke-Seest's most interesting film may well have been *The Story of a Boy* (*Historien om en gut*, 1919). Christiania Film Compagni closed its doors after failing to sell sufficient of its products on the lucrative American market.

In 1913, the Norwegian government passed the Film Theatres' Act, which not only comprised rules pertaining to censorship but also the stipulation that the country's municipal councils alone had the right to license the public screening of films. 'Municipal cinemas were established,' according to Klevjer Aas, 'first to combat opportunistic exploitation, second to employ the new mass medium in the cause of popular enlightenment, and (only) last with the expectation that the enterprise would be financially self-supporting or even bring a profit to the municipal coffers.'⁴ In practice, however, the authorities tended to invest the income from the cinemas into the building of new schools and other educational activities, and the fledgling Norwegian film industry began to lag behind its Nordic neighbours, where the major chains ploughed back much of their profit into film production.

Despite a resolute campaign by the film distributors, the municipal cinema system survived and indeed became entrenched. Even the radical new Film and Video Act of 1987 failed to change the basic principle upon which the showing of films has always depended in Norway: the local municipality has the right to sanction every public showing of film in whatever form.

Rasmus Breistein led Norway's effort to establish a national cinema during the 1920's. He had started life as a musician, and then enjoyed a spell as a stage actor. The energy and competence of his first film, *Anne the Gipsy-girl* (*Fante-Anne*, 1920) came as a surprise. Piling on one melodramatic plot twist after another, Breistein traces the story of the gipsy-girl Anne who has been brought up as a foster-child on a large country estate. Her childhood sweetheart, Haldor, is the son of the estate-owner, and is not permitted to marry Anne. In a fit of jealous fury, she sets fire to the house with Haldor and his bride-to-be inside. One of the estate workers, Jon, justifies his secret affections for Anne by assuming blame for the arson. Years later, after he has been released and made his fortune in the United States, Jon returns to claim Anne.

Breistein, like Sjöström and Stiller in Sweden, exploited to the full the natural locations his country offered. Studio interiors were few and far between in these early films, which were usually shot in high summer with mountains and fjords as a background. Many historians have attributed the popularity of pictures like *Anne the Gipsy-girl* to their romantic image in the eyes of the working-class people who viewed them, eager as they were to escape the dark, drab routine of life in the cities. Perhaps audiences had grown weary of the films with working-class settings which had dominated Norwegian production during the years 1912-20. Ten years later, Breistein demonstrated how skilled he had become at dealing with human predicaments in a natural landscape. *Kristine, the Daughter of Valdres* (*Kristine*

Valdresdatter, 1930) again comes to the defence of a young woman, a cow-hand on a country farm who is left pregnant by a visiting British aristocrat. She abandons her baby daughter, who grows up ignorant of her parents' identity. The film closes, according to contemporary convention, with a reconciliation between age and youth, as the dying English lord identifies himself to his long-lost daughter and leaves his money to her and her husband-to-be.

Two other surviving melodramas of the silent period merit attention. *Pan*, direct by Harald Schwenzen in 1922 from a novel by Knut Hamsun, uses a military background to unfold a tale of passion and jealousy that ends with a murder during a hunting trip in Algeria. *The Magic Elk* (*Troll elgen*, 1927) bears some resemblance in tone to Erik Blomberg's Finnish masterpiece, *The White Reindeer* (see FINLAND), in that the 'magic elk' is a reincarnation of a dead man, and invokes the fear and wrath of the local farming folk.

Harry Ivarson's *Madame Visits Oslo* (*Madame besøker Oslo*, 1927) is a lively comedy about two swindlers who try to steal the property of a wealthy banker who has just died. The film's leading lady, Naima Wifstrand, became familiar to a whole new generation of filmgoers during the 1950's, when she worked with Ingmar Bergman on stage in Malmö and on the screen in such films as *Smiles of a Summer Night* and *The Face*. Carl Dreyer's *The Bride of Glomdal* (*Glomdalsbruden*, 1925) far outshone anything being made in Norway during this period (see DENMARK, page 32). One of the last silent films made in Norway has withstood the test of time. *Raid on the Bergen Express* (*Bergenstoget plyndret i natt*, 1928) is nothing more or less than a fast-moving soap opera, with the rivalry between its two main men similar to the struggle between the siblings in *Dynasty*. The director, Uwe Jens Kraft, handles the opening sequence at the National Ski-Jumping Championships with great aplomb. Aud Richter's chocolate-box beauty makes her Grete an object of desire for both Tom and the young army officer, Lund. As Grete's father is General Manager of the Norwegian State Railways, Tom must achieve a stunning coup if he is to win her hand. So he stages a robbery of the Bergen express, outwits Lund and his pursuing troops, and then hands over the loot to Grete's father in a gesture that even the old man applauds – not least because of the fabulous publicity accruing to the railways. Locations enhance the quality of this film considerably, compensating for the frivolity of the upper-class charades (although Hollywood was indulging in identical charades like *Show People* and *It* at around the same time). When Lund and his men fan out in search of Tom near Geilo, they ski by the light of flares against the hard-packed snow. The silent epoch in Norwegian cinema lacks distinction. Unlike the films made in neighbouring Denmark and Sweden, Norwegian productions contained no spiritual dimension of the kind furnished by the literary sources of Selma Lagerlöf or Hjalmar Bergman in Sweden; and none of the troubling ambiguity upon which the imagination of the spectator might feed, and which is so manifest in the work of Benjamin Christensen, for example. Nor, apart from *The Magic Elk*, do Norwegian films of the period look to the supernatural for an idiom of expression. They seem

content to serve the appetite of audiences who had a loyalty to cinema as a medium, if little respect for it as an art form.

The Early Sound Period

The volume of film production in Norway during the early 1930's did not exceed one or two features per annum. Pathetic though this appears by comparison with the other Nordic countries (excepting Iceland), the output is not without significance. The establishment of Norsk Film A/S in 1932 (with shares owned by 52 of the country's municipalities), and the opening of that company's studios at Jar outside Oslo in 1935, provided a basis for production that would survive into the 1990's.

The decade also yielded at least half-a-dozen films worthy of comment. **Tancred Ibsen** dominates the scene, due in part to the wealth of practical experience he had gained in Hollywood and Sweden. The grandson of the dramatist Henrik Ibsen, he accompanied Victor Sjöström to America as the Swede's assistant. After two years he returned to Scandinavia, and in 1931 directed *The Big Baptism* (*Den store barkedåpen*) alongside Einar Sissener. The influence of the French cinema is immediately apparent. The unemployed Harald cares for the lonely Alvide's baby, whose sailor papa has perished in a storm at sea. As in Clair's world, the characters are viewed with intense sympathy. The grim reality of factory life, and the poverty of the rooming-house where Harald lives, seem mitigated by the jolly music and the cheerfulness of the people. Einar Sissener himself plays Harald with the gentle, self-deprecating charm of an Albert Préjean; his natural patience enables him to look after the baby while Alvide goes out to work.

Ibsen shows his enterprise from the opening sequence of *The Big Baptism*, emphasising the rhythmic sound of the machines as they start up in the textile factory. By 1934, when he directed Victor Sjöström in *Synnøve Solbakken* for the independent Swedish company, Irefilm, Tancred Ibsen had become a master of his craft. The most influential of Swedish critics, Bengt Idestam-Almquist, wrote with some irony that it was 'the cows, the bucolic imagery, Victor Sjöström and Hugo Alfvén [the composer] that save this Irefilm.'⁵ But the Swedish press has never been kind to directors from other Nordic countries.

The perception of Tancred Ibsen as a director steeped in the countryside traditions of Norway may not, however, be so far from the truth. In *Fant* (1937), he made an effervescent screen version of Gabriel Scott's novel about Norwegian fisherfolk. Alfred Maurstad stars as the roguish 'Fant' who takes advantage of a young girl (Sonja Wigert) aboard his tiny boat. His reckless behaviour contrasts amusingly with the conventions of the tight-knit community, and when he plays his guitar and springs his practical jokes it is difficult not to like Fant, who resembles somewhat the personality of Michel Simon in *L'Atalante*. His death by drowning, following an accidental 'murder', allows Sonja Wigert's Josefa to return to the arms of her 'decent' lover. But Fant, like the dark, handsome stranger who pops up in so many

Nordic films, has given her a taste of another lifestyle. Through her involvement with him she can appreciate more keenly the sensual pleasure of open-air dances beside the jetty, and the glistening undulations of the water beneath the summer sky. Such imagery outlasts the slapstick quarrels that Ibsen includes to cater for his audience's expectations. One of the most popular films of the 1930's proved to be *Two Living and One Dead* (*To levende og en død*, 1937), which revelled in the thriller genre in telling of a post-office employee who, on the verge of retirement, is robbed one night and finds himself sucked into psychological complicity with the criminal after he has moved to Oslo. *Gjest Baardsen*, Ibsen's most accomplished film, appeared at Christmas 1939, not long before the Nazi occupation of Norway. Its 19th-century hero is a blend of Robin Hood and Harry Houdini. In the briskly-edited opening scene he escapes from prison and takes to the fells. Gjest represents

the ordinary people's cause in the face of the arrogance and corruption of the Law. When the local Customs officer's daughter seems about to fall into the arms of the crooked Warden of Bergen, she is rescued by Gjest Baardsen, who sweeps down like Superman to save this damsel in distress. In similar circumstances, Sjöström's characters decided to accept the destiny Nature reserves for them. Not so Ibsen's. Gjest and Anna give themselves up to the police and serve their sentences. 'I intend to pay my debts to society,' declares Gjest, tongue-in-cheek. At their trial, he denounces the Warden for his villainy, and although sentenced to life imprisonment he and Anna are set free by the magistrate.

