

Norwegian films Young and fearless



THE BEAUTIFUL COUNTRY | ELLING

Suddenly Norwegian film has gone global, and is no longer isolated far off somewhere in the icy and stormy North. The new global appeal does not appear only because the films are rooted in local tradition, or unfold peacefully in a relatively idyllic environment, both well polished and protected by oil money.

On the contrary, Norwegian film people are stepping out into the outside world. Or how else to describe it when a Norwegian director and production company catch onto a design laid out by the legendary Terrence Malick (*Badlands*, *The Thin Red Line*)? The plot does not take place in Norway, it is set in Vietnam and the US. Actors like Nick Nolte, Tim Roth and Bai Ling are hired. *The Beautiful Country* is selected for the main competition at the Berlin Festival 2004.

Previously, Hans Petter Moland has attracted attention with *Zero Kelvin* (1995) as well as with *Aberdeen*; both films are studies in male self images. The themes of *The Beautiful Country* are the dangers and hardships that lie behind the mass migrations of our time. But it is just as much a metaphor for the desire for reconciliation after the Vietnam War.

A Vietnamese-American war child is adopted, but

leaves his village for Saigon to find his biological mother. He continues fleeing, ending up on a ship from hell bound for the US. Tim Roth is a careless devil of a captain. After the ordeal on board the ship, America does not prove to be a paradise for the boat refugees. And the father figure is different from what the son had imagined. Nick Nolte provides the great acting achievement of the film, in an unhysterical finale. *The Beautiful Country* develops into a stirring odyssey through individual fortunes and our contemporary age. It is bold and hearty.

UNCOMMON

Norwegian films are uncommonly popular, not only during film weeks and festivals abroad, but also in Norwegian cinemas. This little miracle appeared in 2001; the new millennium made a big difference. The comedy film *Elling* (Petter Næss) was Oscar nominated. And the documentary *Cool & Crazy* (Knut Erik Jensen) was a substantial audience and critics success both abroad and at home.

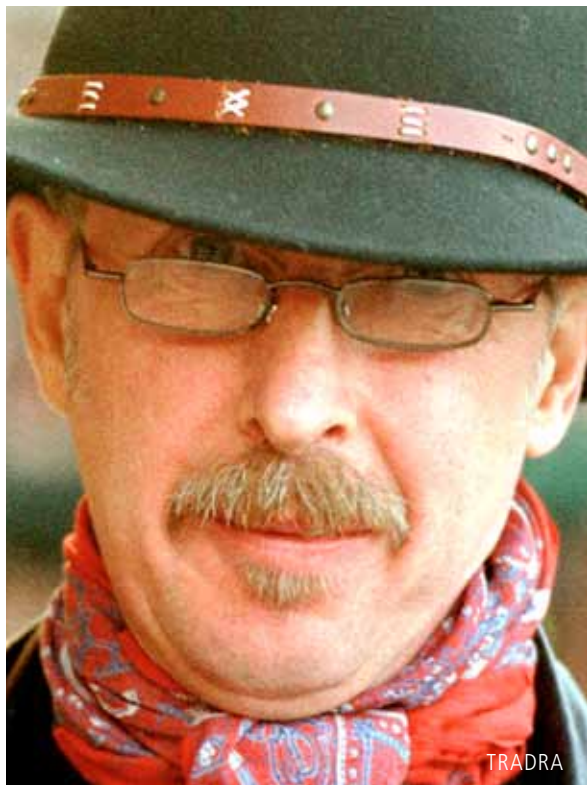
But the big, broad breakthrough did not occur before 2003. There are now more Norwegian productions than ever, and they are taken seriously by an audience which hitherto has been content with Hollywood as the valid film model. It is impossible to be moving in social circles without having seen the latest Norwegian cinema film. Box office numbers are the highest in 20 years, and constitute

22 % of the market.

2001, a remarkable year for Norwegian film, saw the release of *Elling*, a film based on a very popular series of novels which had previously been successfully adapted for the stage. Of Norway's population of 4.5 million people, over 700,000 were tempted out of their homes to see this comedy. More than half a million Germans saw the film in the cinemas. It also became a festival success, after the Oscar nomination. Later, the film makes a triumphal progress over Europe as a theatre play.

Together with his friend, *Elling* is forced to rid himself of his obsessions and social anxiety. *Elling's* inhibitions are all-encompassing, and he uses desperate flights of fantasy and a highly personal, extremely high-pitched vocal style to escape from any stressful situation. His friend is heavily down-to-earth in his own naive way. Fabulous acting ensures that the two characters' anxiety and trepidation are portrayed with feeling, pace and humanity. The writer Ingvald Ambjørnsen is among the best providers of raw material for Norwegian films.

A man who formulates the age in which he lives. In 2004, the man behind *Elling*, Petter Næss, delivered a comedy with an even stronger American hue, à la American Pie. *Just Bea* is about the sexual debut of 16 year old girls. Næss has not made a cynical high school comedy. He sheds light on



TRADRA



COOL AND CRAZY

conformity pressure and the more or less dubious ideals which young people are clinging to. Such topics are well suited for comedies. And in this film, there is never a dull moment.

Later this year, productions turned up which were even more varied than the films of 2003.

And they appeared as a result of a lively production of short and documentary films which train and develop talents like almost never before. The documentary film has an honourable previous history in Norwegian film, especially regarding sober films in accordance with the demand for realism. In recent years, Sigve Endresen has made several films about sensitive subjects which are also haunting Norwegian contemporary times; drug addiction, cancer, diet hysteria. Endresen has formed his own school, characterized by an especially strong talent for getting close to the characters, without exploiting them. Other names worth mentioning are Karoline Frogner, who has brought up the plight of the vagrants with *-Igår ble jeg Tater* (English title tba).

But Knut Erik Jensen has lately taken the genre even further, with his films from Finnmark county which have earned international attention among critics and success among audiences. High above the Arctic Circle the members of a men's choir take their places, backs bent against the snow and wind, while in the background the Arctic Ocean froths and foams. Under white caps, the men's beards and eyebrows are slowly enveloped by a crusting of snow and ice. No less rugged are the lives of the men who make up the Berlevåg Men's Choir, as told in the unique documentary called *Cool and Crazy* (2001). Light and dark, cold and solitude, warmth and vision, beauty and fear are all acted out against a backdrop of frozen landscapes, subtly evoked moods and warm interiors. But an undercurrent of pithy, biting wit keeps this film firmly down to earth.

