Literary Intertextuality in Harald Rosenløw Eeg og Erik Poppe’s deUSYNLIGE

The article explores literary intertextuality in Harald Rosenløw Eeg and Erik Poppe’s deUSYNLIGE. The main argument is that the film employs a subtle form of indirect literary intertextuality allowing for various national, international, global and denationalized viewing positions. For instance, while the film inscribes common Danish and Norwegian cultural phenomena, it allows each audience to draw on their own distinct sets of cultural codes without forcing them to enter the position of a shared Scandinavian identity. First, the article traces the development of the Old-Testament tale of Abraham and Isaac in 19th-century Danish and Norwegian literature, taking Søren Kierkegaard’s Frygt og Bæven as its point of departure. Through Hans Christian Andersen’s “Historien om en Moder” and Henrik Ibsen’s Brand, the article maps out the historical development of the motifs of the grieving mother, the ethnic Other and the relationship between good and evil. The article ultimately situates the narratological content of deUSYNLIGE within this modernizing trajectory. In addition, it focuses on the film’s medium-specific means of presenting these themes while creating aesthetic unity.

Key words

With his Oslo trilogy consisting of Schpaa (Bunch of Five, 1998), Hawaii.Oslo (2004) and deUSYNLIGE (Troubled Water, 2008), Erik Poppe has established himself as a significant Norwegian film producer. His trilogy explores human kindness – charity – in various settings: among young boys from Oslo’s Eastside characterized by crime, drugs and immigration; among young adults on Grünerløkka linked through various degrees of random encounters; and among young urban families brought into contact with one another first through a criminal act and then through activities in an Oslo church. As the settings indicate, Poppe’s explorations of human love and kindness are inflected by an increasingly overt Christian symbolism. While the religious aspect is subtly hinted at in Schpaa, with the main character not wanting to “sacrifice” his best friend, it becomes more obvious through the theme of guardian angels in Hawaii.Oslo. In deUSYNLIGE it is thematized...
from beginning to end through the main character Jan Thomas’s occupation as a church organist. The church employees refer directly to the Bible, and the film imagery includes Christ figures appearing at the bottom of a river. Another way of framing the trilogy is by viewing it as stories of sacrifice from three different points of view: that of the child, the man and the woman. The trilogy thus sheds light on questions of sacrificing one’s friend (the child), one’s own life (the man) and one’s child (the woman).

Indispensable to *deUSYNLIGE* is scriptwriter Harald Rosenløw Eeg, who also wrote the manuscript for *Hawaii.Oslo*. Rosenløw Eeg is a well-established, award-winning author with a master’s degree in religious history. His manuscript for *deUSYNLIGE* is exceptionally rich and layered: it not only situates Christian ideology within a framework of contemporary debates on crime and punishment, but also builds on layers of indirect references to classic Scandinavian literature. Most overtly, the film is a subtle rewrite of Henrik Ibsen’s *Brand* (1866), but it also enters into intertextual relations with texts by Søren Kierkegaard and Hans Christian Andersen.

By employing indirect intertextuality, the film establishes itself as an autonomous art form and does not—a like many traditional adaptations—rely on classic literature for legitimation. At the same time, the film opens up for various viewing positions, allowing not just for a transnational audience who may not catch the Nordic intertextuality at all, but also for separate Danish and Norwegian national audiences. *deUSYNLIGE* is therefore a film that inscribes common Danish and Norwegian cultural phenomena in the subtest of ways, allowing each audience to draw on their own cultural horizon without forcing them to enter the position of a shared Scandinavian identity.

In this article, I first discuss notions of adaptation and intertextuality. I then trace the development of the Old-Testament tale of Abraham and Isaac in 19th-century Danish and Norwegian literature, taking Søren Kierkegaard’s *Frygt og Bæven* (Fear and Trembling, 1843) as my point of departure. Subsequently, I read *deUSYNLIGE* in light of Henrik Ibsen’s *Brand* (1866) and Hans Christian Andersen’s “Historien om en Moder” (The Tale of a Mother, 1848). My overall goal is to show how, in an age of globalization, a Nordic film may still engage with national cultural heritage without this necessarily precluding denationalized, inter-Nordic or international viewing positions.