Gjest Baardsen suffers from several naive close-up shots of faces in reaction poses, and it brims with melodrama in scenes like the discovery by Anna's father that the money has been stolen. Against that must be set Ibsen's delightful

Tancred Ibsen's *Two Living and One Dead* (1937)



use of the Bergen locations, from the narrow streets of the town, with their wooden houses, to the brilliant scattering of trees in blossom on the hillsides, and the snow-clad fells further up.

Leif Sinding, who shot his first film in 1926, came to prominence for his adaptations of Norwegian novels. His sympathetic treatment of the gipsy community in *The Gipsy* (*Fantegutten*, 1932) brings into sharp focus the prejudice with which outsiders are treated in Norwegian society: gipsies still during the 1930's, Middle Eastern immigrant workers in the 1980's. Even Sinding seems to suggest that gipsies should be tolerated but held down as second-class citizens. Iver, the baby gipsy boy who survives an avalanche in which his mother perishes, grows up on a farm and longs to wed the insouciant Ragnhild. Caught like a half-caste between the two communities to which he belongs, Iver recognises that in the eyes of Norwegian society he wears the mark of Cain, while at the same time he finds himself captivated by the sexual charms of a gipsy girl in the locality. In a powerful climax, he must intervene to stop this girl being whipped in her own encampment for having seduced him, and his quandary is complete.

Like Ibsen's *Fant*, this film contains romantic musical numbers, presumably aimed at domestic audiences who, as in Sweden and Finland, expected such interludes when they went out to the cinema in the 1930's. Leif Sinding felt more confident about tackling social issues when he brought to the screen Gabriel Scott's novel, *The Defenceless* (*De vergeløse*, 1939). The abuse of child labour colours this picaresque story of an adolescent Albert, whose mother is a whore and who is forced to work from morning to night with other similarly deprived children on a rudimentary farm in Norway. This latter-day version of slavery cannot be entirely blamed on the farmer, who earns more money from the government for every orphan he accepts. The daily round is a tough one, interspersed with corporal punishment meted out by the old dragon of a woman who runs the domestic side of the farm.

If on the one hand Sinding adopts a critical stance to his material, in the idiom of Sweden's Hampe Faustman, on the other he develops the notion of rebellious young love that Bergman makes his own a decade later. The film's most serious handicap is its cast. The young orphans look far too well-fed and healthy to attract our pity. Nevertheless, it is difficult to comprehend how Leif Sinding, so alert to the injustices endemic to Norwegian life, should have collaborated with the Nazis to the extent of making inane comedies and propagandist films during the wartime years.

Olav Dalgard specialised in films about the working classes in Norway in the 1930's. *Growing Up in the North* (*Gryr i Norden*, 1939) was one of several productions made for the National Unions' Congress. Dalgard reconstructs the matchmakers' strike of 1889, using a cast of semi-professional players. Many sequences look contrived and the rhetoric sounds sententious, although the sequence where the women wave triumphantly to each other from the stairways and fire-escapes of the workers' houses remains a stirring piece of agit-prop, backed with the tones of the Marseillaise.

The Shadow of Occupation

Although annual film production had climbed only to six features in 1939, the market share for Norwegian pictures reached 10.4% compared to just 0.6% three years earlier. The Nazis took less than a year to exercise control over every aspect of Norwegian film production, distribution, and exhibition. 'Exhibition was run by decree, even to the point of forbidding admission between the (German) newsreel and the main feature.'⁶ The so-called 'Film Directorate' imposed on local producers a standard diet of comedies and thrillers. In the words of Nils A. Klevjer Aas, 'Escapist farces were the order of the day [during the Nazi/Quisling years]; even with words from Dr. Goebbels on the importance of films indoctrinating the Nazi creed ringing in the background, only one or two of the 23 wartime films may be said to have had an ideological slant towards Nazi ideals.'⁷ Alfred Maurstad's *A Gentleman with a Moustache* (*En herre med bart*, 1942) transcended the level of most Norwegian films of the time, taking as its model the Hollywood screwball comedy.

The one undeniable step forward implemented by the Film Directorate concerned the subsidy of feature films. A tax on every ticket sold contributed towards the production budgets of Norwegian films – a concept not far removed from Harry Schein's radical policy via the Swedish Film Institute from 1963 onwards.

At war's end, a sizeable residue (10.5 million Norwegian crowns) remained in the production fund, and in 1948 the income from ticket taxes amounted to no less than 20 million crowns. It allowed the government to save the ailing Norsk Film A/S by taking a minority shareholding in the company.

The Second World War exerted an impact beyond mere economic considerations. The Norwegian authorities, despite the efforts of the Quisling regime, preferred resistance and exile to collaboration. There was a tremendous struggle for Narvik, for instance, while King Haakon's personal indignation and resolve led him to resist the invasion at all costs. In 1946, Olav Dalgard and Rolf Randall's *We Want To Live* (*Vi vil leve*) dramatised this patriotic resistance, and two years later came the widely-seen Franco-Norwegian co-production, *The Battle for Heavy Water* (*Kampen om tungtvannet*, 1948).

Directed by Titus Vibe-Müller, and supervised by Jean Dréville, this 'reconstructed' docudrama benefits from the crystalline exterior photography of Hilding Bladh (who worked with Bergman five years later on *Sawdust and Tinsel*). The non-narrated action sequences survive best as the saboteurs parachuted down on the Hardanger plateau carry out their mission to blow up the German stocks of heavy water. 'Operation Swallow', as it was known, attracted the attention of Hollywood two decades later in *The Heroes of Telemark*. Like all cosmopolitan film productions *The Battle for Heavy Water* suffers from bad dubbing and disembodied voices. The British 'stiff upper lip' philosophy intrudes almost to the point of parody ('I'd be inclined to kill myself,' says one officer as he refers to the possible failure of the mission). Celebrating Christmas in a

mountain hideout in 1943 also looks and sounds too sentimental for the good of this rugged film. Vibe-Müller does achieve a certain degree of catharsis when the heavy water is finally detonated just as it is about to leave for transport by ferry to Germany in 1944 – some twenty months after the saboteurs made their first sortie into enemy-occupied Norway.

Other films revived memories of the war years – Toralf Sandø's *We Leave for England* (*Englandsfarere*, 1946), Michael Forlong's *The Shetland Gang* (*Shetlandsgjengen*, 1954), and Kare Bergstrøm and Rados Novaković's *The Blood Road* (*Blodveien*, 1955). As late as the 1980's, the themes of betrayal and deception during the Quisling period would surface in films like *The Reward*, *The Feldmann Case* and *Growing Up*.

Arne Skouen, the most assured director of the 1950's and 1960's, had lived abroad in voluntary exile during the war. A novelist and playwright by vocation, he had survived as a press attaché in the United States, and returned to his native Norway in 1946. Three years later he embarked on his first film in partnership with Ulf Greber. The immediate success of *Street Urchins* (*Gategutter*, 1949) established Skouen's reputation as a director of actors, and he would make a further sixteen features over the next twenty years.

Reminiscent of *Sciuscià*, released by Vittorio De Sica in 1946, *Street Urchins* offers a more congenial vision of its street urchins. These kids wear baggy shorts and shirts, and large caps on their heads, as they dash through the streets of Oslo in the 1920's. Their crimes are petty by comparison with those of Buñuel's *Los Olvidados*, for example, and amount to stealing fruit from the harbour, or sacks of cocoa beans from a passing truck. The grim reality of strikes, lock-outs, and domestic poverty colours the background of the film like a poster, but the wish-fulfilment of childhood takes precedence – and no more poignantly so than in the final scene as Gotfred and Sofus gaze in wonder at the street-lights being switched on at dusk.