The fishing village of Berlevåg in Finnmark, like

other small communities in rural Norway, is vulnerable. Knut Erik Jensen, himself from an isolated outpost, directed this film with the sensitivity of a poet, producing a documentary which has drawn record crowds in Norway and attracted international attention – also in the USA, where the choir's tour among Norwegian-Americans was filmed for release as a sequel, called *Cool and Crazy On the Road* (2002). This was not as successful, even in the shadow of September 11.

In 2004, Jensen made a third documentary. This time around, he boldly described a cabaret group in Finnmark county, in the extreme northern part of the country. Arctic Cabaret belongs to the well-known burlesque carnival tradition of continental Europe. Ordinary folks oppose the authorities. But also this form of common cause failed to become a success.

Though the traditional image of Norway is confirmed in these documentaries, Jensen has close ties to the culture of neighbouring Russia. The thematic and aesthetic influence of film poet Andrei Tarkovsky runs like a thread through the three feature films Jensen has made – a mystical vision of reality, in which symbolism abounds and which is often expressed through modernistic techniques. These three films are *Stella Polaris* (1993), *Burnt by Frost* (1997), and *Passing Darkness* (2000).

Writer Alf R. Jacobsen, who is also an outstanding investigative reporter, provided the storylines for all three of these films. Norwegian film without writers and publishers would be unthinkable. There would simply be fewer – far fewer – films. Over half the films made in Norway are the works of directors inspired by literature and moved to create new visual interpretations.

Short film is also treated as a genre different from and more than just a training ground for feature film directors. The format has got its own buzzing festival in Grimstad. And when Norwegian short

films venture out into the world, they are often presented with awards. The 2003 Cannes Festival was remarkable in this respect, with Norwegian productions winning three major prizes.

BREAKTHROUGH

2003 as the breakthrough year for a new film generation was not without controversies, in spite of critical acclaim and audience magnetism. It was claimed that these were feel-good films which cheat on reality and wag spinelessly for their ever increasing audience. That they offered a onesided view of the young men of the dessert generation who have always gotten unconditional support from superiors and from their schools. They have never encountered any resistance. There has always been plenty of everything. And they do not wish to leave behind their youth, which, according to some, lasts until they reach 40, rapidly followed by old age. They do not wish to break up from their parents' comfortable nest. Neither are they willing to make the choices necessary for building an independent life. And they do not want to assume any responsibility.

On the fringes of the comedies, because that's what these films are, a few young women hover. They're patiently waiting for the boys to make up their minds, before the girls themselves intervene.

This kind of comedy lacks any kind of plot, it was claimed. But in the magic mirror of comedy, they capture a mentality which borders on the tragicomical. Norwegian films hit the contemporary pace of a generation. Young Norwegians of today are not living in heroic times. A lot of ironical flippancy was tyrannizing the last decade. Consequently, it's natural to choose a somewhat protective and disarming comedy form when seriousness is to be regained. Questions are posed in a comfortable, non-ironical way. The form is intended to reconcile.



BUDDY

KITCHEN STORIES

Characteristic for this kind of film is *Buddy* by Morten Tyldum, a story about friendship. The boys are either torn between two girls, they run away from the responsibilities of unwanted parenthood, or they show significant symptoms of juvenile depression. They have to adjust to a labour market which suddenly is not open to well-educated young people.

Conditions ease up slightly in *United* by Magnus Martens and *Jonny Vang* by Jens Lien. Characteristics of a somewhat older kind appear in Eva Isaksen's *Mother's Elling*. This film presents the pre-history of the Oscar-nominated film *Elling*, made with shrewdness and in a gloomy mood. The two films will be followed by a third, which will carry Petter Næss' signature, after a stay in Hollywood.

Norwegian films are no longer distinguished by auteur theories and personal handwriting, but follow the regulations and conventions of the genres. We have seen a horror film, *Dark Woods*, by Pål Øye, and a fairy-tale thriller about beauty pressure on little girls, *The Beast of Beauty*, by Hilde Heier, an animation film about the distinctly Norwegian *Captain Sabertooth*, by Stig Bergqvist, a romantic comedy, *The Woman of my Life*, by Alexander Eik. Just to mention a few films from 2003.

THE AUTEUR BENT HAMER

The best Norwegian film of the breakthrough year is full of criticism of the purpose rationality of the 1950s. This was the period when social democracy was supposed to regulate everything to the benefit of all, with its well-meant, firm and unimaginative social planning.

A few stuffy Swedish observers crossed the border to the far more laid-back neighbour country Norway. They perched on umpire style high chairs

of the kind we know from tennis courts, discreetly placed in the corner of the kitchen. From this position they sketched all movements Norwegian bachelors made across the kitchen floor. The graphs were supposed to result in a more rational utilization of the kitchen. Does this perhaps by any chance also resemble the thought patterns of market liberalism?

Bent Hamer is the man who laid *Eggs* in 1995. This was a debut film from the sidelines about two retired brothers in the typical Norwegian countryside. The critics mentioned names like Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter and Buster Keaton in order to trace the spirit behind this low budget comedy which was selected for the Directors' Fortnight in Cannes, and won many awards all over the world. This tragicomic play never becomes pretentious, but rather universal, with great performances by aging, clown-like characters.

In 2003, Hamer won the main award at the fastidious Directors' Fortnight at the Cannes Festival. *Kitchen Stories* is an eccentric and burlesque film. It glances sideways in the direction of Jacques Tati, and asks world-improvers to leave ordinary folks alone. Hamer's intelligence is kindhearted, but shrewd enough. Scenography, acting and other factors helped *Kitchen Stories* win many awards and a lot of well deserved good critics, both abroad and at home.

And they confirm the impression that Norwegian film workers know their medium through and through; this is the natural form of expression of the present generation. In addition, they employ actors who effortlessly follow up ideas and observations.

THE LURE OF LITERATURE

Norwegian film is unthinkable without writers of literature, and they are used according to who is

in vogue. For a while, the taciturn symbolist from Telemark, Tarjei Vesaas, delivered the material. Later on, it may have been the more nervously urbane Knut Faldbakken. Along came Lars Saabye Christensen, who not only rewrote Knut Hamsun for the screen, but also put his own adolescence novels from Oslo's westside on the table. The dramatist Jon Fosse is played on stages all over the world, and is hailed as the new Henrik Ibsen. His works are challenging, which became apparent at the Berlin Festival 2004 with Romuald Karmakar's German version of *Nightsongs*. His restricted form and frozen emotions created a lot of temper.

