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Tybjerg, Casper

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Casper Tybjerg

On the Periphery of the “National Film”: Danish Cinematic Border Crossings, 1918–1929

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Abstract: This article examines four Danish filmmakers whose careers took them across borders: Urban Gad, Gunnar Sommerfeldt, George Schnéevoigt, and Carl Theodor Dreyer, focusing on the films the last three made in Norway, Dreyer’s *Prästänkan* (1921, a Swedish production) and *Glomdalsbruden* (1926), Sommerfeldt’s Hamsun adaptation *Markens Grøde* (1921), and Schnéevoigt’s *Laila* (1929), as well as Gad’s unsuccessful attempt to set up an inter-Scandinavian film company. At the same time, the article tries to assess the usefulness of a theoretical concept that seems suitable for the investigation of such border-crossing filmmakers: Jurij Lotman’s concept of the boundary. The article concludes that this concept is useful as a heuristic device, because it calls attention to figures and works often treated as marginal by national film historiographies, but also that Lotman’s model of cultural dynamics, which emphasizes the periphery, does not fit well with the centrality of the dominant Swedish film industry to the development of Scandinavian silent film during the 1920s.

Around 1920, “national film” was a label used by many contemporary commentators to refer to a particular type of Scandinavian silent film: the high-quality literary adaptation, often relying on a considerable amount of location shooting in scenic landscapes. In this article, I shall examine several films that are national films in this sense. The genre is perhaps associated primarily with the so-called “Golden Age” of Swedish film, but it is equally if not more important in Norway and Finland, and examples are also found in Denmark (for a discussion of the most important Danish examples, see Tybjerg 2001).

Despite the label “national,” however, many of these films are more international and inter-Scandinavian than one might think. Quite a few of the most

Corresponding author: Casper Tybjerg, University of Copenhagen, Department of Media, Cognition and Communication, Karen Blixens Vej 4, 2300 København S, Denmark, e-mail: casper@hum.ku.dk

important Swedish films were based on non-Swedish literary works.¹ The relatively large number of non-Swedish source novels and plays for Swedish films from this period is emphasized in the most thorough study of inter-Scandinavian film culture, Anne Bachmann’s massive, impressively detailed and very useful doctoral thesis from 2013. As part of her conclusion, Bachmann presents a “heavily generalized” model of the flow of inter-Scandinavian contacts:

Literature (often canonical) as originals for film adaptation flowed towards Sweden. Know-how (crew members, screenwriters) flowed either from Denmark to Sweden or from Sweden to Norway. (Bachmann 2013, 325–326)

Bachmann makes clear that these are only the most common trends, but I think that it is worth mentioning that there was also a flow of know-how from Denmark to Norway, even if it to a certain extent involved Swedish money. In the following, I am going to look at four filmmakers whose careers took them across borders: Urban Gad, Gunnar Sommerfeldt, George Schnéevoigt, and Carl Theodor Dreyer. Sommerfeldt, Schnéevoigt, and Dreyer all made films in Norway, and Gad tried unsuccessfully to set up an inter-Scandinavian film company.

One theoretical concept that seems promising for the investigation of these border-crossing filmmakers is Jurij Lotman’s concept of the boundary.² As the German literary scholar Michael C. Frank has pointed out in a useful article, Lotman places considerable emphasis on the boundary-crosser, the “Grenzgänger,” as a key element of cultural dynamics (Frank 2009, 70; see also Frank 2012). The filmmakers I will be considering below all had international careers, and all can be described as boundary-crossers.

I will begin by presenting Lotman’s boundary concept. I will then discuss Urban Gad’s unsuccessful attempt to set up an inter-Scandinavian film company; the two films Carl Th. Dreyer shot in Norway, the Swedish production *Prästänkan* (1921) and the Norwegian *Glomdalsbruden* (1926); Gunnar Sommerfeldt’s film

1 If we take the four most celebrated films by Victor Sjöström and Mauritz Stiller as examples, two of Sjöström’s are based on non-Swedish works, *Terje Vigen* (*A Man There Was*, 1917) on a narrative poem by Henrik Ibsen and *Berg-Ejvind och hans hustru* (*The Outlaw and His Wife*, 1918) on a Danish-language play by the Icelandic author Jóhann Sigurjónsson; the same is the case with Stiller, *Sången om den eldröda blommen* (*The Song of the Scarlet Flower*, 1919) based on a Finnish novel by Johannes Linnankoski, *Erotikon* (1920) on a Hungarian play by Ferenc Herczeg. The four others – Sjöström’s *Ingmarssönerna* (*The Sons of Ingmar*, 1919) and *Körkarlen* (*The Phantom Carriage*, 1921), Stiller’s *Herr Arnes pengar* (*Sir Arne’s Treasure*, 1919) and *Gösta Berlings saga* (*The Atonement of Gösta Berling*, 1924) – are all based on works by Selma Lagerlöf.

2 The invitation for the research colloquium for which this paper was originally written, *Grenzüberschreitung in Skandinavischen Stummfilm*, held in Greifswald in May 2014, encouraged speakers to examine the applicability of Lotman’s concept to Scandinavian silent film.

Markens Grøde (1921); and George Schnéevoigt's *Laila* (1929). As Bachmann notes, the three latter Norwegian-financed films are mentioned separately from the more or less chronological survey of the 1920s in the historical introduction to the filmographic volume *Filmen i Norge*; instead, they are touched on almost as an afterthought as "Danish directorial contributions to the Norwegian film production of the 1920s" that provide "a series of fine examples of the cinematic use of Norwegian nature" (Braaten et al. 1995, 21; see Bachmann 2013, 293–294). The older Norwegian film history *Det store Tivoli* by Sigurd Evensmo (first published in 1967) mentions the three films in a very similar, afterthought-like fashion (Evensmo 1992, 145). Only Gunnar Iversen's recent history of the Norwegian feature fiction film treats them on equal terms with other Norwegian productions (Iversen 2011, 44, 49, 52–55, 63–66). In Danish film histories, they are not given much attention either.