Many of the boys in *Street Urchins* pursued their acting career and Pål Bang-Hansen, playing the chubby little guy who is taught the rules of survival by his older pals, became a director and a TV commentator in subsequent years.

Comedy continued to attract the Norwegian public more than any other genre, and Nils R. Müller found his inspiration in the state of marriage, with films that echoed the laughter of Stiller's *Thomas Graal* satires (see SWEDEN): *We're Getting Married* (*Vi gifter oss*, 1951), and *We Want a Divorce* (*Vi vil skilles*, 1952). The Danish director, Astrid Henning-Jensen, contributed a richly-mannered, delicately-observed comedy to the Norwegian cinema in 1951, with *Krane's Tea-shop* (*Kranes konditori*), which brings to life the gossip and peccadillos of a small coastal town. It introduced one of Norway's great actresses, Wenche Foss, and boasted cinematography by Arthur J. Ornitz, one of the most distinguished of Hollywood cameramen.

The Individual Perseverance of Arne Skouen

Until the late 1960's, Norwegian cinema appears to have



Pål Bang-Hansen in Arne Skouen's *Street Urchins* (1949)

remained almost immune to trends and forms being developed in other countries. Erik Løchen's *The Hunt* (*Jakten*, 1959) is said to anticipate the temporal experiments of Resnais and Robbe-Grillet, but Norwegian directors tended to react first and foremost to the requirements of their domestic audience, and only then to an inner compulsion to express their feelings on film. Arne Skouen may be regarded as the country's first genuine auteur, for he wrote the screenplay for all seventeen of his films save one, and towards the end of his career established his own production company to ensure him even greater independence.



Jack Fjeldstad in *Nine Lives* (1957) by Arne Skouen

Skouen's protagonists often transgress the rules of Norwegian society. They are not so much outsiders as insiders who through their actions and attitudes extrude themselves from their community. They turn to murder (in *The Return of Pastor Jarman* [*Pastor Jarman kommer hjem*, 1958]), to arson (in *The Flame* [*Det brenner i natt!*, 1955]), to poison pen letters (in *The Master and His Servants* [*Herren og hans tjenere*, 1959]), and – in Skouen's films about the Occupation – to treason and treachery. In his quest for realism, Skouen shot most of his films on authentic locations, using the fells and villages of Norway as effectively as the larger urban environments. In the tradition of Sjöström and Stiller, he regards Nature as a crucial factor in deciding Man's destiny. His characters grapple with the elements for survival, in films such as *Nine Lives* (*Ni liv*, 1957) and *An-Magritt* (1969). Bo-Christer Björk⁸ has also pointed out that Skouen's actors were selected carefully to suit their roles, not to placate the star system. In films like *Forced Landing* (*Nødlanding*, 1952)

and *Surrounded* (*Omringet*, 1960), he insisted on using Germans in Nazi roles. Wind and snow provide the symphonic bass line for Skouen's masterpiece, *Nine Lives*. Based on the true exploits of Jan Baalsrud, as described in David Howarth's book, 'We Die Alone', *Nine Lives* brings its indestructible hero into direct conflict with the Nordic winter. Baalsrud falls into the hands of the Germans when he and a group of commandos try to land in occupied Norway in March, 1943, and are betrayed by a local shoemaker loyal to the Quisling regime. He escapes, and tries to remain unidentified in his native country, sheltering with various families and trying to link up with other resistance fighters. Told in one long flashback from Baalsrud's Swedish hospital bed, the film gallops along at breakneck speed, whipped forward by the music of Gunnar Sønstevoid. The beaches, fells, mountains, and fjords set their hostile face against the fugitive, and soon Baalsrud falls victim to snow blindness. At last, with gangrene attacking his leg, and hallucinations clouding his vision, he takes refuge in a

'grave' hollowed out from the snow on a mountain slope. As he waits near the Swedish border for help to reach him, Baalsrud goes delirious, fantasising his own death and seeing his corpse borne over the mountains in a cortege.

Few Nordic films have realised the visual potential of the mountain landscape with such distinction as *Nine Lives*. Unclogged by dialogue, Skouen's narrative proceeds with classical simplicity against the stark natural landscapes. When Baalsrud begins to go blind, he uses snowballs to guide him as he lurches forward, and Skouen edits this sequence with lyrical intensity, dissolving the frontiers between sanity and delirium. Later, as screaming winds force back a rescue party from Sweden, Baalsrud's refuge is buried by the gusting snow, in as emotional a scene as the climax of Sjöström's *The Outlaw and His Wife*. The film triumphs by virtue of the visual and aural language that Skouen conjures up to match the almost mystical quality of Baalsrud's defiance of his fate.

For his swansong, *An-Magritt*, Skouen called on the services of Liv Ullmann, by that time established as the most famous of Norwegian actresses through her work with Ingmar Bergman, and of the cinematographer Sven Nykvist, also associated with the Swedish maestro. Based on a best-selling novel by Johan Falkberget, *An-Magritt* recounts the ordeal of an orphaned girl who must fight for her basic rights in a primitive 17th-century community. Her mother commits suicide because the child is the consequence of a rape attack. An-Magritt survives from sheer indignation and persistence. Forced to labour in a stone quarry, denied even a modicum of food, she clings for friendship to Johannes, a German migrant artist. Her natural intelligence comes to her rescue, and when she learns to read she finds herself appointed leader of a workers' protest to Chancellor Bjelk in nearby Trondhjem. Skouen's control of the action sequences in *An-Magritt* lacks the delicate touch that so enhances *Nine Lives*. Liv Ullmann, too, exaggerates the frustration and anger of the heroine and is less convincing in moments of hysteria than in her soliloquies. The epic sweep of the story remains undeniable, and some scenes, such as the ox's plunging through thin, melting ice, are all the more persuasive for being filmed on location. *An-Magritt* also emphasises the role of the church in Norwegian history, and has affinities with Rauni Mollberg's *Earth Is Our Sinful Song* in this respect. In both films, the legacy of enforced solitude cause human beings to turn their emotional gaze inwards instead of relating to those around them. The cold freezes spirit as well as body. Ideals become distorted. Superstition takes hold. The constant repression of feelings finds inevitable compensation in outbreaks of violence.

A New Wave at Last

Throughout the 1960's, European cinema was in a state of flux. Sweden, through Widerberg, Sjöman, and Donner; and Finland, through Kurkvaara, led the Nordic countries in response to the new film language promulgated by Godard, Antonioni, and Cassavetes. Denmark and Norway proved

slowest in following these trends. To some extent, the reason may have been administrative and economic. Norsk Film did not have a film-maker on its board until 1966, when Erik Borge became Managing Director. Television was reaching 70% of the population by 1960, and a majority of the country's movie theatres were suffering as a result of waning attendances.

Young film-makers toiled hard during the 1960's to escape from the traditional methods of production. Knut Andersen, Knut Bohwim and Mattis Mathiesen founded Teamfilm A/S in 1962, and sustained a steady flow of productions over the next two decades, even if most of these did not pretend to be anything other than local comedies. Others, more exasperated by the domestic situation, travelled abroad, or only as far as neighbouring Stockholm, to study film. Anja Breien enrolled at IDHEC in Paris, Pål Bang-Hansen at Centro Sperimentale in Rome.

The break with the past in terms of film language and choice of subject matter occurred in 1967, when Pål Løkkeberg directed *Liv*, a freewheeling study of a mannequin, played by his then-wife Vibeke Løkkeberg. Sharply influenced by the spirit of Godard, *Liv* may also be compared to Nordic films of the same decade such as *The Pram*, *The Mistress* and *Grass Widow*. The acting may be self-conscious, and the photography off-balance or out-of-focus, but outweighing such aesthetic faults is a palpable sense of contemporary reality. The immediate experience takes precedence over formalism and literary narrative.

Løkkeberg's career in the cinema failed to progress, and he has found more rewarding work in the theatre and television. Vibeke Løkkeberg, however, emerged from her chrysalis as a sex symbol to become one of the key personalities in the Norwegian cinema of the 1980's. Other young enthusiasts attempted to reach foreign audiences, without much help from official quarters (the Norwegian Film Institute suffered from lack of funds and authority prior to the late 1980's, and the country's films rarely appeared at film festivals during the 1960's and 1970's). Ragnar Lasse Henriksen, with *Love Is War* (1970), won a Silver Bear at the Berlinale and demonstrated his gifts as a virtuoso cinematographer. *Love Is War* suffers from an excess of rhetorical dialogue and self-conscious psychedelic effects, but Henriksen's exuberant approach captures the cinema's unique propensity for showing both the bright and the sombre sides of life.

