Screening the Past: Memory, History and Scandinavian Film.
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Our fascination with history – the importance of memory

- Long running fictional series on television – constructing national historical narratives, combining individual, family-history with broader collective history
- Often nationally the most popular series of all – some also with considerable transnational appeal: the US-UK heritage tradition (*Brideshead Revisited*, *Downton Abbey*, etc), American traditions (*Holocaust*, *Roots*, *North & South*, *John Adams*, *Game of Thrones*, *The Vikings*, *The Tudors*, *Rome*)
- Scandinavian examples: *Matador*, *Krøniken*, *Udvandrerne/Indvandrerne*, *Best Intentions*, *Fanny & Alexander*
- Within film culture – the same phenomenon and high interest
- Documentary history:
  - The grand scale historical series: Kenneth Clark’s *Civilization*, Ken Burns *The War*, Simon Schama’s, and Scandinavian equivalents
  - The interest in very mundane, local history: in Denmark *The Danes history*, based on archive footage from national, local and private archives – sold in millions of copies on DVD
- Memory: connecting the dots in historical time, individually, collectively – building and sustaining identity
Why the past can be important for the present: *The lives of others* (2006) – *the human dimensions and dilemmas of communist everyday life*

- *Winner of* both an Oscar and the European Film Award – the film story seem to call upon a ‘traumatic, European, collective memory’ and to make it possible for different more individualized forms of memory

- A historical transition dramas, a modern classic, capturing the imagination of both German and European audiences, a historically drama that makes a traumatic historical period come to life, in a way that calls for a reconciliation

- Donnersmarck’s film explores the operation of an authoritarian system by showing the various ways people might try to adapt themselves to it – either by submitting and conforming or by trying to live a secret life within the authoritarian system.

- In this way, the film tells a universal human story of not just the GDR but of all societies and authoritarian systems that employ this kind of intensive surveillance. The historical specific combines with universal human forms of cognition, emotion and forms of remembering.
Das leben der anderen, 9 mio., 1.6, US

AT - Austria (0.66%)
BE - Belgium (2.11%)
CZ - Czech Republic (0.40%)
DE - Germany (32.87%)
DK - Denmark (2.19%)
EE - Estonia (0.04%)
ES - Spain (11.92%)
FI - Finland (0.32%)
FR - France (21.03%)
GB - United Kingdom (7.41%)
GR - Greece (3.18%)
HU - Hungary (0.67%)
IT - Italy (10.49%)
NL - Netherlands (4.46%)
PL - Poland (1.03%)
PT - Portugal (0.34%)
RO - Romania (0.00%)
SE - Sweden (0.74%)
SI - Slovenia (0.09%)
SK - Slovakia (0.05%)
Why the past can be very important for the present: coming to terms with a traumatic political past (Wajda on Katyn (www.wajda.pl))

Katyn is a special film (...). I never thought I would live to see the fall of the USSR, or that free Poland would provide me with the opportunity to portray on the screen the crime and lies of Katyn. While Stalin's crime deprived my father of life, my mother was touched by the lies and the hoping in vain for the return of her husband. The creation of the screenplay about Katyn took several years. The long, arduous process of looking through huge quantities of individual recollections, diaries, and other mementos confirmed my determination to base this first film about Katyn on the facts these materials related. And this is how the film's opening scene on the bridge, as well as the one featuring Soviet soldiers defacing the Polish flag, came to be. Most of the incidents depicted on the screen actually happened and were reported by eye-witnesses. While it is true that the details of the Katyn crime are now known, I couldn't omit, in this first film about the event, the image of death; death that met twenty thousand Polish officers. (...)Soviet Union failed to recognize or respect any international standards, not even with regard to prisoners of war. All the men who died did so as members of the Polish intelligentsia, and this paved the way for Stalin's subjugation of Poland.
Katyn – a film with only national appeal. 3 mio. Cinema tickets, 2.7 of them in Poland

- CZ - Czech Republic: 0.675% (20031)
- DE - Germany: 0.108% (3198)
- DK - Denmark: 0.061% (1812)
- ES - Spain: 1.650% (48964)
- FR - France: 1.083% (32147)
- GB - United Kingdom: 1.002% (29748)
- HU - Hungary: 0.414% (12291)
- IT - Italy: 1.443% (42822)
- PL - Poland: 93.274% (2768533)
- SE - Sweden: 0.080% (2377)
- SI - Slovenia: 0.047% (1385)
- SK - Slovakia: 0.164% (4872)
Changing our understanding of history – changing our social imaginaries and mental frameworks