Because it can help call attention to such figures and works, treated as marginal by a film historiography which has been focused on the national, I will conclude that Lotman's concept of the boundary is useful as a heuristic device. On the other hand, it must be said that Lotman's model, which emphasizes the dynamism of the periphery and the conservatism of the center, does not fit well with the developments of Scandinavian silent cinema around 1920, since many of them occur as local responses to the enviable successes of the dominant Swedish industry.

Boundaries and Boundary-Crossers

Lotman's semiotic theory of culture as he developed it in the later part of his career has as its overarching notion the concept of the semiosphere. The idea of the semiosphere is based on the biological concept of the biosphere, the whole zone of the Earth's surface that supports life – from the bedrock to the upper atmosphere – and all the living things in it. The biosphere is more than the sum total of the organisms in it; it is an interconnected system. In the so-called Gaia theory, the entire biosphere is considered a single super-organism: Planet Earth as a single being. Lotman's semiosphere is conceived similarly as a super-culture, an endlessly dynamic and fundamentally interconnected system. It is made up of many, many smaller subsystems, all similarly structured, and most of Lotman's semiosphere examples are taken from these lower levels.

The semiosphere has a boundary, a center, and a periphery. Lotman uses the example of the Roman (and sometimes the Tsarist) Empire: a powerful imperial city at the center, surrounded by a provincial periphery, and beyond

its boundaries, uncivilized barbarians. It is a semiotic theory; as such, it focuses on differences and oppositions. Oppositions (such as ‘a’ versus *not-‘a’*) are taken to be the fundamental constituents of meaning, and the semiosphere boundary creates such oppositions; most fundamentally, the opposition between “us” and “them”: “Every culture,” Lotman writes, “begins by dividing its world into ‘its own’ internal space and ‘their’ external space” (Lotman 1990, 131).

But Lotman’s boundary is more than a line of demarcation; it is a membrane that allows elements from outside in by transforming them: “The function of any border or film – from the membrane of a living cell to the biosphere as a film [...] covering our planet, to the delimitation of the semiosphere – comes down to a limitation of penetration, filtering and the transformative processing of the external to the internal” (Lotman 2005, 210).

Through this filtering process, new ideas are introduced into the semiosphere, creating a dynamism that continually affects the whole, even the established center: “The boundary has another function in the semiosphere: it is the area of accelerated semiotic processes, which always flow more actively on the periphery of cultural environments, seeking to affix them to the core structures, with a view to displacing them” (Lotman 2005, 212). Lotman uses the example of the process whereby “cinema ceased being a fairground amusement and became a serious art-form” to illustrate these dynamics (Lotman 1990, 124).

This example is clearly relevant to our concerns here: it was a very important goal of filmmakers like Dreyer to have their movies recognized as works of art. Filmmakers and other commentators wrote about how this might be achieved. For Lotman, an important indication that a cultural form has moved from the periphery to the center and established itself is provided precisely by this kind of meta-commentary:

The “career” of cinematography is a case in point: from being a fairground spectacle, free of all theoretical restrictions and regulated only by technical possibilities, it turned into a central art-form, and, what is more, into one of the most written about of art-forms. (Lotman 1990, 134, italics added)

Returning to the initial filtering process on the boundary of the semiosphere, it is worth remarking that since Lotman’s theory is a semiotic theory, it takes language as the paradigm for all cultural processes. The transformative processing that happens in the boundary zone he therefore describes as a process of translation: “The border is a bilingual mechanism, translating external communications into the internal language of the semiosphere and vice versa” (Lotman 2005, 210).

I have some reservations about Lotman’s language here. It tends to assign agency to semiotic processes – “the border” is supposedly doing the translating, rather than people. I think, moreover, that the metaphor of translation is

problematic in the context of cinema. For instance, in the 1920s German filmmakers gradually adopted the American continuity cinema, a process well described in Kristin Thompson's book *Herr Lubitsch Goes to Hollywood* (Thompson 2005). It would be misleading to say that they were "translating" the American style "into the internal language" of German cinema, because that would entail that film style can simply be assimilated to other, preexisting cultural systems – to give "American" and "German" primacy over anything that is specifically filmic.

Another example would be the response in Norway, Finland, and Denmark to the success of the Swedish "Golden Age" films. Charles Magnusson, the head of Svenska Biografteatern (often shortened to Svenska Bio), the dominant Swedish film company, decided in late 1916 or early 1917 to adopt a policy of making fewer, but more expensive, ambitious, and prestigious films, based on well-known literary works and often shot on scenic locations. In his outstanding study *Den nationella stilen*, Bo Florin (1997) has examined the films resulting from this new policy and considered how their appearance was linked to the emergence and development of the idea of a Golden Age in Swedish cinema. With the new policy, Svenska Bio sought to make films that could gain critical recognition as works of art – at the time, much of the cultural establishment was unwilling to recognize the cinema as an art form in its own right and not merely a vulgar kind of canned theater.

In this, Svenska Bio was highly successful. Influential theater critics praised films like *Terje Vigen* and *Berg-Ejvind och hans hustru* unstintingly. The artistic cachet of these literary films acquired a distinctly national flavor when Svenska Bio released its first adaptation of the Nobel Prize-winning novelist Selma Lagerlöf, the majestic two-part *Ingmarssönerna*. Reviewers praised this film for being peculiarly Swedish, not just in its story, background, and spirit, but also in its high artistic worth. Florin quotes Johannes Zackarias Lindberg, a reviewer at *Stockholms Tidningen*, who wrote in 1919 that the Swedish cinema not only matched the technical skills of the Americans, but had an artistic soundness and dignity all its own: "Den är icke blott modern efter amerikanska begrepp, den har ock över sig som konstprodukt den prägel av gedigenhet och värdighet, vars verkan på utländsk botten såkert icke blir förfelad" (quoted in Florin 1997, 35).