One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich (*En dag i Ivan Denisovitsj's liv*, 1970) showed that Norway could participate in an international co-production with honour. Casper Wrede, known for his stage work, wrote and directed this austere screen version of the autobiographical novel by Solzhenitsyn about conditions in a Siberian labour camp. The photography by Sven Nykvist and the music by Arne Nordheim add conviction to Wrede's account of the remote, icy prison where Tom Courtenay's Ivan struggles to preserve his self-respect while compromising with necessity.

Anja Breien, returning to her native land after assisting Henning Carlsen on *Hunger* and *People Meet and Sweet Music Fills the Heart*, adopted a less aesthetic stance in

discussing flaws and injustices in contemporary Norway. Her first feature, *Rape (Voldtekt)*, 1971, aims to switch attention from the victim of a rape to the suspect attacker himself, and thereby to test the flexibility of the legal system and to expose its inadequacies. In certain phases, the film looks like a dossier, shot in unrelenting black-and-white tones, with long speeches into camera by prosecutor and defence counsel. At other moments it launches into subjective flights of fantasy.

Nothing in this grim-faced docudrama, however, suggested that Anja Breien's next film, *Wives (Hustruer)*, 1974, would be such a sparkling, extrovert satire on the role of women in the modern consumer society. Not for many years had a Norwegian film proved such a hit at home, and even in certain territories outside Scandinavia. An undisguised homage to Cassavetes' *Husbands*, this story of three women who quit their men and their families to face an uncertain future on their own contains numerous barbed references to the complacency of Norwegian life. Women are tolerated so

long as they do not interfere with male prerogatives. A rising standard of living has provoked many people to question traditional values and vested interests. Norway, for so long the most isolated of the Nordic countries in terms of culture and consumerism, now faced an abrupt transition. 'The real theme of this film,' says Anja Breien, 'is the conditioned sexual roles we are all expected to play – and our conditioned assumptions are, of course, undermined, as so often happens when we see the normal order of things turned upside down.' The wives' three-day binge acquires greater significance with each passing argument and experience; they find themselves in the male zone, with its privileges, its liberties, and its fundamental lack of domestic responsibilities.

The dialogue in *Wives* was improvised with the help of the three excellent actresses used by Breien: Frøydis Armand, Katja Medbøe, and Anne Marie Ottersen. The team had toured Norway with a play on a related theme. After each performance the actresses and director discussed the

Wives (1974) by Anja Breien



problems involved with the audience, and discovered in the process that a gulf existed between so-called 'enlightened' feminism, and the majority of ordinary people's perception of what issues were at stake.

Per Blom had helped on the screenplay of *Rape*, and in 1973 made his own debut behind the camera with *Anton*, a sensitive portrait of a fifteen-year-old boy in a small rural community. The following year he confirmed his talent with *Mother's House* (*Mors hus*), which tackled the theme of incest with even more courage than Vilgot Sjöman had in *My Sister, My Love*. When Petter leaves his studies in Oslo, abandons his fiancée, and takes the train back to his home town in the provinces, his journey assumes a compulsive dimension. His 'mother's house' is a villa set apart from its neighbours in Gjøvik, at once refuge and trap. The subtle means by which the mother undermines Petter's relationship with a girl in the same town are registered in cinematic terms by Blom. The intimacy between mother and son runs like a dangerous current beneath the placid, formal surface of everyday Norwegian life, with its courtesies and rituals (such as the sharing of Christmas gifts), so well suggested in the accompanying Pachelbel 'Canon'. The androgynous Petter tries with increasing desperation to establish a 'normal' relationship with the aptly-named Eva, but his true desires overwhelm him when Eva announces that she is pregnant. In a closing sequence of soaring catharsis, Petter leaves the arms of his girlfriend, rushes home, and flings himself into the ample embrace of his mother. Their love-making represents release for both of them, and a victory for the mother. *Mother's House*, a miracle of innuendo and sly observation (Petter's girlish coiffure, for example), may also be regarded as a commentary on the taboo of homosexuality, to which Norway has reacted with much less tolerance than, say, Denmark.

Other hidebound attitudes come under fire during the mid-1970's, from film-makers more confident of their ability to transcend the frivolous image of cinema in Norway. State guarantees mounted in size and scope; more risks could be taken in the interests of artistic expression. Oddvar Bull Tuhus embarked on *Strike!* (*Streik!*, 1975) with the help of NRK, the national TV corporation, and a script by himself and Lasse Glomm from a book chronicling the bitter strike at the Sauda factory (an industrial firm owned by the giant Union Carbide). Recreating the various stages of the dispute in the spring of 1970, Tuhus and Glomm examine the tension that emerges between the unions at local and national level. By 're-staging' the fierce debates that took place behind closed doors among the union members, the film peers beneath the outward show of unity to discern the divisions between young and old workers, and between Marxist-Leninist dialectic and unadorned protest. The fear of a written ballot, imposed by central government, surfaces repeatedly. *Strike!* stares back through time at a dispute settled five years earlier, yet the film itself may now be viewed in an historical light too, from a perspective in which the unions have changed many of their fundamental attitudes to disputes with management.

Halvor Næss's photography contributes significantly to the absorbing quality of the film, especially during the union debates, when telephoto lenses view the proceedings from a subjective angle. Tuhus and his team falter when they try to dramatise the pressures on the strikers outside the factory: the housewives have their say, and the leading militant turns to drink. Nevertheless, *Strike!* takes an honourable place among the many Nordic protest films of the late 1960's and early 1970's. It could not have been made in the Norwegian cinema of any previous decade, which in itself underlines the enormous strides made by the younger generation during this period.

Social criticism gathered momentum in the Norwegian cinema of the 1970's and 1980's. Lasse Glomm, who co-wrote *Strike!* and Anja Breien's *The Inheritance*, delivered a stinging rebuke to bourgeois complacency and urban authorities alike in *Stop It!* (*At dere tør!*, 1980). Two youngsters steal a car late at night, and in a shootout near the airport, one of them is killed by a policeman. Reinert, the survivor, must face trial and the film concentrates on his response to the emotional and psychological pressures that accumulate in the months prior to his appearance in court. Few Norwegian films had dared to focus on the problems of unemployment, drug abuse, and single parent homes. In *Stop It!* we can recognise the same disenchanting youths who people the films of Stefan Jarl, Tapio Suominen, and Morten Arnfred. They suffer not from the genuine poverty of the Developing World, but rather from a fatal lack of motivation and the disinterested attitude of their elders.

Sølve Skagen's *Hard Asphalt* (*Hard asfalt*, 1986) deals with a similar situation, although with more gritty and aggressive exuberance. Drug addiction and alcoholism, the twin vices of Nordic life in the affluent 1980's, scar the lives of two young people (played with remarkable commitment by Frank Krog and Kristin Kajander). Mutually dependent, they laugh, quarrel, and commiserate with each other, surviving thanks to a series of cynical petty thefts. Skagen (working from an autobiographical novel by Ida Halvorsen) etches in raw detail the seamy underside of Oslo, its back streets frequented by drug addicts and child prostitutes. *Hard Asphalt's* bleak implications are rendered bearable by the moments of fun and satire at the expense of a society which takes itself rather too seriously. The film notes with irony that whisky is priced at excessive levels, while alcoholism on the streets appears more acute than in other countries.

Not all socially-engaged Norwegian films adopt this naturalistic texture. *Madness* (*Galskap!*, 1985) offers its central character, a middle-aged mother named Marianne, the refuge of insanity. It creeps up on Marianne almost without her being aware of it. Her teenage daughter has left school early and drifts around Oslo, unemployed and ready to join in spontaneous acts of protest and violence. Egil Kolstø's film views these familiar circumstances with an ambiguous eye. Instead of standing shoulder to shoulder with her husband in defence of bourgeois values, Marianne embarks on her own rebellious journey, joining the disarmament movement and quarrelling with her reactionary husband. Her spiralling descent into 'madness',

to quote the sardonic title of the movie, becomes ludicrous when she escapes from hospital wearing her daughter's punk outfit. Kolstø fails to digest the heavy slices of pacifist monologue required to bolster his heroine's attitude, and *Madness* falls victim to ponderousness and didacticism. Its premise – the political conversion and liberation of a middle-aged woman – cannot be ignored, however, and stakes out the same kind of claim as *Wives*.