- ‘Our mental horizons limit more than just our perceptual field. Like their prototypical exemplars, which literally impose visual closure on our physical surroundings, they basically “close” our minds by helping delineate what we consider relevant (...) social situations are typically surrounded by mental fences which mark off only part of what is actually included in our perception field as relevant’ (Zerubavel: Social Mindscapes, p. 37)

- ‘Not only does our social environment influence the way we mentally process the present, it also affects the way we remember the past. Like the present, the past is to some extent also part of a social reality that, while far from being absolutely objective, nonetheless transcends our own subjectivity and is shared by others around us. (Zerubavel: p. 81)

- ‘.. Remembrance is not just a spontaneous, personal act, it also happens to be regulated by (...) social rules of remembrance that tell us quite specifically what we should remember and what we must forget (...) mnemonic traditions affect our memory even more significantly by prompting us to adopt a particular cognitive “bias that leads us to remember certain things, but not others (Zerubavel, p. 88)
Mediated memories: the personal and collective dimensions

- ‘Remembering is vital to our well-being, because without our autobiographical memories we would have no sense of past or future, and we would lack any sense of continuity. Our image of who we are (...) is never stable but it is subject to constant remodelling because our perceptions of who we are change along with our projections and desires of who we want to be (Van Dijck 2007: 3)

- Susan Bluck (2003): *The Three functions of biographical memory*
  - Preserve the sense of being a coherent person over time
  - Strengthen social bonds by sharing personal memories
  - Use past experience to construct models to understand inner worlds of self and others

- The personal memory is from early on shaped by a broader socio-cultural influence and thus has a clear collective dimension:
  - Collective narratives and stories on family level and in other contexts influence us and mingle with personal dimensions
  - Mediated narratives and experiences from all types of media also intervene (books, cartoons, games, film, television)
Historical narratives as mentality shifters and transitive memories

- Zerubavel's concepts of memory transitivity:
  - Memory communities – guarding the social construction of collective and historical memories
  - The dialectic relation between autobiographical memory, social memory and historical memory
  - Memory transitivity important for both individual and social memory: transporting memory from group to individual and from generation to generation

- Historical films therefore, together with other narratives important tools for transitivity of memories, but also for framing and changing subjective and social mentalities

- Film examples of potential roles of historical film narratives, focus on shifting frames of national identity and history concept:
  - *The wind that shakes the barley* (2007, Ken Loach, UK) – the story of both suppression of a people’s wish for freedom and independence and the division of a people and its families and individuals
  - *Days of Glory* (2006, Rachid Bouchareb, FRA) – also a story of a forgotten national controversy, this time the misuse of African soldiers in the French army
  - *Pan’s labyrinth* (2005, G. del Toro, SPAIN) – also a story of the authoritarian suppression during the Spanish civil war, fantasy and escape vs. harsh reality
Basic formats of history and memory

- **Individual history and memory**: the construction of one’s life as an identity narrative with emotional, cognitive dimensions and with certain aspects of narrativity – diaries, pictures, personal movies, data published on social media, family stories, personal belongings etc.

- **Collective history and memory**: connected to what we learn about the world in school and through history books, construction of national history and beyond as a kind of official public knowledge.

- **Mediated historical narrative**: taking the personal and collective history and memory to a new level by developing highly complex fictional or non-fictional narratives recreating history in a more live form, in which collective and individual memory can blend and give a more intense and reflexive form of historical experience.

- **Cognition, emotion and memories (Van Dijk)**: “The question of memory ties together the intricacies of the brain with the dynamics of social behaviour and the multi-layered density of material and social culture’ (p. xiii); “Memories effectively are rewritten each time they are activated: instead of recalling a memory that has been stored some time ago, the brain is forging it all over again in a new associative context. Every memory therefore is a new memory because it is shaped by the changes since the memory last occurred” (32)
José van Dijck (2007): *Mediated Memories*

**Future Projection Creation**

**Mediated memories**

**Past Recollection Preservation**

**Self Private Individual**

**Others Public Collective**

**Embodied**

**Embedded**
Erlé and the three dimensions of memory

Material Dimension: media and technologies of memory (media, texts, symbols, landscapes, buildings)

Social dimension: Carriers and practices of memory (rituals, priests, universities, church)

Mental dimension: Community shared schemata and concepts (values, norms, stereotypes, self perceptions)
Personal and collective cultural memory

- Van Dijk: “Personal cultural memory is the acts and products of remembering, in which individuals engage to make sense of their lives in relation to the lives of others and to their surroundings, situating themselves in time and place” (p. 6). “In a sociological sense, collective memory means that people must feel they were somehow part of a communal past, experiencing a connection between what happened in general and how they were involved as individuals. Adjusted to historiographical explanation, social memory constitutes the interface between individual and collective ordering of the past.” (p. 10).