The Norwegian film industry has been able to draw on the country's three Nobel literature laureates, who, strangely enough, do not include the playwright Henrik Ibsen. And it took Norway's only film personality of international stature to transfer Sigrid Undset's epic drama, *Kristin Lavransdatter* (1995), to the big screen. Liv Ullmann teamed up with Ingmar Bergman's brilliant Swedish cameraman, Sven Nykvist, and a cast of first-rate Norwegian actors in her three-hour interpretation of the first volume of Undset's medieval trilogy, for which the author won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1928.

The film was the most expensive and controversial project in Norwegian film history, and Ullmann herself said that making it was the hardest job she had ever done. But the film swept the opposition off the screens in the nation's cinemas and created the atmosphere of a golden age. Norwegians flocked to the cinema to see the courageous Kristin's tempestuous encounter with true love under pre-reformation skies. A shorter version was made for the non-Norwegian market.

Knut Hamsun is the Norwegian Nobel literature laureate who has proved most alluring to filmmakers, both with his life and with his works. 1996 saw the premiere of a lengthy biopic – actually



KRISTIN LAVRANSDATTER



THE TELEGRAPHIST

made as a television series – with three actors playing the novelist from boy to old man. The Enigma was directed by Bentein Baardson, and is an attempt to view this many-faceted writer through wholly Norwegian eyes.

But Sweden's Jan Troell was first out with his dramatization of the Danish writer Thorkild Hansen's controversial documentary novel, *The Case against Hamsun*, with Max von Sydow in the title role and the Danish actress Ghita Nørby as his wife, Marie. Hamsun supported Hitler during the Second World War, but begged the Nazi occupying forces to spare the lives of Norwegians condemned to death. When the war ended, this most internationally renowned of Norwegians was brought to book, and the aging patriarch was eventually declared mentally disabled. This he immediately disproved by publishing a brilliant new novel, *On Overgrown Paths*.

The trial was an embarrassing affair for all concerned, and highly-charged emotionally. For this reason, the story had to be filmed by a non-Norwegian. All controversy aside, however, there is no doubt that von Sydow plays Hamsun with great dignity. He is a man who has lived in his own separate world, but who will face his trial like a man. Despite all the politics and legal niceties, the film is first and foremost a moving and tragic love story.

Hamsun is Norway's most filmed novelist. Only Ibsen's dramas have more frequently been transferred to the big screen. The first Hamsun film dates from 1921, when the Danish film-maker, Gunnar Sommerfeldt, made a film version of *The Growth of the Soil*, the novel for which Hamsun won his Nobel prize. The film was shot in North Norway's most beautiful scenery and was lost for many years, until it was rediscovered in the USA and restored in the Netherlands by the Norwegian

Film Institute. It can be described as a live-action illustration of the novel, and is now often shown together with its original score, written by conductor and violinist Leif Halvorsen. In the days of the silent movie, the score was sent to the various cinemas as sheet-music.

In 1922, the following year, the first completely Norwegian film of a Hamsun work was released. This was *Pan –Five Acts and an Epilogue*. Here we should mention that the Danish film genius Carl Th. Dreyer twice made films in Norway. *The Glomdal Bride* was the very epitome of national romanticism from the depths of rural Norway. A wealthy farmer wants his daughter to marry a rich man, but she loves another. In this film Dreyer showed early signs of the genius he was to demonstrate a few years later with *Jeanne d'Arc*.

Denmark's Henning Carlsen was responsible for the best dramatization of the day of a Hamsun novel, *Hunger* (1966), with Swedish actor Per Oscarsson unforgettable in the leading role. A few years ago, Carlsen returned with *Pan/Two Green Feathers* (1995), which was not in the same class but nevertheless reveals the kind of attraction Hamsun's linguistic virtuosity still exerts on film-makers – be they Norwegians or Danes or any other nationality.

Film-makers seem to do best with Hamsun's 'smaller' works, such as *The Telegraphist*, which was based on the short novel *Dreamers*. Erik Gustavson's film was selected to represent Norway in the main competition of the Berlin Film Festival in 1993. It was the first time in 19 years that a Norwegian film had achieved such an honour at the world's second most prestigious film festival.

The Telegraphist is not a particularly original film. But it takes us to the beautiful coast of Nordland county and to Hamsun's Kjerringøy island, which

is a fairy-tale in its own right. Cinema-goers who have seen the Danish Oscar-winner *Babette's Feast* (which novelist Karen Blixen set in North Norway, but which film-maker Gabriel Axel relocated to oh-so Danish Jutland) and the charmingly Chekhovian comedy *Black Eyes* by the Russian Nikita Mikhalkov will feel at home – in terms of the film's atmosphere – on the coast of Nordland. And that is not only because Sweden's inimitable Jarl Kulle (who was also in *Babette's Feast*) gives one of his tour de force performances, which in some ways resembles that of Marcello Mastroianni in *Black Eyes*. Erik Gustavson, with his unflinching sense of style, is obviously happy in the company of the film's main character, the womanizing day-dreamer Rolandsen – the irresistible telegraphist, who invents something which turns his life upside down – and the colourful cast of characters with whom he is surrounded. Philip Øgaard's photography never overplays the aesthetic, though the fairy-tale landscapes of northern Norway, with their sharp peaks rising straight from the sea, are a constant invitation to overdo the picturesque. The film became instead a kind of idyllic painting in pastels, depicting a summery northern Norway far removed from the cold and storms which are everyday fare in this rugged part of the world.

INTERNATIONAL INSPIRATION

Norwegian film-makers have been justifiably fascinated by North Norway. In 2002 the film version of North Norwegian novelist Herbjørg Wassmo's *Dina's Book* premiered under the title *I am Dina*. Gerard Depardieu plays a leading role, Norwegian-Swedish Maria Bonnevie plays Dina, while Denmark's Ole Bornedal (*The Nightwatch*) directed this pan-Nordic film, which cost over NOK 100 million to make. This film was also shot in Hamsun country.

Thus, Norwegian film also looks outwards. There are practically no films being produced today that do not involve Nordic cooperation. And the ties



HERMAN



THE OTHER SIDE OF SUNDAY

to the rest of Europe's many film production programmes are becoming increasingly close.