Alcoholism, drug addiction, and prostitution have been confronted by Norwegian film-makers, but a more recent menace, racial prejudice, has not been so easily addressed. Gianni Lepre, an Italian based in Oslo, had created a stir with his bizarre debut, *Henry's Back Room* (*Henry's bakværelse*, 1982, see below) and for his second film turned to a controversial issue that many Norwegians would prefer not to acknowledge. *Landscape in White* (*Øye for øye*, 1985) tells a squalid story of arson and blackmail as an unscrupulous businessman frames one of his employees, an immigrant worker from the Middle East. The coarse-cut characters and the bitter tone of the film recall the work of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, while the melodramatic interplay of action and dialogue owes more to the Hollywood film noir (e.g. Ophuls's *The Reckless Moment*). Most startling and disquieting of all, *Landscape in White* unfolds in the city of Drammen which with 50,000 inhabitants is the fifth largest conurbation in Norway. The intensity of racial prejudice in the community, as much as the individual loneliness that it engenders, may not be entirely realistic, but there is no denying the force and feeling of Lepre's achievement. For him, the snow-covered fields of Norway in winter symbolise hostility rather than purity.

Political and Military Issues

As a somewhat reluctant member of NATO, Norway has felt self-conscious in the eyes of its neutral neighbours Sweden and Finland, and film-makers have addressed the country's military involvement in a critical light. In *Remonstrances* (*Motforestilling*, 1972), Erik Løchen applies an experimental aesthetic form to a deeply provocative film about Norway's security police, its role in NATO, and the relationship between Norway and the superpowers. In the words of Jan Erik Holst, Løchen 'shows that filmic reality is equal to everyday reality. The main questions for Løchen are: what do we see, and what do we not want to see?'

Hans Otto Nicolayssen adopts a more coherent narrative line in *Poachers* (*Krypskyttere*, 1982). The son of a sheep-farmer rebels against his superior officers while on military manoeuvres, because his father's traditional grazing grounds are being hived off to the army and, by extension, to the NATO forces based in Norway. Mixing comedy and melodrama with a predominantly documentary idiom, *Poachers* touches an exposed nerve in Norwegian life, and also anticipates the 'green' movement with its emphasis on the preservation of the natural wilderness environment. Nicolayssen, who has since turned to production, is one of

the few Norwegian directors to have used the 'scope format (in black-and-white) to imaginative effect.

The young politician in Pål Bang-Hansen's *The Crown Prince* (*Konprinsen*, 1979) finds himself ensnared in a sordid intrigue when he expresses public support for Norway's NATO membership. The Labour Party in which he is one of the most promising figures has no compunction about sacrificing him when a scandal involving CIA penetration of the party threatens to cause a storm in parliament. Bang-Hansen discusses the conflict between public attitudes and private convictions, and his film indicates that beneath the sober if pragmatic face of Norwegian politics there often run currents of duplicity and cynicism.

Ola Solum, who learned his craft as a director of films for children, burst upon the international scene in 1985 with *Orion's Belt* (*Orions belte*). This political thriller won four major Amanda Prizes (the Norwegian equivalent of Hollywood's Oscars), and found eager buyers in numerous territories. Working from a novel by Jon Michelet, Solum treats an alarmingly realistic 'incident' between the superpowers with all the pace and action of a James Bond thriller. Three Norwegians stumble across a Soviet 'listening post' in a cave on the uninhabited coastline near Spitsbergen. Their immediate detection by a Soviet helicopter in the area unleashes a storm of violence and killing. The sentiments in this hot-blooded film are expressed in rough and ready terms. The Soviets blow up a motor boat without compunction. The Norwegian 'secret service', the tacit servants of NATO, behave in a manner worthy of the Mafia or the KGB. The lone survivor of the incident vanishes in a crowd of revellers in Oslo, pursued by agents of his own government who want to obliterate all traces of the unfortunate boat's crew.

Orion's Belt stands as an important landmark in the development of the Norwegian cinema. In artistic terms, it lacks subtlety and dips too easily into melodrama. But for perhaps the first time a Norwegian director shows himself capable of injecting a relentless drive into his narrative, and the four main actors perform with passion and persuasion. By revealing that each of the men on the doomed tramper makes a living from illicit smuggling, Solum's tempers the audience's shock when confronted with their fate. He exploits his locations (on Spitsbergen and off the coast of Finnmark) with professional zeal. The terrible cold, and the palpable solitude of the surviving man and his dog, is communicated in bravura film language, while the montage thrusts events forward like an express train.

Norwegians take pride in the glittering success of *Orion's Belt*. As its country's most expensive production to date (15 million crowns), the film reflects credit on the technicians and actors involved in it. But the heady cocktail of violence, prejudice, and staccato action serves only to trivialise the underlying theme. If *Poachers* is a muted moan of exasperation against Norway's membership of NATO, then *Orion's Belt* amounts to a shrill scream of protest, which numbs any attempt at analysing the political implications. The characters cannot escape their comic-book context, even if Solum's film should not be denied credit for daring

to address a controversial issue. The irony is that the 'shooting war' it describes with such gusto could not take place in such simplistic terms in the post-Cold War 1990's. Solum's latest film, *The Wanderers* (*Landstrykere*, 1989), avoids overt political issues and emerges as an imaginative, vigorous screen version of Knut Hamsun's novel about life in a small coastal village during the 1860's.

Leiduly Risan's *Rubicon* (*Etter . . . Rubicon*, 1987) strives to replicate the commercial triumph of *Orion's Belt*. Its heroes and villains, however, do not wear such easily identifiable labels as they do in Solum's thriller. At the end of the day, the NATO connection may be discerned, for the Norwegian authorities try to hush up an outbreak of radiation sickness that accounts for two young boys who happen to be sheltering on an island in the vicinity of a sinister freighter. Although it is never directly shown, a neutron explosion of some kind eliminates the vessel's crew. Like *Orion's Belt*, the film surrenders all too often to melodrama, but establishes a haunting mood in its exploration of the deserted, flooding vessel. The climate of fear and apprehension is reinforced by various unusual metaphors (for example, a stricken cat's bleeding on a white sheet as a doctor attends to it). When *Rubicon* strains credulity is in its presentation of every official in the Hammerfest area as a sinister agent of some foreign power or 'authority' bent on silencing the doctor who tries to help the victims of the explosion. Both *Rubicon* and *Orion's Belt* may be viewed as prisoners of the 1980's, just as Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* belongs to the paranoid 1950's. They cater to the essential conservatism of the Norwegian public, while their ambivalent endings symbolise the country's divided loyalties – on the one hand, to NATO and a 'hawkish' political stance towards Moscow; on the other, to her Scandinavian neighbours with their liberal, neutralist traditions.

A link surely exists between this discomfort with contemporary alliances, and the retrospective guilt that surfaces in films about the conduct of Norwegians during the Second World War. *The Reward* (*Belønningen*, 1980), written and directed by Bjørn Lien, dramatises the discovery of a man who seized the chance to make money illicitly during the Nazi occupation. Reidar's arrest after a quarrel with a former workmate leads to a trial and imprisonment. The drab, ordinary lineaments of Reidar's personality suggest that he represents all too many who profited from his country's misfortunes. At the same time, the film implicitly criticises Norway's inability to come to terms with its past.

More ambitious, and flashing back and forth in time between 1942, 1947 and 1985, Bente Erichsen's *The Feldmann Case* (*Over grensen*, 1987) peels away the layers of shame and guilt that lurk beneath the placid surface of a small Norwegian community. Its factual basis shields it from the kind of strident melodrama that mars *Rubicon*, for instance. Considerable attention is given to the tiny details of clothing, decor, and speech that evoke a specific time and place. *The Feldmann Case* investigates the murder of a Jewish couple, Rakel and Jacob Feldmann, whose bodies are found in a lake. When two guides confess to the crime,

they find themselves acquitted in court after their defence counsel argues that they were only trying to prevent the Germans discovering the Resistance's escape route to Sweden. Erichsen's calm, watchful film allows people to reveal their petty-mindedness and instincts for self-preservation. The taint of anti-Semitism emerges both from the court proceedings and from the inquiries of the journalist assigned to cover the case for a newspaper.

The film was made under threat of legal action from the two surviving guides who found the corpses of the Feldmann's. Bente Erichsen adopts a tone of regret rather than hysterical accusation (although the music is too overweening). She focuses her attention on the tight-lipped sentiment of the postwar period, not on the individuals whose arrest appears to close the case. She also implies that during the war Norwegians may have turned a blind eye to the fate of the Jews. Nearly half of the 1,800 Jews living in Norway in 1940 suffered deportation and certain death in Nazi concentration camps, by comparison with 1.6% of Jews who died in Denmark.