Indeed, the Swedish film met with widespread international acclaim, although its commercial fortunes proved short-lived. In Norway and Finland, the Swedish films became models: the rural melodramas that dominated film production during the 1920s owed a great deal to the Swedish example (see Tybjerg forthcoming).

The processes Lotman describes are very abstract. What happens in practice? Lotman, turning again to pre-modern history for his examples, writes of the importance of the marginal figure to the translation process: "a person who, by

virtue of particular talent (magicians) or type of employment (blacksmith, miller, executioner), belongs to two worlds, operates as a kind of interpreter” (Lotman 2005, 211). Does this describe Gad, Dreyer, Sommerfeldt, or Schnéevoigt?

The Language Everyone Understands

For a film company like Denmark’s dominant company Nordisk, which relied on export to the world market for almost all of its business, the First World War produced great difficulties. The borders across which the company’s films had flown freely now became obstacles, often impassable. It is easy to see why the company should feel attracted to the vision of a world without frontiers or fronts.

In 1918, the company’s biggest, massively hyped release was *Himmelskibet* (*A Trip to Mars*, directed by Holger-Madsen), a science fiction story of a group of intrepid explores, led by the gallant Avanti Planetaros, who build a spaceship and travel to Mars. Mars turns out to be inhabited by a human-like but more elevated race of beings. They are wise, just, chaste, strict vegetarians, and completely non-violent. When they arrive, the space travelers from Earth marvel at their ability to instantly comprehend the Martians. Planetaros declares in an intertitle: “Se, vi forstaar alt, hvad de siger, *uden Ord*. De har fundet det Sprog, hvorefter vi har famlet: *Fælles-Sproget*, Sjælenes for alle forstaaelige Sprog!” The Martians have overcome the barriers of language and need no translation; they speak the universal tongue of all men. Stephan Schröder has written about how this idea also frequently appears in writings about the cinema from this time, making *Himmelskibet* a sort of meta-commentary about how the cinema too can overcome the borders of language (Schröder 2000; 2011, 512–553).

Unfortunately, with their long, white, druid-like robes and relentlessly conflict-free lifestyle, the Martians come across as boring and ridiculous, and the film was widely mocked at the time of its release. It was also invidiously compared to Sjöström’s *Berg-Ejvind och hans hustru* which had opened just one month earlier in the same theater, Palads-Teatret, the most prestigious in Copenhagen.

The comparison of the Danish and Swedish film industries was often made in Denmark: Denmark and Sweden were comparable countries, and the Danish film industry was supposed to be first-rank, technically speaking; so how was it that the Swedes made much better movies? Such polemical charges against the Danish productions, particularly those from Nordisk, had already begun appearing when Sjöström’s *Terje Vigen* came out in early 1917, but the premiere of *Himmelskibet*

just weeks after the spectacular critical success of *Berg-Ejvind och hans hustru* permitted the negative comparison to be made in the starkest possible terms. The contrast, as Stephan Schröder has pointed out, could also be seen as a contrast between *Himmelskibet's* high-flying internationalism and *Berg-Ejvind och hans hustru's* firm grounding in Nordic nature and literature.

Among those who contributed to the debate was the director Urban Gad. He had directed most of Asta Nielsen's films up to World War One. Gad's contribution to the debate was an essay, "Filmens nye Veje" ("New Paths for the Cinema"), where he argued that the cinema had both the potential and the obligation to cross borders, not only linguistic ones, but also those of class and taste. The language of the cinema, while naïve, could engage even the most discerning through its form: "[Filmen] maa tale det naive Sprog, som Alle forstaar, men tale det saa skønt, at den evner at gribe de Jævne ved sit Indhold, de Kræsne ved sin Form" (Gad 1918, 70).

It has not been previously noted that Gad had plans to act on his ideas.³ The new direction for the cinema he envisaged turned out to be very similar to the production policies pursued by Svenska Bio: to make national films, based on the works of famous writers and with picturesque natural settings. In May 1918, a newspaper announced that Gad was trying to set up an inter-Scandinavian production company to be called "Skandinavien" or possibly "Inter-Skandinav": "Man agter fortrinsvis at optage literære Film, skrevet af nordiske Forfattere med nordisk Natur som Ramme, og de bedste Skuespillere skal virke som Aktører" (*Ekstrabladet*, 1 May 1918; see also *Aftenposten* [Oslo], 1 May 1918; *Norske Intelligenssedler*, 19 May 1918). The financial backer of the project was Andreas Kvinnsland, the manager of Grünerløkkens Verdenstheater, later Parkteatret, a cinema in Oslo. The company would have, according to the 1 May articles, a quality control committee that would ensure the artistic quality of the films produced. The people named represented all three Scandinavian countries and are indicative of a strong desire for literary respectability on Gad's part: from Norway, Halfdan Christensen, head of the National Theater, and the popular novelist Johan Bojer; from Sweden, Gustaf Collijn, head of the Nya Intima Teatern, and the author Hjalmar Söderberg; from Denmark, Johannes Nielsen, the artistic director of the Royal Theater in Copenhagen, and Henrik Pontoppidan, who had just won the Nobel Prize in literature.⁴ Pontoppidan's involvement is confirmed by a letter from Henrik Pontoppidan to the dramatist Herdis

³ A full treatment of Gad's career is lacking, although Schröder 2010 provides a good discussion of his work with Asta Nielsen.