- Astrid Erll: *Memory in Culture* (2011)
  - **Semantic memory**: conceptual and factual schemata and knowledge
  - **Episodic memory**: tied to concrete and specific time and context
  - **Autobiographical memory**: narrativization of episodic memories – tied to periods of life, general events or specific events
  - **Narrative structures and emotions** play a prominent role in memory and our ability to remember and relate to the past
History-Memory

- **Fictional historical** films often judged and reviewed according to their 'factual representation'—especially when dealing with very 'official' historical reality or questioning established historical 'truth'—but though 'factuality' can be important, fictional historical films are sometimes more complex than journalism and academic history.

- **Memory** is a cognitive, emotional dimension through which humans combine short term memory and long term memory, and generally memory works on several levels and is most strongly activated when 'data' from the past are condensed in narrative images and stories:
  - Emotional intensity is important for memory recall and presence in consciousness.
  - Relation between subjective memory and identity and more general and external memory data important for active memory.
  - Cognitive theories of memory distinguish between 'explicit memory' (general semantic memory, contextual memory and autobiographical memory) and 'procedural, implicit memory' based on very basic non-conscious mechanisms.
  - The intensity of memories and historical narratives and the amount of either positive emotional feelings or traumatic-negative feelings will influence the status and intensity of memory and historical understanding.
Erll: Systems and modes of cultural memory
‘Seeing the past’ – film and history

- Film an important and strong medium for visualizing the past and for getting historical memory and historical themes on the individual and public, collective agenda (see Rosenstone 2006):
  - Recreating the ‘look’ of the past, making the past come alive: places ways of living, a sense of how it was
  - Personification and dramatization of events, conflicts and historical knowledge that is otherwise perhaps too distant and abstract for a contemporary person to understand
  - Unlike academic or journalistic history representation the film representation can combine the factual and the emotional, the individual and the collective, the messages and the ideologies with experienced and lived life
  - The fictional distance and freedom in historical films allows the director to take up even very controversial matters and events, events that would otherwise be difficult to deal with in factual discourses. The fictional, historical film has the potential of recreating history as live experience where both large scale history and small scale history, the economic, the social and the cultural can be combined
  - Combination of narrative, identification and emotion in fiction explain strength of heritage film and television, but also documentary strategies clearly use narrative and emotional strategies.
Forms of historical films

- Historical films, main typology
  - **Heritage films**: films in which – often based on classical novels – the (remote) past as everyday life is recreated with emphasis on either class, family, love and romance, and which can relate to historical and contemporary events and tendencies but most often in an indirect way: *A Royal Affair* (DK, Arcel, 2012), *Elvira Madigan* (SWE, Widerberg, 1967), *Pelle The Conqueror* (DR, Bille August, 1987), *The Simple-minded Murderer* (SWE, Hans Alfredson, 1982)
  - **The historical biopic**: films with main focus of historical character, most often an important one, thus telling us about history (sometimes with clear reference to contemporary reality) through the history of the life of this person and the context he/she acted in: *Young Andersen* (DK, Hammerich, *Carl, My Childhood Symphony* (DK, 1994, Erik Clausen), *Hamsun* (NO, Jan Troell, 1996), *The Best Intentions* (SWE, August 1992), *Flame & Citron* (DK, Madsen, 2008), *Max Manus* (NO, Rønning & Sandberg),
  - **The social historical drama**: both historical drama-types already mentioned can include social dimensions and critical perspectives on the historical past, but the social, historical drama is defined by its intention of taking up traumatic and controversial historical events and conflicts, conflicts often surpressed in public debate and memory. Scandinavian examples include: *Ådalen 31* (SWE, Widerberg, 1969), *Everlasting Moments* (SWE, Troell, 2008)
Scandinavian heritage drama I

- The term heritage cinema is clearly linked to questions of different concepts of a national culture: heritage cinema often seem to celebrate visual, aural and narrative elements of a national tradition and culture, and it often uses national figures, art, literature as a means of representing the past.