This slow process of purgation has helped many Norwegians to accept the reality of the Quisling era. One film, *Little Ida* (*Liten Ida*, 1981), surpasses all others in the genre. Laila Mikkelsen's first feature, *Us* (*Oss*, 1976) presents a nightmarish vision of the future, as city people are compelled by food shortages to work the fields with their own sweat and muscle, and thus confront the inequities and artificial structures of urban society. Her second film, *Little Ida* (also known as *Growing Up*), marks a giant step forward in her career. In the closing days of the Second World War, seven-year-old Ida starts to recognise that weakness provokes intolerance, and survival depends on minding one's own business. Norway is occupied but not truly at war; a country in which impotence in the face of Nazi might turns to bitterness and resentment. Ida's mother works for the Germans, and has an affair with one of their officers. She does not flaunt her behaviour, but the brunt of the community's scorn falls on Ida. Other children shun her, and she wanders on her own through the streets and fields, drawn by curiosity to a German interment camp where men with shaven heads toil in silence. When peace comes, and the enemy has departed, Ida watches her mother being taken away for punishment as a collaborator.

This screen version of Marit Paulsen's novel is directed with consummate sensitivity and even-handed irony. No accusation sounds too strident, no defeat appears too sentimental. Ida and her mother are two unfortunate creatures tossed by the tide of war and struggling to find their balance. Laila Mikkelsen's little masterpiece transcends its specific setting to become a universal lament for innocence defiled, and for a generation that must accept the bitter truths that those who 'transgress' are often victims of those who do not.

Focus on Women's Roles

Anja Breien and Vibeke Løkkeberg have remained loyal to their primary concern, the attitude expressed by a male-



Laila Mikkelsen's *Growing Up* (1981)

dominated society towards women, both past and present. *Games of Love and Loneliness* (*Den alvorsamme leken*, 1977), directed by Anja Breien in Sweden, emphasises how sorely constricted human emotions were in turn-of-the-century Scandinavia and is based (like Mai Zetterling's *Doctor Glas*) on a novel by Hjalmar Söderberg. Breien treats the romance with considerable respect, but beneath the grave progression of the narrative ('And the years passed . . .') runs a dark, surging current of feeling that does justice to Söderberg's recognition of the eternal clash between security and contingency in the realms of love. *Next of Kin* (*Arven*, 1979) remains the most subtle of Breien's films, owing much to Ibsen while aiming its critique at the mournful, rigid, and hypocritical ethos of Norwegian society. A wealthy shipowner dies, leaving his relatives an ostensibly impeccable will, according to which his vast empire must be administered by a united family. But envy and ambition by degrees assert themselves, and the family circle, held together hitherto by a mood of armed neutrality, breaks up in censure and prevarication.

Although *Next of Kin* concludes on a dubious *coup de théâtre*, there is no denying the two graces of Anja Breien's achievement: her sense of humour, which resounds most effectively in the sequence when the relatives strip the dead man's villa of its furniture and heirlooms to the accompaniment of Rossini's 'Thieving Magpie' overture; and her refusal to introduce flashbacks, in a story that might be expected to rely heavily upon them. Anita Björk, Sjöberg's Miss Julie of thirty years earlier makes a particularly sensitive impression as the late magnate's sister-in-law, striving to be the last to conceal the one excess of passion that has blemished her otherwise faultless commitment to the bourgeois ideal.

In 1981, Anja Breien ranged back in time, to a century – the 17th – often ignored by Nordic artists, who tend to opt for the Sagas and medieval times, or to stay firmly rooted in the modern era. At the outset of *Witch-hunt* (*Forfølgelsen*, 1981) a woman arrives in a remote community in the mountain wilderness of Western Norway. She takes work at one of the local farms, sleeps with a handsome cowhand,



Lil Terselius in *The Witch-Hunt* (1981) by Anja Breien

and provokes a breeze of gossip. The country folk dread her independence and lack of shame, brand her as a witch, and receive the blessing of the local authorities for doing so. Dialogue and characterisation leave much to be desired, but the director's eye for landscape, and for an atmosphere of intolerance, sustain this paradigm for the contemporary world in which women's rights are distrusted with equal vigour.

Elisabeth Mortensen plays a young lawyer in Breien's *Paper Bird* (*Papirfuglen*, 1984), a woman determined to unravel the mystery surrounding her father's dramatic death. In discovering the truth about an individual so closely related to her, she also must acknowledge the gulf that yawns between men and women. The irony of the situation is heightened by the fact that the father was a famous actor, accustomed to wearing a psychological mask to shield him from both the public's curiosity, and the incestuous nature of his own family life.

Anja Breien does not advocate a war to the death on behalf of women's rights. Her indignation has softened through the

years, and at the end of *Wives, Ten Years Later* (*Hustruene ti år etter*, 1985) her three friends return home to their waiting menfolk. Elegance and discretion, indeed, mark her recent film, *Twice upon a Time* (*Smykketyven*, 1990), about a stage designer who, despite his popularity with women, finds himself unable to commit to any one relationship. **Vibeke Løkkeberg's** approach has, on the contrary, grown more severe during the two decades she has been active in the Norwegian cinema as actress and director. Her early shorts deal with topics such as abortion and the role of the unmarried mother, and in 1975 her medium length film, *Rain*, introduced what was to be the setting of her two principal accomplishments, *The Betrayal* (*Løperjenten*, 1981) and *Skin* (*Hud*, 1986): the coastal town of Bergen, where Løkkeberg grew up during the postwar years. The picture she paints in *The Betrayal* is a harsh one, castigating the petty-mindedness of a town scarred by wartime memories. Food is in short supply, collaborators are still being tried, and the influence of American culture and commerce is gaining hold. The children, each seven years

of age, manage amid this turmoil to create some kind of human relationship, even though both are subjected to domestic violence and social degradation. Løkkeberg's gift for perceiving everyday settings and incidents through a youngster's eyes elevates *The Betrayal* beyond the grimy environment of a cold Norwegian port into the realm of a fantasy where innocence cannot be numbed by a lack of parental affection.

Løkkeberg's influence may also be detected in *The Head Man* (*Høvdingen*, 1983), which she wrote in collaboration with her husband, Terje Kristiansen, who directed the film. Its partly tongue-in-cheek description of a *macho* Norwegian pater familias only serves to emphasise the obsolescence of traditional power distribution in the family circle. Much more ambitious in scope, Løkkeberg's *Skin* mixes reality and symbolism in a turbid tale of incest in a small trading-post in 19th-century Norway. The film possesses certain affinities with Bo Widerberg's *The Serpent's Way* in its charting of a sexual obsession in a world devoid of love. Vilde's destiny is dependent upon the will of her 'guardian', to whom she has been pledged by her dying father.

The underlying themes of child abuse and female subjugation emerge from the film in sharp profile and at the expense of the narrative, which is confused – even in the original release version running more than three hours. Vilde's father resorts constantly to masculine excuses: 'You must try to understand me'; 'You must not leave me'; 'It's your own fault, you made me do it, you were born to it [incest]', and so on. This rhetoric assumes a haunting resonance in the natural ambience of the sea and the shoreline outside Bergen. Stones, in the photography of Paul René Roestad, appear alive and tactile. A ship's figurehead becomes a recurring symbol of Vilde's trapped, sculpted beauty. A broken doll lying on the rocky headland seems to embody the anguish and violation of the innocent child. A wedding gown floats briefly on the water before sinking like a dying aspiration. A mysterious painting of an island in the ocean fascinates Vilde, giving her a vision of what might lie beyond the menacing authority of her husband.

Abetted by the music of Arne Nordheim, *Skin* coils itself about the patient spectator, smoothly slipping from past to present, from one generation to another. Vibeke Løkkeberg herself plays Vilde as though numbed by centuries of sexual injustice, yet still retains her determination to resist her step-father's will. The film's overriding mood of hopelessness reaches its climax when Vilde kills her husband and, led away to prison, gazes back to see her daughter, face horribly titivated, in the arms of the man who had abused her when she was a child. In visual and thematic terms a sequel, *Seagulls* (*Måker*, 1990) confirms Løkkeberg in both her faults and virtues – a brooding melodrama, slumbrous in form, evoking the atmosphere of the Norwegian coastal communities in the 19th century.