⁴ Some of the names are rendered inaccurately in the original newspaper reports: *Ekstrabladet* (1 Mai 1918) mistakenly calls Christensen "Johan" and Bojer "Boyer," while *Aftenposten* (1 Mai 1918) misspells Collijn's name.

Bergstrøm, dated 23 May 1918. Pontoppidan writes that he has signed and returned a document from Gad: “Dokumentet fra Urban Gad er tilbagesendt med min Underskrift. Nu får vi se, hvad der kommer ud af den store Plan” (http://www.henrikpontoppidan.dk/text/kilder/breve/bergstroem_herdis/1918_05_23.html).

But Gad’s “great plan” came to nothing. It was never realized. Gad soon went back to Germany and made several literary films there, though with limited success. However, on 18 May 1918, less than three weeks after Gad made his plans public, a number of smaller Swedish film companies joined together to form a new company named Skandia, which would successfully pursue policies very similar to those envisioned by Gad: Skandia made film versions of works by Bjørnson, Strindberg, and Henrik Pontoppidan, although the adaptation of the latter’s *Thora van Deken* (directed by John Brunius, 1920) only appeared after Scandia had merged with Svenska Bio to form a huge new company, Svensk Filmindustri. Both Gad and Skandia sought to emulate the successful formula of Svenska Bio, but Gad was too much on the periphery to succeed.

The European

Meanwhile at Nordisk, the management was well aware of the high quality of the films made by Svenska Bio. As early as 1916, Nordisk’s management berated its directors for not making films of the cinematic quality of those made by Mauritz Stiller (see Thorsen 2012), and they were well aware of Magnusson’s decision to make fewer, but more expensive, ambitious, and prestigious films. In 1919, Nordisk adopted a very similar policy, although Nordisk’s big films that year were not all national films: A. W. Sandberg adapted Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend* as *Vor fælles Ven*, and Carl Th. Dreyer made *Blade af Satans Bog* (*Leaves from Satan’s Book*, 1920) from an original screenplay by playwright Edgard Høyer. Both directors were younger men, who were promoted by the company because they were felt to have the ability to make the kind of ambitious literary films the company wanted to produce.

Dreyer’s cinematographer was George Schnéevoigt, who became an important figure in Danish film history as one of the leading directors in the 1930s, and we will return to him more than once in the following. When Dreyer left Nordisk because of disagreements with the producers, he took Schnéevoigt with him to Norway, where he shot *Prästänken* (*The Parson’s Widow*, 1920) for a Swedish company.

This film, based on a short story by the Norwegian writer Kristofer Janson, showed Dreyer’s ability to work in the style of the best of the Swedes. Using outdoor locations and real 17th-century houses preserved at an open-air museum,

Dreyer worked hard to create the sort of authenticity many commentators praised the Swedish films for (see Sandberg 2006). But Dreyer had also from his debut as a director two years before shown his aptitude for and understanding of continuity editing, as David Bordwell has discussed in his essay “The Dreyer Generation” (Bordwell 2010). Dreyer grasped, like Sjöström and Stiller, how this use of more frequent cutting and more close views could be used to give the film the kind of psychological intensity and conviction he considered the hallmark of film art.

Subsequently, Schnéevoigt and Dreyer collaborated again on two Danish films. The first was the fairy-tale drama *Der var engang* (*Once Upon a Time*, 1922), a film that was explicitly promoted as a Danish national film, based on Holger Drachmann’s popular and strongly nationalistic fairy-tale play from the 1880s (see Tybjerg 2001). The film was very popular in Denmark, but despite Schnéevoigt’s gorgeous and very atmospheric images of Danish forests, the film failed to find an international audience. The two worked together again on the small, intimate *Du skal ære din Hustru* (*Master of the House*, 1925). Schnéevoigt thus photographed all but one of Dreyer’s Danish silent films.

In 1926, Dreyer made another film in Norway, this time a Norwegian production: *Glomdalsbruden* (*The Bride of Glomdal*), based on two stories by Jacob B. Bull. *Glomdalsbruden* was a rural melodrama about a young man from a poor farm who falls in love with a girl from a rich farm, is rebuffed by the girl’s father, but finally wins her hand by demonstrating his upstanding character and proving his worth through a daring deed. This plot pattern recurs in many films of the period, both Swedish and Norwegian. *Glomdalsbruden* only survives in an abbreviated, 45-minute version; but it remains an excellent example of its genre. It makes good use of the landscape, not only in the exciting sequence towards the end when the hero has to swim across a raging river, but also to underscore the social differences between the hero and the heroine: she lives in a farm on the sunny side of the valley, where the landscape is pleasant-looking and attractive, but the hero lives on the shadow-side, where the terrain is rougher and the soil is poor. Dreyer also handles the psychological interplay between the hero and heroine with great elegance and subtlety.

The film was little seen outside Norway, and some Norwegian film people thought that it had been a bad idea to invite a Danish filmmaker to come to Norway and make it. Among them was Leif Sinding, who was a very active film journalist and trade paper editor and became one of the most important Norwegian film directors of the 1930s. Many years later, Sinding wrote a memoir-cum-history which remains one of the important texts about Norwegian silent cinema. In this book, he repeatedly returns to what he believed was the essential fact about making films in Norway: that the market was too small to make anything but cheaply-produced films profitable. This was not necessarily a problem: the frugality that this made necessary, Sinding regarded as a characteristically

Norwegian virtue, a product of an economizing small-holder mentality. By contrast, Sinding faults the Danish (and Swedish) directors working in Norway for their lack of budgetary discipline. If their films are better than those made by Norwegian directors, it is only because foolish and provincial producers allowed them to spend more money:

Og hvis en enkelt av disse filmene nådde kvalitet så var det takket et pengeforbruk uten grenser. Det er all mulig grunn til å tro at en av våre egne minst hadde nådd det samme resultat hvis han hadde hatt de samme midler. (Sinding 1972, 26)