Erik Gustavson belongs to the group of Norwegian film creators who have sought wider horizons. In his first film, *Blackout* (1986), he copied the style of the sombre American tragedies of the 1940s, the film noir. Several films later we find the comedy *Herman* (1990), a film full of charming tristesse with a fairly universal appeal. Gustavson's story is taken from the Oslo of his childhood, and is based on Lars Saabye Christensen's novel. *Herman* is about a ten-year-old boy who has lost his hair. *Herman* also reflects the fact that around half of all Norwegian films are centred around children and young people. Like the other Nordic countries, Norway puts considerable emphasis on addressing younger age groups, though frequently in films suitable for the whole family.

The best of these was selected for the main competition of the Berlin Film Festival, where it won the Blue Angel prize in 1995. It was the first of a raft of international prizes awarded to first-time director Marius Holst and his dark Mephisto drama, *Cross My Heart and Hope to Die*. This film is also about growing up in Oslo, and the appearance of evil in an everyday Norwegian setting. It was written by Lars Saabye Christensen.

Gustavson has also made a creditable television series based on *Sophie's World*, Jostein Gaarder's international bestseller aimed at young people. The film was well crafted and offered a good first introduction to the novel's philosophical subject matter.

The films about the teenage detectives Pelle and Proffen were extremely popular. The first one, *Death at Oslo Central*, directed by Eva Isaksen and released in 1990, attracted record audiences with its vivid portrayal of teenagers with a deprived background, where parental conflict and

drug abuse were an integral part of daily life. The film's sequel, *Lethal Lies* (1992), which takes our teenage detective heroes further onto the environmental battlefield, was also very popular. And a third film in the series was called *The Blue Wolves* (1993). They are all based on manuscripts by the applicable Ingvar Ambjørnsen.

But the most charming of these "coming of age" films is *Frida - Straight from the Heart* (1991), by director Berit Nesheim. Frida, who originally appeared in a TV series on Norwegian Broadcasting, is a young teenage girl who lives with her sister and single mother. Frida is the embodiment of restless adolescence, both in body language and speech. Maria Kvalheim's unforgettable portrayal of Frida made her a teenage star overnight in Norway and also abroad. Frida attracted considerable attention at international film festivals, where it won a number of prizes, not least audience prizes. In Norway, the film drew whole families to the cinema.

Nesheim achieved an Oscar nomination, only the third ever achieved by a Norwegian film, for her film *The Other Side of Sunday* (1996), another bitter-sweet demonstration of her insight into the emotional roller-coaster that is the teenage mind.

Frida was written by Torun Lian, whose directing debut in 1998 was a sober tragicomedy based on her own novel *Only Clouds Move the Stars*. The story follows 11-year-old Maria, who sees her younger brother die of cancer and her mother slip into a deep depression. *Clouds* is an anti-action film, shaped by sense and sensibility. It won prizes the world over because it was not afraid to take life both seriously and with a dose of humour – a liberating mixture. Lian will in the autumn be back with her next film *The Colour of Milk*.

A SAMI FILM MAKER

From Finnmark's high plateau almost 20 years ago emerged a major film talent, Nils Gaup. Gaup, who is a Sami, has directed many films. His first film is his best to date, but his latest project is a film set in Finnmark and tells the true story of a Sami rebellion against the Norwegian authorities which took place in 1852.

Gaup's debut in 1987, *The Pathfinder*, is based on a 13th century legend, and the dialogue is in the language of the indigenous Sami people. This daring gamble, which few people had much faith in, resulted in an Oscar nomination – and something approaching worldwide success at the box-office. It attracted unusually large audiences for a Norwegian film, and impressed the critics. All this publicity prompted the Walt Disney subsidiary Buena Vista to take a closer look at Gaup. This major studio eventually decided to back his new production, *Shipwrecked* (1990).

This was no Sami legend about how a young boy uses his ingenuity to defeat an attack by outsiders, with bear fights in the style of the old Hollywood Westerns – on the few occasions when the Indians had the upper hand. On the other hand, it is a ripping yarn, beloved of schoolboys for over a century, which tells the story of a young Norwegian Robinson Crusoe who, on his travels around the world, arrives in the South Pacific, and it offers plenty of scope for the exotic. Gaup has also directed *North Star* (1995), an adventure story in which Oslo's surrounding countryside serves as the Klondike of the American gold rush, Tashunga, and a fairly sober version of novelist Aksel Sandemose's early life, *Misery Harbour* (1999).

Gaup returned to the Finnmarksvidda mountain plateau with *The Kautokeino Rebellion*, a great box office success in Norway in 2008. In this



NINE LIVES

film, he depicts a hushed-up incident from the year 1852, when a group of Sami people rebelled against Norwegian authorities. The rebellion was bloodily crushed. This less than glorious event from the history of Norwegian colonization was explicitly narrated; a “Northern” on the model of directors like Kurosawa, Leone and John Ford, as well as films on American Indians. This film about a persecuted indigenous people, like the film *The Pathfinder*, is almost taking on the shape of a legend. In any case, this is a distinctly personal adaptation of a historical event, in drifting snow and blood. Here we find haunting contrasts, existential decisions which entail deceit and depravity, heroism and destiny, blood and fire. As well as thundering reindeer herding across the shimmering white mountain plateau, bathed in magic daylight over the widescreen.

NATURE AS A SOURCE OF INSPIRATION

The sights and sounds of the mountains and the sea are characteristic of Norwegian films, and are reflected with great authenticity in Gaup's own films. Film history in Norway began with a drama of the sea. In 1907 a boat was launched at Frognerkilen, a quiet inlet in the heart of Oslo, where the sea, it has to be said, was as calm as a millpond. But the result, *Dangers of a Fisherman's Life – An Ocean Drama*, nevertheless provided storm-tossed excitement as it portrayed the harsh living conditions which have been the lot of Norwegians through the ages as they struggle with the raging elements. Compared with *The Pathfinder* and its photographic artistry, which fills an entire cinema wall-to-wall, this first Norwegian film seems extremely dated, but the choice of subject matter is appropriate enough.

The Norwegian film industry has been handed nature almost on a plate, served up by a munificent art director with a penchant for the drama created by rolling contours and abrupt contrasts.