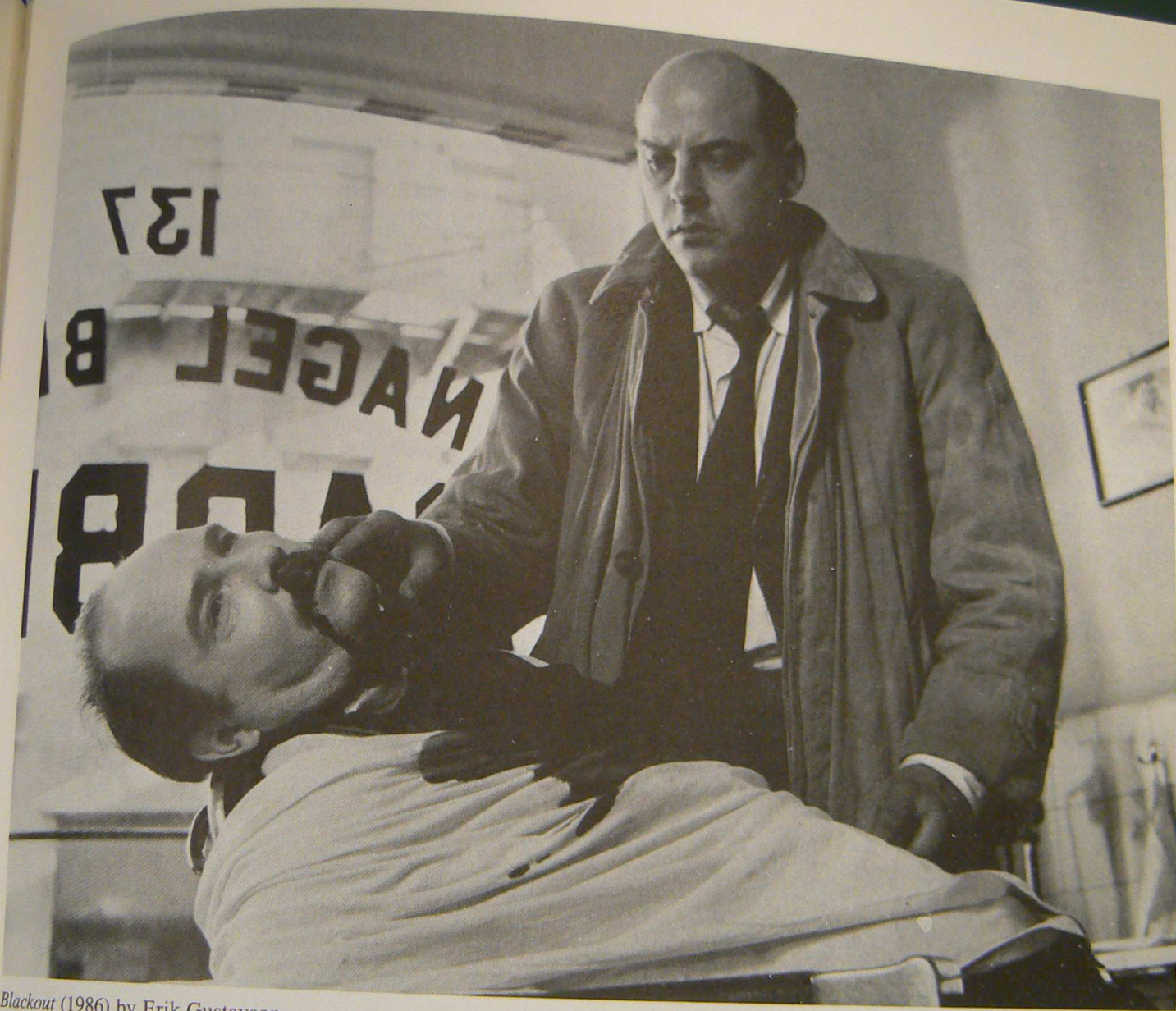
In Search of New Idioms

As young Norwegians returned from film schools abroad in the early 1970's, they brought with them a desire to

experiment with new forms. Haakon Sandøy, who had served as assistant to Witold Leszczyński on the Polish adaptation of Tarjei Vesaas's novel, *Days of Matthew*, made his own debut with a screen version of another book by Vesaas. *The Fire* (*Brannen*, 1973) deals in symbols, and 'consists of different strands which create a unique frame around a young man's lack of relation to the technological society'.¹⁰ Sandøy returned to Poland three years later to make a sympathetic film concerning the life of Edward Munch's friend Dagny Juell [*Dagny*, 1977]. Gianni Lepre, an Italian-Canadian resident in Norway for several years, brings the principles of Antonin Artaud's 'Theatre of Cruelty' to bear on a bizarre incident in one of Norway's smaller towns. In *Henry's Back Room* (*Henrys bakvaerelse*, 1982), a barber discovers that his teenage daughter has killed herself because she was dependent on drugs and had been forced to become a prostitute. Henry turns into an avenging angel. He takes prisoner the pimp responsible for his daughter's despair, and tortures him in the basement of his barber's saloon. Lepre's film exhibits an obsessive quality rare in Norwegian cinema, as well as an uncanny grasp of the calculated cruelty that lurks in even the most innocuous of individuals – especially when the public surrounding him behaves so callously.

Some measure of darkness also inhabits the flagrant world of Svend Wam and Petter Vennerød. Like the Kaurismäki brothers in Finland, Wam and Vennerød have worked fruitfully and impudently outside the mainstream of production in their country. They established Mefistofilm in 1976, and in a dozen films since have addressed the issues and the disillusionment that accrued from the events of '68. *Open Future* (*Åpen framtid*, 1983) examines the doubts and tribulations of a teenage boy about to leave high school in the late 1960's. *Castle in the Air* (*Drømmeslottet*, 1986) follows the fortunes of six friends of that same generation who, during the 1970's, buy a large house and move into it with their children in the vain hope of creating an ideal commune. *Goodbye Solidarity* (*Adjø Solidaritet*, 1985) looks at the materialist, self-obsessed decade of the 1980's. The two principal men in this film have abandoned the high ideals they embraced in 1968, settling instead for comfortable jobs and luxurious standards of living. This cannot conceal, however, their abject failure in relationships with parents, lovers, and children alike. In the words of Jan Erik Holst¹¹: 'The film depicts, in bold anarchistic and surrealist tones, a world in dissolution, which the lives of the main characters so vividly illustrate. Themes dealt with include the demise of human fellowship, the conflict between left and right overshadowed by re-emergent fascism, and with the encroachment of privatisation in a social democratic society.'¹²

Wam and Vennerød's cinema sometimes suffers from a narcissistic streak, as well as a frivolous attitude towards heterosexual relations. This can be ascribed in part to their prolific output, but films like *Hotel St. Pauli* (1988) descend into a vortex of absurdity and gratuitous violence. Mocked and spurned though they are by Norwegian critics, Wam and Vennerød undoubtedly know how to grip an audience by the throat in the opening sequences of a film, and their



Blackout (1986) by Erik Gustavson

audacious use of music and effects lends credence to their concentration on sexual taboos and frustrations. Norwegian directors do not often succumb to the allure of pastiche. *Blackout* (1986) resurrects the Hollywood film noir with meticulous devotion. A balding private eye finds himself diverted from retirement in Argentina by just one last job – tracking down a gangster in what looks like San Francisco's Chinatown. The offscreen monologue echoes Raymond Chandler: 'I chucked my badge in the sea and began to go through other people's dirty washing. It was a good time for bad news. . . .' Backed by a mood indigo jazz score, and rich in offbeat characters (including an undertaker who is also a drug addict), **Erik Gustavson's** affectionate homage to the 1940's falls short of its target on account of its self-conscious *mise-en-scène* – a plethora of overhead crane shots and excessive attention to details of

design and lighting. *Herman* (1990), however, suggests that Gustavson may be a force to be reckoned with. He directs his young boy actor, Anders Danielsen Lie, with consummate sensitivity in this bizarre (but good-natured and, finally, poignant) story about a child who loses his hair from a rare disease. *Herman* paints a convincing and heartening portrait of family life in the Norway of the 1960's, and fills it with quite unexpected humour. At the opposite extreme of the spectrum stands **Oddvar Einarson's** *X* (1986), which won a Silver Lion at Venice. If this film may also be considered pastiche, then the influence is that of Antonioni. But in 1986 the theme is not romantic love of the kind that beguiled Monica Vitti and Gabriele Ferzetti in *L'Avventura* but an uninspiring relationship between a taciturn photographer and a fourteen-year-old girl in Oslo. Einarson's trademark becomes the long-held

shot, underlining the slow development of the link between the young man and his friend. The girl is hardly a nymphette, and the photographer seems immature for his age, so that occasionally the traditional roles are reversed (as of course they were, in an altogether more scintillating way, by Nabokov and then Kubrick in *Lolita*). Reticent, phlegmatic, etiolated almost to breaking point, X signals the arrival of a talent comparable to Aki Kaurismäki in Finland and Kay Pollak in Sweden. All three directors analyse loneliness as a phenomenon of the consumer society.

In Einarson's second feature, *Karachi* (1989), two people also take refuge from the outside world, but for more mundane reasons. A young woman drug courier hides in a cop's shabby apartment at Oslo while being pursued by the drug barons she has betrayed. The subtle interplay of feelings in the relationship contrasts with the violence of the external narrative.

Erik Borge, who had revealed himself a shrewd observer of the female psyche in *Blackbird in the Ceiling Lamp* (*Trost i taklampe*, 1955), served as head of Norsk Film A/S for many years before retiring and writing the original screenplay for *A Handful of Time* (*En håndfull tid*, 1989).