Dreyer and *Glomdalsbruden* was a good example of this. Sinding somewhat disdainfully suggests that Dreyer was too much of a “European” to properly depict rural Norway: “Men det norske bondemiljøet forstod han mindre av, her var han, europeeren, på usikker grunn” (Sinding 1972, 65). Sinding acknowledges that the film Dreyer made was in fact an excellent one, but again describes it as a function of Dreyer’s reckless overspending, which created unrealistic expectations about what Norwegian-made films could achieve:

Glomdalsbruden ble en sober og velspilt film, uten tvil en av den norske stumfilmtidens beste filmer, men trass i dette ubestridelige faktum gjorde den allikevel mere skade enn gagn. For det første ble filmen altfor dyr etter norske forhold, 3 a 4 ganger dyrere enn en vanlig norsk stumfilm. [...] Og en annen uunngåelig følge av denne filmen var at dens dyrekjøpte kvalitet ble satt opp som en slags norm for annen norsk stumfilm. (Sinding 1972, 66)

Matching Natures

The Nordisk production most similar to the Swedish national films was *Borgslægtens Historie* (*Sons of the Soil*, literally “The History of the Borg Family”, 1920). It was based on a very successful multi-volume novel by the Icelandic author Gunnar Gunnarsson, written in Danish and first published in 1910–1912. The film was partly shot on location in Iceland, which had just become a sovereign nation (though the Danish king was the head of state). For that reason, the film is usually mentioned in surveys of the history of Icelandic cinema (Møller 2003, 261; Soila et al. 1998, 96–97), whereas it often goes unmentioned in surveys of Danish film history. Interestingly, whereas Iceland’s National Film Archive holds a print (where the original Danish intertitles have been replaced with Icelandic ones), the archive of the Danish Film Institute only holds a negative.

Gunnarsson was heavily involved in the production, but the direction was entrusted to the experienced film actor Gunnar Sommerfeldt. He had appeared

in thirty films from Nordisk beginning in 1914 and had directed one picture when he, according to his own account, proposed to adapt Gunnarsson's novel in April 1918 (*Palads-Teatrets Films-Nyheder*, 2:3, 11). The film went into production in the summer of 1919 and shooting was completed by the end of the year. It premiered in August 1920 in two parts, each nearly two hours in length, to respectful but not enthusiastic reviews. The Icelandic landscapes were an important part of the film's appeal; some Danish reviewers felt they were something that belonged to "us," to Danes – or used to, given that Iceland had only recently become independent of Denmark: "Det er for en Gangs Skyld noget af vort eget, vi ser – eller noget, der en Gang har været det" (*Berlingske Tidende*, 28 August 1920).

The film did not become the big international success Nordisk had hoped for, however. Sommerfeldt was let go. He went to Norway, where he found investors who were willing to put up the money for another big literary film, an adaptation of Knut Hamsun's 1917 novel *Markens Grøde* (*The Growth of the Soil*). The novel had just brought Hamsun the Nobel Prize in Literature (the citation specifically mentions it as the reason for awarding him the prize). Sommerfeldt also tried to get the rights to film *Victoria*, another Hamsun novel, while *Markens Grøde* was still in production, but Hamsun blocked this (letter from Hamsun to Sommerfeldt, 1 July 1921, in Næss 1997, 358). Hamsun was no cinema enthusiast, but when he saw the finished *Markens Grøde*, he was apparently quite happy with the adaptation; at least, that was what the film's leading actor Amund Rydland told an interviewer in the 1950s: "Hamsun var i et ypperlig humør. Han havde ikke *tenkt* seg at boken kunne bli så god som film" (quoted in Myrstad 1994, 20).

The film *Markens Grøde* was shot entirely on location in Northern Norway, in the area around Mo i Rana. The snow-covered winter scenes were shot in March 1921 (*Nordlands Avis*, 17 March 1921), the rest of the picture during the summer, probably finishing in mid-August (*Nordlands Avis*, 30 July 1921). There is basically only one interior set, the log cabin of Isak, the main character. It is very clearly constructed as an open box, lit by natural light, and likely built on the spot. A few real interiors are also used, including a courtroom for a trial scene late in the film. The many location exteriors give the film a great deal of fresh air, but probably did not help control costs. Soon after the shooting started, Sommerfeldt told the local newspaper in Mo i Rana that the film would cost around 100,000 Crowns to make (*Nordlands Avis*, 17 March 1921), but after the end of shooting, the same paper reported that the final costs had been 250,000 Crowns (*Nordlands Avis*, 5 November 1921). This meant that it was as expensive as some of the costliest Danish and Swedish films. It was launched in the grandest possible way, with a special screening for King Haakon VII and prime minister Blehr (*Firda Folkeblad*, 23 December 1921), and a full orchestral score commissioned from the prominent composer Leif Halvorsen.

A problem faced by Sommerfeldt is the sprawling, epic character of Hamsun’s novel. It is very difficult to condense into a two-hour film. Furthermore, apart from Isak’s initial arrival in the wilderness, he is in some ways a very passive character; he just keeps toiling away at the land while events happen around him. The story is, in the words of a literary handbook, “en moderne Robinsonade” (Fonsmark 1967, 443), but this is hard to transfer to the screen. Here, apart from settling in the wilderness at the beginning, Isak never crosses any boundaries; the story never really gets moving.