The Nordic countries have a solid tradition of filming landscapes as if they were paintings on canvases. However, Norwegian film photographers, who are today among the best in the world, have used nature in a more commercialized way than their Swedish counterparts, for example. Norwegians have an almost mystic feeling of affinity with nature in its supposedly simple, original and unforgetting form. The most bizarre experience you can have in this country is the annual Easter pilgrimage to the mountains. When the snow has finally melted in the lowlands, Norwegians want more, and feel driven to leave their homes and climb to higher altitudes in search of fresh snow. The correlation between landscape and temperament is close and tangible, and represents an important element in Norwegian film-makers' art, even when the landscape is not mild and the temperament is consequently fairly gloomy, almost depressively introverted, or when it is heroic as the characters struggle against wind and weather, empty fishing nets and hard times.

OSCAR NOMINATIONS

In an international context Norwegian films have done best when they radiate adventure and reflect the exploits of the great polar explorers like Roald Amundsen and Fridtjof Nansen. Characteristically the country's only Oscar in 1952 was awarded to a documentary about the voyage of the balsa raft *Kon-Tiki* over the Pacific. In a way Thor Heyerdal was sailing in the wake of the explorer and scientist Fridtjof Nansen, while the waves broke over the vessel as if it were on the Norwegian fishing banks. In 1957, Norway achieved another Oscar nomination, but Arne Skouen and his *Nine Lives* could not match the great Fellini. *Nine Lives* also depicts a struggle for survival against the elements. The action takes place during the German occupation of Norway, and it describes how a soldier put ashore on the coast of Northern Norway fights his way through sea, snow and storms, over

the mountains to neutral Sweden. And how he is helped along the way.

It was the most northerly part of Norway – with its indigenous people – which provided the backdrop to Norway's next Oscar nomination some 30 years later. Though *The Pathfinder* is brimful of action and stunts, it is more than anything a celebration of stubborn, almost heroic humanity – with the camera lovingly demonstrating the awesome power of nature. Berit Nesheim's *The Other Side of Sunday*, on the other hand, deals with conflicting inner landscapes. In 2002, also Elling was nominated.

TWO GENERATIONS

Norway has always been a 'poetocracy', where the poets' voices have been the loudest. Every corner of the land has fostered a poet of substance who has set his stamp on the cultural agenda of the day or enthusiastically tried to shape society according to his own lights. The film industry has not produced many individuals of such a calibre. For a long time film-makers stuck to the popular narrative forms and were roundly despised for it. Film research is now in the process of showing how unjust this verdict has been. But it is easy to see why film-makers have felt a little overawed when faced with such literary luminaries as Knut Hamsun, the most vivid writer imaginable, or the more sombre play-wright Henrik Ibsen, who more accurately than anyone else reflects the fact that Norway is the land of regulated worthiness rather than merry playfulness. However, it is worth noting that Ibsen's grandson, whose other grandfather was the play-wright, poet and social commentator Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, was a clever and innovative filmmaker. Tancred Ibsen, who for obvious reasons was called the 'double grandson' and undoubtedly suffered as a result, worked in many genres over a period of almost forty years. This Ibsen moved back and forth between the popular and the more



serious. Many people think that Tancred Ibsen's *Gjest Baardsen*, an upbeat adventure story about a cheerful Norwegian Robin Hood, is still the most successful Norwegian film – even though it was made as long ago as 1939. And that is not simply because it reflects fundamental Norwegian attitudes – such as the resistance of the free spirit to authority and bureaucracy – but also because the images of warm summer days and a refreshing breeze blowing through the mountains are balm for the soul. The Norwegian Association of Film Critics has, with Tancred Ibsen's permission, chosen to call the Haugesund Film Festival's prize for best film – Norwegian or international – the *Gjest Baardsen* Prize. This is no coincidence. The previous year, Ibsen had made a film of Gabriel Scott's *Fant* (*The Traveller Boy 1937*) in Norway's Arcadia, the summer paradise which lies along the country's southern coast. But *Fant* is a story of travellers, or vagabonds, a travelling people who sailed in small boats from fishing village to fishing village, and had a reputation for not always being able to tell the difference between mine and thine. The actor Alfred Maurstad, who also played *Gjest Baardsen*, gives another vibrant portrayal, cunning and tough, in a slice of Norwegian social history wrapped up in a good story.

Another great pioneer is Arne Skouen, the razor-sharp columnist for the liberal daily *Dagbladet*, who made a total of seventeen films between 1949 and 1969. In addition to *Nine Lives* (1957) and other wartime dramas, he made a name for himself with a series of contemporary dramas on controversial issues made in the form of documentaries. He combined a keen intellect with an understated story-telling technique. Where Skouen is concerned, there has never been any doubt about his polemical intent – or about his exceptional sureness of style, as exemplified in *Cold Tracks* from 1962. In this film a resistance fighter from the Second World War makes a desperate attempt

to come to terms with love betrayed, a fatal error of judgement in the snow-capped mountains of Norway, which cost 12 refugees fleeing the occupied forces their lives. It is a gripping example of the kind of moral realism which characterizes Skouen's high quality work.

Skouen's film career ended in 1969 with his first film in colour, photographed by Sven Nykvist. The story is based on a novel by Johan Falkberget, An-Magrit, who tenderly depicted the lives of ordinary people working in the mines of Røros. Then as now, what is important in a frozen, inhospitable world is to create warmth and thereby look after each other. Liv Ullmann plays An-Magrit, the strong and energetic coal driver who refuses to be treated as a soulless beast of burden. It is the best role Ullmann has had in a Norwegian film.

In 1949, Norway's first female director Edith Carlmar made a spectacular debut. She was later to make a name for herself with a series of bright, fresh comedies, often with a social twist. *Death is a Caress* is an extremely sophisticated film noir, about black passion in the greyest of everyday lives and with hidden madness spanning the class divide. The film has seen a renaissance of interest in recent years, both in France, Great Britain and the USA.

Norway's only real film modernist, Erik Løchen, made *The Hunt* in 1959, just as the French new wave broke onto these shores. In his editing he plays elegantly with time and space, dream and reality, and departs from the chronological and the causal that have always confined films, including Norwegian films. Løchen's later films followed the French director Jean-Luc Godard's motto that a work should have a beginning, a middle and an end, although not necessarily in that order. And Løchen has said that his film *Remonstrances* (1972), which consists of five twenty-minute rolls,

can be shown in any order whatsoever. This could render 3.125 different versions.

To give room for both Løchen and other less experimental film-makers, a number of public funding schemes have been established. They are a necessary condition in a small film market like Norway. Without them it would have been completely impossible to develop film as an art form in this country.