Directed by Martin Aspø, *A Handful of Time* breathes something of the same delicate mood as Bergman's *Wild Strawberries*, as an old man strives to relive a vanished love, and to expunge his feelings of guilt about a relationship that ended half a century earlier.

The Lapp Connection

Norwegian films have attracted increasing attention at festivals during the past dozen or so years. Anja Breien's *Next of Kin* featured in the Competition at Cannes, as did Vibeke Løkkeberg's *Skin*. Oddvar Einarson impressed the jury at Venice, and Per Blom's *The Ice Palace* was selected by several major festivals.

The most impressive product of the entire period, however, has never appeared at a top festival, because its producers wanted to sell it direct to audiences around the world. *Pathfinder* (*Veiviseren*, 1987) was nominated for Best Foreign Film in the Academy Awards in Hollywood, but lost to *Babette's Feast*. Its director, Nils Gaupe, comes from the Lapp region of northern Norway, and *Pathfinder*

Oddvar Einarson's *X* (1986)



takes its inspiration from a 12th-century Lapp legend. The sparse lines of dialogue are in Sami, the Lapp language (although the marauding Tchude tribe seem to be speaking in an invented tongue), and the Panavision 'scope format allows Erling Thurmann-Andersen's camera to take full advantage of the flat, horizontal tundra landscapes. *Pathfinder* touches on various aspects of Lapp culture and legend. Aigin, the teenage hero of the film, returns from a hunting expedition to find his parents and younger sister slaughtered by a band of sinister, ruthless tribesmen known as Tchudes. Now he must survive in a hostile environment where the snow rarely relents and Lapp encampments are few and far between. He responds intuitively to the symbols and supernatural signs that govern the Lapp culture: to the local *noaidi* (holy man), who counsels him against seeking revenge; and to the bull reindeer which appears to him in a vision after he has tricked the Tchudes into plunging to their death down a precipitous cliff-face. At every stage of his struggle for survival, Aigin finds himself accompanied by the accoutrements of his ancestors — rings, a drum, teeth on a string. Birds and animals become as significant as human beings, from the dog transfixed by an arrow in the opening

scene, to a huge hawk floating balefully over the tundra. The Tchudes themselves flounder like black beasts in the all-pervasive snow, and have learned to travel in single file, roped together in order to negotiate the rugged mountains and treacherous slopes. Gaup displays an economy of statement rare in a debutant. He employs imagery rather than words to communicate the essential themes of his film: the peaceful nature of the Lapps by comparison with the barbaric Tchudes; the innocence of the women and children when faced with an all-male fighting force; the desperate aggression of the Tchudes deriving from their loss of bearings and, by extension, their separation from the 'brotherhood' in which all things are joined. When the film does adopt more conventional means of expression, the spell weakens. The dialogue in the Lapp tents, and the glib closing exclamation of one old woman ('We'll *always* have a pathfinder!'), undermines the harsh, unforgiving naturalism of the rest of the narrative. By leading his adversaries into a lethal trap, Aigin at once avenges his murdered family, saves the innocent Lapps sheltering on the coast, and acquires a personal maturity (termed by Tim Palleine 'the boy's rite of passage into

A Handful of Time (1989) by Martin Asphaug



manhood, italicised by the supernatural overtones attaching to the tale¹³). *Pathfinder* stands alongside Erik Blomberg's *The White Reindeer* and Rauni Mollberg's *Earth Is Our Sinful Song* as one of the most impressive films made about the Nordic wilderness and its inhabitants. Its appeal to quite large audiences outside Scandinavia may also stem from its superb technical construction. The sound effects, enhanced by an antiphonal score, give a three-dimensional quality to the images, from the whirr of a hostile arrow to the thundering onset of an avalanche. Gaupe tends to accentuate the visceral outbreaks of violence with too self-conscious a glee, and he relies too often on close-ups. But nothing can detract from his command of film language and from his comprehension of the Nordic relationship to Nature.

It will be interesting to see if he can refine his style still further, after his adventure with Walt Disney Productions in 1990. The American company financed *Shipwrecked* (*Håkon Håkonsen*), a seafaring adventure set in the 1860's and aimed at a younger audience.

Lasse Glomm also attempts to capture the mystique of the remote Norwegian wilderness in a film set during the 1860's: *Northern Lights* (*Havlandet*, 1985). Heikki is a small, watchful boy who leaves the hardship of his family farm and traverses the frozen wastes in his quest for the fabled 'Northern Lights', and the land of plenty where fish may be found in abundance. Glomm's film contains some spectacular imagery, and he adroitly alternates moments of tranquillity with bursts of roaring turbulence. *Northern Lights* encapsulates the Nordic yearning for freedom – from pitch-black nights, from ceaseless snow, from oceans that freeze over – in short, from a Nature that holds its human inhabitants forever in thrall.

Through the Child's Eye

Like Denmark, Norway has long placed commendable emphasis on the production of films for and about children. Sometimes this can lead to confusion. Per Blom's *Silvermouth* (*Sølvmann*, 1981) baffled both critics and the marketing department of Norsk Film. In one respect it is a children's movie – the protagonist is a tubby, irresistible little boy – and in another it constitutes an adult entertainment, charting the passage of a divorce and a deserted husband's attempt to introduce a new girlfriend to his son. Blom directs the film with appropriate humour and sensitivity, forcing the audience to reconsider its views of marital conflict, and reminding it that in moments of crisis children can be at once weaker and stronger than their seniors. In Knut Andersen's *Friends* (*For Tors skyld*, 1982), a slightly older boy runs away from home in the hope that his father will give up his heavy drinking. The lush summer countryside, where father and son have enjoyed happy interludes, plays a major role in this engaging film, restoring the will to live and develop in the mind of its young hero.

Nature can on the other hand strike children as a terrifying challenge. In both *Zeppelin* (1981) and *The Ice Palace* (*Is-slottet*, 1987) youngsters must confront the mystery evinced

by an alien Nature. Nina, the susceptible little girl in Lasse Glomm's *Zeppelin*, makes friends with a homeless boy, and runs after him into the depths of the forest, testing her own courage as much as searching for someone to whom she feels drawn. In Per Blom's *The Ice Palace*, two pre-pubescent girls respond to an unspoken, mutual attraction. Unn, the more fey of the pair, vanishes into the heart of an 'ice palace', where the tumbling waters of the mountainside have congealed into a cathedral-like shrine. Glomm suggests with discreet sounds and images the secret symbiosis between the two girls, culminating in a remarkable cut from Unn's dead features in the ice palace to Siss's face floating above the surface of her bathwater at home. *The Ice Palace* eschews dramatic incident, evoking instead the haunting beauty of the fells and mountains in winter, and lacquering the visuals with an ethereal music score that lulls and hypnotises the spectator into compliance with a story that shifts constantly between fantasy and reality.

If children themselves could vote for the best of all Norwegian films, they might well plump for *Flåklypa Grand Prix* (1975), a delightful puppet extravaganza directed by the single-minded, meticulous craftsman Ivo Caprino. Its combination of model care, cleverly-designed decor, and a snorting, snarling soundtrack give this motor-racing drama a charm unmatched by any form of animation in the Nordic countries. The attendance figures for *Flåklypa Grand Prix* (2.1 million out of a national population of 3.8 million) demonstrate that Norwegians do support their national cinema on occasion! It is a hopeful sign for the future that Norwegians visit the movies more frequently than any of their Nordic neighbours.

1 Jan-Erik Holst, *Film in Norway* (Oslo, Norwegian Film Institute, 1979)

2 Nils A. Klevjer Aas, 'Cinema in Norway: 70 Years of a Singular System', in *International Film Guide 1988* (London, The Tantivy Press, 1987)

3 Jan-Erik Holst, *op. cit.*

4 Nils A. Klevjer Aas, *op. cit.*

5 Quoted by Bengt Forslund, in *Victor Sjöström, His Life and Work* (New York, New York Zoetrope, 1988)

6 Nils A. Klevjer Aas, *op. cit.*

7 *Id.*, *ibid.*

8 Bo Christer Björk, *Den nya norska filmen* (Helsinki, Walthalla, 1982)

9 Jan-Erik Holst, in *International Film Guide 1974* (London, The Tantivy Press, 1973)

10 *Id.*, *ibid.*

11 Jan-Erik Holst, in *International Film Guide 1986* (London, The Tantivy Press, 1985)

12 *Id.*, *ibid.*

13 Tim Palleine, in *Monthly Film Bulletin* (London, British Film Institute, September 1988)



Helge Jordal in Ola Solum's *The Wanderers* (1989)