Markens Grøde has some nicely shot scenes. One of the most impressive is one which was also singled out for praise by the Norwegian paper *Morgenbladet*’s reviewer at the time of the film’s premiere (17.12.1921, quoted in Myrstad 1994, 18). In this scene, Isak’s wife Inger returns after years in jail, having killed her infant daughter because she had a hare-lip like herself. She has borne another daughter in jail, whom Isak has never seen. When Isak arrives at the harbor and sees Inger and her daughter for the first time, we get a relatively close shot of him, but the rest of the scene plays out in a very distant shot, with intertitles explaining Isak’s emotions to the audience. During the drive back to Isak’s homestead, they stop for a break and begin to eat. Again, Sommerfeldt does not place the camera in such a way that we get to see the actors’ emotions well; instead, we get a narrative intertitle saying, “And by sunset it felt as though they had never been apart.” Sommerfeldt then cuts to a spectacular nature shot that underscores and deepens the emotional significance of the scene, but the staging of the scene itself fails to build towards it. It is useful to compare it to the similar scene towards the end of Victor Sjöström’s *Ingmarssönerna*, analyzed in detail in Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs’ *Theatre to Cinema* (Brewster / Jacobs 1997, 133–36). In this scene too, the wife has been released after having been jailed for killing her infant child. Sjöström explores the intense, but suppressed emotions involved with great delicacy and tact; we get close enough to the actors to allow their performances to carry most of the weight of communicating the emotions of the characters to the audience.

Even so, *Markens Grøde* remains an impressive film. It has gradually been given a more prominent place within Norwegian film historiography.⁵ Making “a truly Norwegian film” was Sommerfeldt’s declared intention: “Jeg haaber gjennem samarbeide med den norske forfatter og norske skuespillere at faa en egte norsk film, indspillet som den blir i nogen av de vakreste egne av Deres vakre land” (*Nordlands Avis*, 21 February 1921). But Leif Sinding’s conclusion was

⁵ Its relative obscurity may be related to the fact that for many years, *Markens Grøde* was considered a lost film. Prints found in the United States and Holland allowed it to be restored in the early 1990s (Pedersen 1994; Surowiec 1996, 125–126).

different: “*Markens grøde* ble ingen god film” (Sinding 1972, 26). The film was costly but not good and set the baleful trend of importing overspending directors from the other Scandinavian countries, which Sinding regarded as the bane of the Norwegian cinema of the 1920s. In Danish film historiography, Sommerfeldt remains an almost entirely obscure figure, perhaps because his two major films were made in Iceland and Norway.⁶ His border-crossings do not seem to have made Sommerfeldt artistically influential, but if we wish to get a better understanding of his career, we probably need a research perspective that directs attention at boundaries and those who cross them.

An Asphalt Flower in the Wilderness

When Sommerfeldt talked about how the beauty of the landscapes would make *Markens Grøde* a truly Norwegian film, it underscores the importance of the cinematography. The cameraman who shot *Markens Grøde* was George Schnéevoigt, who was also very much a border-crosser. His father was a Danish musician, but in his youth, he lived in Berlin with his Finnish mother, Siri Schnéevoigt, who was a professional photographer.⁷ He returned to Denmark around 1913 and began working in films, first for a short-lived company owned by his wife, and then from 1915 for Nordisk, the dominant Danish production company. Here, he directed four pictures (all lost) and photographed a number of others. As a cinematographer, apart from his work with Dreyer and Sommerfeldt, he also worked for UFA in Germany. In Norway, he directed a comedy, *Baldevins bryllup* (1926), and subsequently photographed a picture called *Viddernes folk* (1928), directed by the Swedish director Ragnar Westfelt. This was a melodrama taking place in the far north of Norway among the reindeer-herding Sami people (or “Lapps,” as they were then called).

Working in the stark Northern wilderness seems to have struck a chord with Schnéevoigt. Leif Sinding makes no secret of his dislike for Schnéevoigt, who was apparently rather openly gay (see Sørensen 2014, 276–77), but grudgingly admits his skill at capturing the Northern wilderness on film: “denne københavnske asfaltplante havde en medfødt sans for villmarken” (Sinding 1972, 164). Wanting

⁶ According to his biography at the Danish national filmography (<http://www.dfi.dk/faktaomfilm/person/da/111780.aspx?id=111780>), he made a couple of documentaries in the late 1920s, one of them in the Holy Land, and died obscurely in police custody in 1947, having been arrested for not being able to pay a hotel bill.

⁷ The following paragraphs on Schnéevoigt’s career are a slightly revised version of my liner notes for the Flicker Alley DVD edition of *Laila*.

to make his own film along the same lines as *Viddernes folk*, Schnéevoigt was able to convince the producer Helge Lunde to finance *Laila*, a film based on the best-known novel then written about the Sami, J. A. Friis's *Fra Finnmarken. Skildringer* from 1881, retitled *Lajla* (with a J) in subsequent editions.

Laila tells the story of an infant girl lost in the snow when her parents' sleds are attacked by hungry wolves. She is found by the Sami and raised by them after her parents die of the plague. As a grown woman, she falls in love with Anders, a handsome Norwegian, but a supposedly interracial marriage between a white Norwegian and a Lapp girl is considered completely unacceptable. After many melodramatic complications, Anders declares his sincere love for Laila, and only then learns that she is, in fact, Norwegian by blood. The story thus neatly manages to have its cake and eat it: while saluting the way true love triumphs over racial prejudice, it reassures spectators uncomfortable with “racial mixing” that no such thing actually occurs – both heroine and hero are pure-blooded Norwegians.

Schnéevoigt shot much of *Laila* on location in Northern Norway, and the results are magnificent. The cinematographer was Valdemar Christensen, another Dane (he would go on to shoot all Schnéevoigt's subsequent films). As was the case in *Markens Grøde*, some of the most impressive landscape shots are carefully husbanded, being used to deepen the impact of emotionally crucial scenes. To take one example: at the time the plague strikes, Laila, still a girl, has been returned to her parents, and her Sami foster-father Aslak, who loves her deeply, fears she may have died. Aslak waits anxiously on a hilltop for news, and when his faithful retainer Jåmpa appears and shouts that he has brought her back safely, Schnéevoigt cuts to a long shot of the deeply relieved and grateful Aslak bowing his head with a gorgeous and spectacular mountainscape behind him. The emotions evoked in spectators by this breathtaking view amplify and enrich their comprehension of the emotions of the character.