ANIMATION

Films for children is an important area, with several excellent results. Whether the animator Ivo Caprino really worked with films for children, is a topic open to discussion. He created his own world of puppets, and his favourite themes were Norwegian folktales. This multi-talented Norwegian answer to Walt Disney created perhaps the best film to come out of Norway in the past 30 years, *Pinchcliff Grand Prix* (1975). The film combines sly village humour with the most sophisticated use of puppet animation techniques, making this a film masterpiece which – for a Norwegian film – attracted enormous audiences. *Pinchcliff* was dubbed into 16 languages, an unprecedented achievement for a Norwegian film. Caprino had previously also translated several Norwegian folktales into short films which are just as timeless as *Pinchcliff*. The Norwegian with the Italian name is a storyteller whose work will be shown on Norwegian cinema and television screens for countless years to come.

The animated feature *Gurin with the Foxtail*, with its vaguely Disney-inspired artwork, was released in 1998. Just like *Pinchcliff*, the film is based on the slightly baroque, joyously anarchic village characters created by humorist and artist Kjell Aukrust. This too became a huge hit with the public, although it lacked the artistic quality of *Pinchcliff*. Later, we have seen *Karlsson on the Roof* (2002),



THE PATHFINDER

which is also a John M. Jacobsen production, based on the books by Astrid Lindgren, as well as Captain Sabertooth (2003), the animated version of the adventures of an extremely popular Norwegian pirate.

A NEW GENERATION

Inspired by the French New Wave and the other vitalizing tides which washed over the film world in the 1960s, a new generation emerged. They did not go to the movies just to catch a glimpse of the latest curiosities, but incorporated them into their own thinking and even went abroad to study film-making. Perhaps the most prominent of these is Anja Breien, who unites spontaneity of feeling with an academic balance of form. She wanted to be a nuclear physicist, but ended up in a film school in Paris.

Her breakthrough came in the mid-seventies, after she had made a name for herself as a major talent with a film about Jostedalssrypa, the only girl from a picturesque mountain village in western Norway to survive the Black Death around 1350. *Wives*, released in 1975, marked the breakthrough of feminism in Norwegian films, with a fresh, improvised comedy about three former classmates who meet at a reunion and swap life stories and girlish giggles. In 1985 came *Wives Ten Years After*, in which the tone is more sombre and more disillusioned, but with the spontaneity, albeit rather cautiously, still intact.

Breien continued her snapshots of the lives of the three female musketeers in *Wives III* in 1996, in which the trio are about to turn 50. It is the least successful of the films, but the series is in the process of creating a fictional record of the lives and times of Norwegian women through successive decades that is unique in international film history.

In 1979, Breien competed in the main competition at the Cannes Film Festival with the comedy *Next of Kin*, which in some ways was gaily inspired by Rossini's music for *The Thieving Magpie*, but which is also typical of contemporary Norwegian greed and which cocks a snook at Ibsen. She won prizes at the Venice Film Festival in 1982 with *The Witch Hunt*, a vaguely Dreyer-inspired film which once again returns to the mountains of late medieval Norway and features a woman as the victim. In 1990, Breien was back with *Twice upon a time*, a romantic drama featuring Don Juan in Oslo.

THE EIGHTIES

When considered from a bird's-eye perspective, the multi-faceted eighties – never have there been so many volte-faces in the Norwegian film industry – can be divided neatly in two. In the first half it was women and children first, a triumph for feminism. In addition to Breien, Laila Mikkelsen was in her gentle way in top shape, not least with her film *Growing Up* (1981), about the child of a so-called 'German slut' during the German occupation of Norway. This film, too, was distributed abroad – though not as widely as *Wives* some years earlier.

But the main figurehead was photo model, actress, screenplay writer and director Vibeke Løkkeberg. Norway's most photogenic person demonstrated a wild and beautiful film talent with *The Betrayal*, released in 1981, a piece of Norwegian neo-realism with rich colours from post-war Bergen's poor quarter, where a strange and fragile world is seen through the magnifying and distorting eyes of a child. The same child's-eye view can to a certain extent be seen in the incestuous drama *The Wild One* from 1986, which, like *The Betrayal*, was shown at the Cannes Film Festival. This is a kind of cinematographic folk song, which in front of the camera swelled up into a hopelessly bloated Wagnerian opera from the windswept west of Norway.

Right at the end of the eighties came another promising debut. Though Martin Aspøhaug's international breakthrough was not as big as that of Nils Gaup's *The Pathfinder*, he nevertheless won the Nordic prize for best new director for his film *A Handful of Time* (1989). In this film, moral realism mingles with symbolism and surrealism, or magical realism. When was the last time we saw a Norwegian film so full of fantasy that it makes use of archangels? This cinematic juggling with time and space has perhaps had a liberating influence on the artistic ambitions of others. Aspøhaug's later films have not reached quite the same high standard, but include works for children and teenagers, such as the popular *Lethal Lies* (1992) and the imaginative and visually striking *Svampe* (1990). Since then he has disappeared to Sweden, where he makes highly atmospheric TV series. He is now back with the thriller *The Crossing*.

THE BOYS ARE BACK IN FILM

Svend Wam and Petter Vennerød delivered a long series of rebellious films waging war on the critics and receiving loud cheers from the audiences. They branded themselves anarchists, and with violent gestures attacked the dead serious social realism which many people feel distinguished the 1970s and 1980s. The best among the films are *Them and Us* (1976) and the trilogy on the 1968 generation: *Open Future* (1983), *Farewell, Illusions* (1985), and *Castle in the Air* (1986).

The men returned with a vengeance in the mid-eighties. The antithesis to feminism was Orion's Belt, muscular action set against an arctic backdrop, with international political overtones and an evocative musical score. This survival drama was followed by several forays into the world of suspense. At the same time the limited partnership arrived on the scene as a vehicle for film funding. The device was intended to create a Hollywood in the Norway of the oil boom. And from the English-speaking world came film-makers who could



INSOMNIA



JUNK MAIL



CABIN FEVER

not find financial backing in their own countries – which was not a coincidence. In Norway they could, at least until it all fell apart. But it gave newspaper-readers a lot of entertainment while it lasted. The commercial twist also resulted in better contact with the public and growing support for both home-grown films and cinema-going in general.