- But this, as both Hjort and Higson have pointed out doesn’t necessarily constitute a particular nationalistic ideology, a celebration of a specific social and cultural perspective on the past: ‘on the one hand heritage films seem to present a very conventional version of the national past, a view from above, conservative, upper-class, patriarchal; on the other hand they very often seem to move marginalized social groups from the footnotes of history to the narrative centre’ (Higson 2003: 28).

- Tendency towards the ‘darker’ sides of heritage in Scandinavian cinema, rather few films based on royalty (but A Royal Affair is there in DK), and rather few films about the Manor house culture from an above perspective.

- Maybe one might use the term Nordic Heritage Noir as a parallel to Nordic (Crime) noir.
Babette’s Feast clip
Scandinavian heritage drama II

- **Anders Refn (DK): dark heritage films** - *Slægten/The Baron* (1978) and *Sort Høst/Black Harvest* (1993) – based on the novel by Gustav Wied about the decadence and decay in the manor house culture around 1900 – often seen as a critical response to the more nostalgic Korch tradition of classical Danish cinema.

- **Bo Widerberg (SWE): heritage as tragic romantic drama** - *Elvira Madigan* (1967) – the lyrical poetic celebration of nature and love vs. the harsh realities and tragic death. The dark side of a society where class and sex roles were a heavy burden on freedom.

- **Hans Alfredson (SWE) and Bille August (DK): heritage as class conflict and class strugle**
  - *The Simple-minded Murderer* (1982): a powerful symbolic, social melodrama with use of visual and musical effects – a film about the poor and rejected rising to protest. Based on Alfredson’s own novel ‘An Evil Man’
  - *Pelle the Conqueror* (1987) – based on the classical novel by Martin Andersen Nexø about the rise of the working class from late 1800 to the beginning of 1900 – a large scale epic about life in late era of the rural feudal society – as both Oscar and Cannes Winner this film clearly matched a more international category of heritage film.
Pelle the Conqueror clip
The Simple-Minded Murderer Clip

He always talks to himself.
The Scandinavian, historical biopic I

- The historical biopic has the same elements as heritage and other historical drama forms, but a factual, significant historical character is at the centre.
- Clausen’s *Carl-My Childhood Symphony* a clear example – the story of the by now world famous Danish composer Carl Nielsen, a story combining national, regional roots, historical development and more universal themes,
- Hjort: ‘The film’s images, music, and represented actions combine to construe the young Carl as the historically significant figure who will go on to create an authentically Danish music (...) the musical strains that somehow articulate the webs of meaning by which geese, Danish summers, clogs, and blonde young girls are ultimately connected.’
- Cultural biopics one might call films like *Carl* and also *Hamsun* and *Best Intentions*: but different trends are obvious:
  - *Best Intentions* a broad epic film about Swedish culture and history, but through the story of Ingmar Bergmans very different parents
  - *Hamsun*, is a film about the public decline of a big author who happened to be a nationalist with nazi sympathies
Best Intentions clip
Young Andersen (2005, Rumle Hammerich) – prize winning Danish biopic

- A historic biopic about the young H.C. Andersen going from Funen to Copenhagen – seen partly in rear view from the dying old Andersen’s perspective
- Mixes factual history of Andersen with elements from Andersen’s fictional story world
- Strong thematic and social tensions between rich and poor between lower class regional Denmark and the upper class Denmark of manor house and big city Denmark
- Subjective and mental approach to history of a person and a time: use of point of view shots, memory flash backs, abrupt shifts in time and place in real world and between factual historical world and an imaginary world
- Strong use of visual effects and special framings and camera movements.
- As a historical narrative the film has a very complex relation between the subjective dimensions of memory and history and broader collective aspects – strong play on emotional history vs. cognitive history
Young Andersen clip
Hamsun-clip
The Scandinavian, historical biopic II. WW2 biopics.

- **Flame and Citron (2008, DK)** Director: Ole Christian Madsen
  - Production Co. Nimbus Film, co-production with Czechoslovakia and Germany
  - Production budget, appr. 45 mio. DKK
  - Released in 32 countries – but mostly a national succes
  - National cinema audience 673.000 – total audience in cinema: 773.300
  - Estimated dvd-sales, festival appearances, television screening and VOD probably at least three double this figure.