Not least because of its dramatic use of the Nordic landscape, *Laila* was widely understood to be part of a common Scandinavian tradition. Many of the reviews remark on this. When the film premiered in Copenhagen in late 1929, it was treated as an inter-Scandinavian event: it had a Danish director, Norwegian novel and nature, and a Swedish star (Mona Mårtensson, who plays the adult Laila). The Swedish and Norwegian ambassadors were invited, and the flags of all three nations hung in the auditorium.

Schnéevoigt did not just want to make a “Scandinavian” film, however. He explicitly declared his intention to make a film that would appeal to international audiences, and that could hold its own in the world market – “en Verdensfilm” (Norwegian program booklet, quoted in Bachmann 2013, 283).

Bachmann also quotes an interview with Tryggve Larsen, the actor playing Jåmpa, where he emphasizes the international qualities of Schnéevoigt's script: "Det inneholder de russiske films realism, tysk nøiaktighet, fransk følsomhet og raffinement og ikke å forglemme amerikansk tempo" (quoted in Bachmann 2013, 284)

This corresponds to the broad European tendency to try to draw on the stylistic experiments of the 1920s – German expressionism, French impressionism, Soviet montage – and combine them with Hollywood continuity storytelling to create an "international style," as Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell call it in their book *Film History: An Introduction* (Thompson / Bordwell 2010, 155–158), a style that would have both eye-catching artistic refinements and broad audience appeal. *Laila* does not use any conspicuously avant-garde devices, but the use of both rapid cutting and fast camera movement in the film's action sequences shows Schnéevoigt's desire to make a film as well-crafted, modern, and exiting in its storytelling as possible. Not everyone felt that he had been successful in this endeavor, however.

Sinding approvingly quotes in full a review (from *Tidens Tegn*, Norway's second-biggest newspaper) suggesting that Schnéevoigt's film comes up woefully short when compared either to a Soviet film like *Storm Over Asia* (*Potomok Chingiskhana*, Vsevolod Pudovkin 1928) – which also takes place in a distant, exotic frontier area inhabited by 'primitive' nomads – or to Hollywood films dealing with the Klondike gold rush or otherwise set in the Arctic:

Instruksjonen [...] og fotograferingen virker meget solid, men ikke alltid modern, ikke i amerikansk, heller ikke i østeuropeisk forstand. [...] Man savner dristighet, fantasi, en intellektuell oppfatning av det som synsinntrykk kan gi av pludselig [sic], uventet sjeelig opplevelse [sic]. (Quoted in Sinding 1972, 171)

It is worth dwelling a moment on the reviewer's comparison between *Laila* and *Storm over Asia*, particularly the market scenes. In both films, we see markets held on the frontier between civilization and the lands of the nomads, shot on location. In both cases, we start with a crowd of exotically dressed spectators watching a fairground performer. Schnéevoigt gives us quite a lot of this kind of local color; the main narrative event in the market scene in *Laila* is the first meeting of Laila and Anders and the first stirrings of their romance. Pudovkin, on the other hand, quickly moves to drama: his market town is a place of capitalist exploitation, and soon our hero is a fugitive, pursued by hard, stiff-necked British soldiers, having lashed out in anger at a rapacious English fur trader. With its starkly composed, very legible shots, its brisk montage, and its odious villains, *Storm over Asia* is evidently a more forceful film.

To Sinding, however, the problem is not really that Schnéevoigt failed to reach the standards set by Pudovkin and to realize his ambition to create “en verdensfilm,” a world-class international-style film (and he arguably got quite close); rather, the ambition to make an “international” film was itself the problem. Sinding regarded *Laila* as being insufficiently rooted in the national and as the worst example of the cost overruns Sinding believed happened again and again when non-Norwegian directors made Norwegian films: the costs of the film ballooned way beyond its initial budget of 90,000 Norwegian crowns to a final cost of almost 400,000 crowns (Sinding 1972, 164, 170). Sinding does acknowledge that the film did in fact get the international distribution that would make it possible to recoup the money invested in it. Still, he prefers to credit the Norwegian producer of the film, Helge Lunde, with its success, rather than its spendthrift and fickle Danish director or its second-rank Swedish star:

Laila fikk nemlig sin førsteoppførelse – i Nationalteatret. Og i fremmedlosjen satt Georg Schneevoigt [sic] og primadonnaen Mona Mårtenson og tok imot publikums hyldest. Jeg vet hvem jeg ville gitt laurbærkransen. Jeg vet hva denne premieren kostet ham og hva den skulle komme til å koste ham i tunge år som fulgte.
Honnør for Helge Lunde! (Sinding 1972, 170)

It is a curious reversal Sinding performs: praising the producer Lunde for *Laila*'s undeniable – artistic – qualities, but blaming the director Schnéevoigt for its poorly planned production and excessive cost.

Conclusion

Can we say, then, that our four *Grenzgänger* Gad, Dreyer, Schnéevoigt, and Sommerfeldt helped bring new impulses across boundaries? To some extent, yes, and I believe it is one of the strengths of Lotman's model that it directs attention to figures who do not necessarily fit easily into a single national film history and may have been marginalized by historians as a result. It also brings to the fore the importance of the tensions between internationalism and the national we found in connection with Urban Gad's ideas and the debate in 1918, as well as with the films *Laila*, *Markens Grøde*, and *Glomdalsbruden*.