But in the midst of all these games which were typical of the day, all this playing with surfaces, genres, ornaments and fragments, artistic ambition was almost lost. Many people asked why the taxpayers should be funding other people's gambling with a camera, why we should compete with Hollywood on the film capital's over-powerful terms. Only *The Pathfinder* made it – and then only by exploiting its distinctive Sami stamp and keeping its feet firmly planted in frozen ground. However, a work with the strangely anonymous title *X* (1986) heralded a synthesis between the male and female principles. Using a mixture of colour and black and white photography, documentary-maker Oddvar Einarson produced a feeling of being on the wrong planet. Oslo was depicted as a lunar landscape. The poetic photographic imagery was a little inspired by the great Russian Tarkovsky's way of depicting the world

after the catastrophe, as a spiritually tormented desert. This work, which also offers almost inaudible rock music in its tentative hints of a possible love between teenagers who have not yet been spoiled by the dreariness of their surroundings, received the jury's special award at the prestigious Venice Film Festival.

NORWAVE

Tarkovsky's influence can be discerned in Unni Straume's *To a Stranger* (1990), a dream-like film with a Russian tone and intoxicating visual imagery. Straume was invited to the Cannes Film Festival with her interpretation of Strindberg's *Dreamplay* (1994), an ambitious experiment. And for the first time since 1969, Liv Ullmann's name was on the cast list of a Norwegian film, which indicates the many neglected opportunities for film art in the north. Since *Kristin Lavransdatter* (1995), Ullmann has abandoned Norway to direct films and television series in Sweden based on screenplays by Ingmar Bergman. It certainly seems difficult to fit in with Norwegian film, but both *Confessions* (1996) and, not least, *Faithless* (2000), demonstrated unusual and significant qualities. Throughout the Cannes Film Festival in 2000, *Faithless* was the hot favourite to win the Golden Palm, but was pipped at the post. It has

subsequently attracted much admiration around the world, although in Norway the praise was not unqualified.

In 1997, all of two Norwegian first-time directors were selected for the Film Critics' Week at the Cannes Film Festival, out of a total of seven international participants. Erik Skjoldbjærg's *Insomnia* is essential in what has been termed Norwave, an effective film noir under the midnight sun, from the capital of North Norway, Tromsø, which has an international atmosphere. It is both a thriller and a character study of a police detective who cannot sleep and makes a fatal mistake, and whose life ends in chaos. Here moral chaos is in the driving seat. Elegant and meaningful on many levels. Later, Hollywood has refilmed Skjoldbjærg's *Insomnia*, with Al Pacino in the leading role and the plot set in Alaska.

Pål Sletaune won the Film Critics' Week prize in 1997 for his film *Junk Mail* and, like Skjoldbjærg, went on to gain international recognition. *Junk Mail* is a trashy comedy thriller from the most down-at-heel part of inner-city Oslo. The main character is an indolent, unkempt, amoral post-man, but our anti-hero has a dash of unhealthy curiosity left, even though he lives in a world over-



DRAGONFLIES

flowing with melancholy. Played in a monotonously low-key style, the face of Sletaune's narrator offers a laconic, and thus drily witty, expression. Some very fresh air from some very bad breath. Sletaune followed up with *You Really Got Me* (2001), a comedy of rogues driven by farce and with variations in the action which interlock like cogwheels, with unsuccessful criminals and dispirited losers, seen through a prism of slight absurdity.

DOGME

The Danish Dogme movement has also contributed new impulses to the Norwegian film industry. Mona Hoel's *Cabin Fever* (2000) is played out in a cabin in the mountains at Christmas time, with Polish in-laws who have arrived for the holidays. Christmas turns into a whole-hearted and spontaneous hell on earth. Skeletons fall out of closets faster than in an Ibsen play. Hoel is faithful to the style and content of the Dogme movement. She delivers a vivid example of naked drama in its search for truth, which captures the moment by means of a handheld camera. She continues the style in her new film *Chlorox, Ammonia, and Coffee* (2004).

Marius Holst directed an open-air chamber piece. *Dragonflies* (2001) is a film about the eternal triangle, which reminded many people of the Nordic region's eternal number one, Ingmar Bergman. The intensity and understanding of a raw struggle for power was certainly not lacking. This film also took much of its material from the Dogme movement.

Norway has more able directors than many people were aware of. And now one concentrates hard on the youngest directors. Maybe too hard. Under the circumstances, the Norwegian film scene includes a lot of good photographers and art directors, extremely professional craftsmen at all levels and watchable actors. The scripts continue to improve. The film industry in Norway is like the climate – stormy or snowed in, cloudy grey or brightly sunny, moral and serious, like Ibsen's Brand, or playfully irresponsible, like the same playwright's Peer Gynt. At their best, Norwegian films have the

power to reach out beyond their domestic audience. The climate has been particularly mild and good-natured since the turn of the millennium, with a summery promise of renewal, both artistically and in relation to audiences. Cool and Crazy no less. But also young and fearless.

THE NEW NORWAVE

In 2004, Erik Skjoldbjærg teamed up with scriptwriter Nicolaj Frobenius to update Ibsen's ever-relevant *An Enemy of the People* to our present times. The conflicts have been relocated to a mineral water plant situated in the picturesque West Coast area of Norway, demonstrating that Ibsen's admirers, like the poet himself, even today are able to torpedo the ark. Ibsen, as well as other great Norwegian cultural icons like the composer Edvard Grieg and the violinist Ole Bull, have recently been celebrated, but also dissected in biographical documentaries, an instructive form of mental and cultural history.

The director Bent Hamer is said to have unlimited access to the "Quinzaine des Réalisateurs" at the Cannes Festival. He has been bold enough to film Charles Bukowski's juicy bohemian novel *Factotum* in the US, starring Matt Dillon and Lili Taylor. This film brought Hamer to the Cannes selections for the third time, a sure sign that The New Norwave reaches further than many former waves. The *Factotum* production definitely must be labeled multicultural. The multicultural aspect also shines through in *Izzat*, a solid thriller from the Pakistani immigrant circles in Norway, loaded with rough action scenes and hard-boiled dialogue. This macho adventure met its antithesis in writer Sara Johnsen's debut as a director, *Kissed by Winter*, a delicate relation drama from the remote regions of Norway, about grief and privation.