- **Max Manus: Man of War (2008, NO):** Directors Joachim Rønning & Espen Sandberg
  - Norwegian, German, Danish co-production with further support from Norwegian Film and TV fund and Eurimages
  - Production budget appr. 50 mio. NOK
  - Released in 17 countries, but mainly a national succes
  - Cinema audience: National (1.64 mio), International: 44.000!! – hereof just 17.000 in co-producing Germany and 13.000 in Denmark.
  - But again – estimating tv-broadcasts, dvd-sales and VOD and streaming, the film probably has a much broader audience
WW2 biopics II: Ole Christian Madsen

- "I think we're incredibly puritanical about our own history in this country," Madsen says. "It bugs me that demands for historical accuracy stand in the way of interpreting the truth in a way that, though it may not correspond absolutely to reality, is somehow more true. We lack an understanding that fiction can play an active role in shaping our identity. It's a shame, because it means we have no real sense of our history."

- “What is the drama behind the story of the "illegals"? As Madsen reveals, he had two parallel agendas with his film. "First, I wanted to do a story about these two heroes," Madsen says, "try to make them modern heroes with cracks in their souls and doubts and insecurities, so we can mirror ourselves in them today. Second, I wanted to examine what war is and what it does to people. What was their moral dilemma? Was it right what they did? And at what price?"

(Ole Christian Madsen interviewed by Sophie Engberg Sonne for DFI magazine *Film*, may 1, 2008)
BUFFED TO AN EXPENSIVE-LOOKING GLOSS AND DRESSED IN PERIOD-PERFECT FINERY, “MAX MANUS” HAS AN OLD-FASHIONED SINCERITY THAT ENTERTAINS WITHOUT ENGAGING. MAX’S GUNG-HO ENERGY, THOUGH OCCASIONALLY A LIABILITY — HE SHOOTS HIMSELF IN THE NECK WHILE HORSENG AROUND — PROPELS A SCREENPLAY BY THOMAS NORDSETH-TILLER THAT REMAINS STUBBORNLY DISTANT AND BOYISHLY RASH. NOT EVEN THE REQUISITE LOVE INTEREST (AGNES KITTELSSEN, DELIGHTFUL) AND ELEGANTLY NASTY NAZI (KEN DUKEN, DEVASTATINGLY CHARISMATIC) CAN TEMPER THE YOUTHFUL AROMA OF DASH, DECENCY AND DANGER-BE-DAMNED. (NYT, 2/9 -10)

DOM: FORVENTNINGENE HAR VÆRT SKYHØYE, DE POTENSIELLE FALLGRUVENE TALLØSE FOR FILMEN «MAX MANUS». DERFOR ER DET MED STOR GLEDE DET KAN MEDDELES: «MAX MANUS» ER EN MEGET GOD FILM, SOM STØDIG OPPFYLLER KRAVENE TIL BÅDE GOD OG STERK HISTORIEFORTELLING, ET ENGASJERENDE PERSONPORTRETT OG DERTIL EN PåMINNELSE TIL NGE GENERASJONER OM HVA DET FAKTISK HAR KOSTET Å SKAPE DET Norge VI LEVER I I DAG. (VG, 18/12 -08)
Max Manus clip
The Scandinavian social, historical drama

- Historical social drama has elements of the dark heritage drama in the sense that it takes up social problems and issues, and raises our consciousness about something which is perhaps not so recognized or described in official history.

- Two Scandinavian examples:
  - Bo Widerbergs Ådalen 31 (1969) – a film about a fatal class conflict in Sweden between workers and industrialist, involving military and police intervention. This conflict imbedded in a family and love story between the daughter of a rich industrialist and the son of one of the working classe fathers killed in the incident. Personal levels of history and memory meet with more structural and large scale aspects of history.
  - Jan Troell’s Everlasting moments (2008) – a story with focus on everyday life history, family life and women’s suppression in the Swedish working class culture at the beginning of 1800.

- Both films clearly illustrate the ways in which historical film can trigger both our collective memory and aspects of official history and the more personal memory connected with emotional structures and experiences of everyday and family life. By combining a narrative on those levels the films can create the memory transitivity Zerubavel and others talk about.
Ådalen 31 - clip
Everlasting Moments clip
Kitchen Stories clip
My life as a dog clip