But while Lotman's model may call attention to these issues, I fear it may be a little too abstract and general to fully analyze them. The division between center and periphery is seldom clear-cut, nor is it always easy to say which is which. To Sinding, very clearly, Norway was on the periphery of the international filmmaking community. But were the Danish directors travelling north

representatives of a metropolitan center arrogantly imposing its norms on distant primitives? Or were they outsiders bringing new ideas to a close-knit cultural grouping?

The issue becomes even more fraught when the great conflicts of twentieth-century politics enter the picture. Both the “nationalist” Sinding and the “internationalist” Schnéevoigt sided with the Germans during World War 2. Both their sons served as volunteers under Waffen-SS command on the Eastern Front. Sinding’s son was killed, Schnéevoigt’s returned to Denmark, joined the Nazi auxiliary police, and was sentenced to death after the war for the murder of a resistance fighter (the sentence was commuted to a long prison term). The outspokenly anti-Semitic⁸ Sinding became the head of the new film directorate established in 1941 by Quisling’s Norwegian Nazi government to oversee film production in Norway. Sinding withdrew after a year, but was sentenced to a four-year jail term as a traitor after the war. While Schnéevoigt’s sympathies were less open than those of his cinematographer Valdemar Christensen, who made no secret of his membership of the Danish Nazi party, he seems to have had clear pro-German views. Schnéevoigt was not officially punished after the war, but he was never able to return to filmmaking after having been fired from Nordisk, where he had been the top director since 1931, at the end of 1942, largely for commercial reasons (for more on Schnéevoigt and the occupation, see Sørensen 2014, 275–81). Christensen, regarded as Nordisk’s and perhaps Denmark’s finest cinematographer at the time, was dismissed after the liberation in 1945. He ended up working as a staff photographer at the Zoological Museum of the University of Copenhagen.

The careers of Schnéevoigt, Sinding, and Valdemar Christensen were cut short because they had “crossed a line” (as the common metaphor has it) in

⁸ Sinding contributed a vile piece to the 1942 collection *Norske røster. Inntryk fra Tyskland*, where he writes about the contrast between visiting Berlin in 1931 and ten years later: “Jeg hadde jo helt fra 1921 av med forferdelse konstatert jødernes stadig stigende makt og innflytelse, men i 1931 hadde deres frekkhet nådd en høyde som virket likefram gruoppvekkende. Jødernes skitne fantasi og lidderlighet hadde formådd likefrem å sette sitt smussige stempel på Berlin. Det stod en gufs av pornografi og pervers erotikk fra gater og kaféer. Ikke ti meter kunne en gå i fred før en eller annen ivrig selger ville prakke på en ‘Die Ehe’, ‘Die Freundin’ og hva nå denne hærskare av smussblader het. På kaféer og kabareter var all slags perversitet den store mote, og jødene som bevisst søkte å styrte folket ut i fordervelsen og ødeleggelsen, flirte åpenlyst. Men for en forskjell disse 10 år har gjort. Berlin er som forvandlet. Den er blitt en åpen og renslig by. En germansk by. De flirende, uforskammede og hovmodige jøder er forsvunnet fra gatebildet. Lasten som innbringende jødisk forretning feid vekk.” (Holst 1942, 98–99). Even in a collection devoted to sycophantic praise of the “will” and “strength” of the Nazis’ “new Germany,” Sinding’s contribution stands out for its embrace of the Hitler regime’s lethal racial politics.

their enthusiasm for Nazi Germany. This is obviously a very different sort of boundary-crossing from that which consists in trying to introduce the norms of the international quality film into the small-scale, almost artisanal world of Norwegian film production. I think it is worth mentioning, however, because the overall thrust of Lotman’s description and his examples tends to see boundary-crossing as something commendable, something that contributes to cultural dynamism and enriches a given cultural sphere.

Using examples like film’s successful struggle for acceptance as an art form or the gradual triumph of avant-garde art over its academic forebearers, Lotman aligns the activity of border-crossing with courses of events often presented as heroic narratives by film historians and art historians. On a similar note, the boundary-crossers, the *Grenzgänger*, are exemplified with such figures as magicians, executioners, and millers; and these are precisely the kinds of marginal figures micro-historians of the medieval and early modern periods have tended to find particularly fascinating (a famous example is the miller Menocchio, the central figure of Carlo Ginzburg’s classic *The Cheese and the Worms* (Ginzburg 1982)).

But there are many kinds of boundary-crossing, and not all of them are equal – or commendable. If we take the example of Schnéevoigt, he was an exotic but highly qualified outsider in Norwegian cinema in the 1920s; in the 1940s, it seems he was both a Nazi fellow-traveler and openly (by the standards of the time) gay. If we use the terminology of boundary-crossing, it seems difficult not to refer to all three things as just that. But if we do so, we risk suggesting that there might be some kind of link between them, some kind of common cause or parallel development.

I believe we should not even begin to make such a claim without strong arguments and solid evidence. Therefore, while Lotman’s concept of the boundary (as I have already said) may helpfully direct attention to marginal figures, its use requires great circumspection if we are to avoid the risk of blurring boundaries between different spheres that should be kept distinct. Moreover, it seems rather evident that in the case of Scandinavian cinema of the 1920s, the artistic dynamic was not one of the periphery stimulating the center, but rather that the Swedish cinema, the dominant force in this period, became the model filmmakers in the neighbouring countries sought to emulate.

Finally, it is difficult in practice to say exactly what semiospheres are or what they contain. Do nations correspond to semiospheres? What about film styles or political movements? Semiospheres (and *a fortiori* crossings of their boundaries) are, in the end, conceptually too vague to be really useful if our aim is to assess the significance of the careers of such figures as Schnéevoigt, Sommerfeldt, and Dreyer, or the value of their films.

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