In 2001, the comedy *Elling* was nominated for an Oscar. The next film in the series was the somewhat weaker *Mother's Elling* (2003). In 2005, the trilogy was completed by Petter Næss, back in the director's chair with *Love Me Tomorrow*. This film did not quite reach the level of the first one either, but was still exceptionally popular, featuring actor Per Christian Ellefsen as an unforgettable neurotic,

and Sven Nordin as his dull friend. More diversity: The same year, Pål Sletaune launched his Polanski and Hitchcock inspired *Next Door*. This film was selected for the Venice Days at the Venice Film Festival, with its ingenious conjuring tricks and pitfalls.

In 1905, Norway broke free from the union with its big brother Sweden. The country's first hundred years in freedom was celebrated with the documentary *Too Much Norway*, a playful cinematic journey down memory lane through the first century illustrated with moving images. In the 70's, a small but influential Maoist movement had grown up in Norway, which later made its presence felt in the media, in the cultural sphere, and in the universities. With considerable acuity, Hans Petter Moland sat down with Dag Solstad's novel about the movement and composed the feature film *Comrade Pedersen*, a tragicomedy of international format about the idiosyncratic Utopian ideas, psychology and sociology of the movement.

But the climax so far was the 2006 Cannes Festival. Norway had all of four films chosen for the Official Selection; a national record. The burlesque, high budget animation film about a junkie elephant by the underground artist Christopher Nielsen, *Free Jimmy*, was shown in the International Critics' Week. This was a highly ambitious film. In the same section, Jens Lien's *The Bothersome Man* won an award, the first of many for a stylized tragicomedy with absurdist overtones and undertext. In "Un Certain Regard", Stefan Faldbakken's fast-moving police thriller *Uro* was selected, a US inspired action film with a Bressonesque ending. But the most exciting of all was Norway's first Palme d'Or. It was awarded in the short film section, to *Sniffer*, directed by Bobbie Peers, a genuinely European, dialogue-free follow-up of the tradition from Kafka and the absurdists, Tati and others.

The New Norwave reached another peak in February 2007, when Torill Kove's *The Danish Poet*, a fantasy over a Danish poet's admiration for



REPRISE



THE BOTHERSOME MAN

the Norwegian Nobel Prize Laureate in literature, Sigrid Undset, was awarded an Oscar in the section for short animation film. Liv Ullmann narrated this exceptionally charming and distinctive opus. The same year, Marius Holst returned with *Mirush*, an intense, multicultural portrayal of a boy from Kosovo who meets his unknown father in Norway. This film was just short of a masterpiece.

Maybe the most gratifying debut in years was provided by Joachim Trier. His *Reprise* is a light, but far from insubstantial generation portrayal in François Truffaut's spiritual manner about the Norwegian generation around 30 who have received everything except meaning of life. Trier won the Best Director Award in Karlovy Vary and the Diesel Discovery Award in Toronto, and has later harvested a wealth of international prizes.

Encouraged by this progress, Norwegian authorities are determined to invest even more in developing and diversifying film to a still higher degree. The number of productions is high and on the rise, export is to be increased, there is great optimism. There are very few imperfections. The only setback worth mentioning is that Norway's only world star Liv Ullmann was denied funding for her version of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, featuring international stars.

Otherwise, Norwegian film is in excellent condition, both technically and artistically. In exceptionally good condition. The present ambition is to win one of the truly high ranking international awards for a full feature film as well. In view of the general temperature in Norwegian film, this goal does not appear altogether out of reach.

Presently Norwegian film has successfully re-established rapport with its audience. Meanwhile, foreign festivals have shown interest in several newly produced films. Eva Sørhaug's debut film *Cold Lunch* is a gourmet class film selected for the Venice, Toronto, and London festivals. Her film is minimalistic, light, airy and nutritious, with scores of ingredients from the refined French film kitchen. We follow 6-8 quiet fates from the city of Oslo,

people forced to venture into decision-making, regardless of their life situation or age. The film carries some dark aspects, but contains substantial doses of disciplined humour, as it weaves its discreet tapestry of fate.

The depiction of adolescence in a 1980's Stavanger distinguished by a more prevalent small town nature, *The Man who loved Yngve*, turned out to attract awards like a magnet, with its vulnerability and indulgent humour, as well as its great recognizability.

But the most challenging of them all was probably Erik Poppe's *Troubled Water*. In the same manner as his paradise-yearning *Hawaii, Oslo*, this was a triumphant boundary breaking moment for Norwegian film, an outstanding, bold construction based on thoughts and impulses which are not exactly trendy. In this film, Christian symbolism and church environment is utilized even more directly, without backing away from close contact, and avoiding caricatures of priests.

Two stories are interwoven. A mother has lost her little son. The convict is released after eight years of imprisonment. He becomes a substitute organist in a congregation. The mother of the murdered boy visits the church and discovers the organist. What happens to forgiveness and reconciliation under such extreme circumstances? The questions are posed, sharply and urgently, relentlessly formulated in sustainable scenes, with an ensemble imbued with sophisticated empathy and intense will of expression. *Troubled Water* contains echoes of Dostoevsky and other artistic relatives, from the film world as well, like Bergman and the Dardenne brothers. And it burrows down into existential bedrock. This is a reflection of a time and a city teeming with uncultivated minds. And it is all elevated into the higher film spheres, from the tragic and unredeemed to the eternally valid.

Not since *Pinchcliffe Grand Prix* has a Norwegian film attracted as many audiences as *Max Manus*, the film about our boldest saboteur during the Second World War. And never have more profes-

sional action scenes and more authentic as well as rich scenography been achieved in a Norwegian war film, not to mention more magnificent special effects. The director duo Rønning/Sandberg are skilfully intensifying, producing high dramatic temperatures. Some of this is firm, stringently stylized. At times the film is characterized by the noisily puerile, but this often happens to men under pressure. In the title role, Aksel Hennie once again demonstrates qualities which make him perhaps the most prominent among his generation of film actors; an open and expressive gaze, an ability to arouse curiosity, with his interpretation of a resourceful, almost hyperactive man, who turns into a great risk-taker whenever necessary.

On the other hand, the film does not venture into history revisionism or film revisionism. Instead, a more traditional, frictionless approach has been chosen, and the events are narrated in a slightly impersonal mainstream manner. There is not much originality in its outlook and shape. But the lack of will to dare take risks in a film about daredevils, did not seem to matter. The audiences were more than willing to watch this costly narration of a story which was in the process of sinking into oblivion. *Max Manus* contributed more than most films in making Norwegian films genuinely attractive to the audiences once again.



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