**Intertextuality and Adaptation**

The tradition for literary film adaptations has worked to the advantage and disadvantage of film. On the positive side is the appeal to an audience’s established interest in a narrative as well as the cultural status a classical text may confer upon a film project. On the negative side is the tendency for audiences to disregard medium specificity and remain disappointed in a film’s perceived lack of “fidelity” towards the text.¹ With this approach, the film tends to end up in the losing position, perceived as an inferior medium. There are, of course, exceptions to this paradigm and in a Scandinavian context, some of these exceptions have played a major role in the development of the Nordic film industry.

In recent discussions on the development of Nordic film, scholars have focused on a shift in cinematic production away from culturally and nationally marked literary adaptations towards an interest in common, everyday drama. Tracing Nordic co-productions financed by NFTF (National Film and Television Fund), Pil Gundelach Brandstrup and Eva Novrup Redvall note how the late 1990s marked a shift from historical drama and literary adaptations to genre-inspired contemporary cinema.² A clear sign of this change away from Nordic “culture-build-
ing" is that the NFTF no longer seeks to promote and emphasize a Nordic shared cultural heritage and identity. In a specifically Norwegian context, tracing the development of Norwegian production support awarded by the Norwegian Film Fund (since 2001), Gunnar Iversen notes that at the turn of a new millennium, renewing and modernizing the Norwegian film sector implied providing the national film production sector with more freedom. Thus, the government "no longer emphasized the aspects of artistic aspiration or national cultural identity as clearly as before" (my italics). Finally, Mette Hjort has written extensively on what she regards as a move away from Scandinavian heritage films to Nordic films that appeal beyond national boundaries due to a shared set of contemporary affinities. Using Hjort's terminology, the assumption of "epiphanic culture" – has been replaced by an assumption that films will circulate outside national boundaries based on "homophily".

Yet, while Scandinavian film has veered away from literary adaptations and a focus on national heritage, favouring instead everyday drama, the possibility remains of employing a subtle form of intertextuality in an everyday drama that opens up for different viewing positions. In *deUSYNLIGE*, the intertextual references are subtle enough to be overlooked. Using Hjort's terminology, it may be said that some audience members will view the film as "culturally marked", while others will view it as "unmarked". Film-goers are not forced into particular cultural positions, but the film nevertheless possesses the qualities of a classic, the richness of which relies on surface-level quality as well as a deeper layering of potential meaning and intertextuality.

Since *deUSYNLIGE* is a subtle adaptation with intertextual links to several literary texts, it might be fruitful to regard it in terms of what Robert Stam has called "intertextual dialogism". Basing his understanding of an adaptation on M. M. Bakhtin and Gérard Genette, Stam argues that an adaptation may be regarded "less [as] an attempted resuscitation of an originary word than a turn in an ongoing dialogical process". This definition seems particularly relevant to *deUSYNLIGE*, since the most obvious hypotext, *Brand*, so clearly enters into dialogue with Kierkegaard's *Frygt og Bøven*, which in turn thematizes possible ways of understanding and recounting the Old-Testament tale about Abraham and Isaac.

**Kierkegaard’s Reflections on Adaptations**

Kierkegaard’s *Frygt og Bøven* includes the author’s passionate deliberations on how Old-Testament tales are to be understood and recounted in modern society. The narrator, Johannes de Silentio, not only ends up recounting the tale of Abraham and Isaac himself, but also encourages others to do the same. The recounting of Biblical texts is, of course, especially pertinent in the case of sermons, and Kierkegaard’s advice may be viewed as homiletic as well as metapoetic. Through a series of experimental thoughts, Silentio, represents the story about Abraham and Isaac in varying ways. He imagines it as a contemporary sermon, and he compares its motif with similar motifs found in other Biblical tales, Greek tragedies, folklore and Shakespearean drama. Through various points of view, he presents the story with different endings – such as Abraham’s not having had a happy moment after passing God’s test, or Isaac’s no longer having been able to believe in God. He wants us to imagine a man who killed his son in a similar way today: "At der dog ikke er en Diger, der kunde beslutte sig til at foretrække saadanne Situationer for det Fias og Tant, hvormed man fylder Comedier og Romancer!" (p. 29). He finally evokes a contemporary "Troens Ridder" (Knight of Faith), an ordinary citizen who lives “glad og lykkelig hvert Øieblick i Kraft af det Absurde" (p. 47).
The most important aspects of Silentio’s narrative strategy are expansion and modernization. The expansion of an otherwise short Biblical text is to force listeners to imagine and dwell on the angst Abraham must have experienced. The expansion is achieved through repetition of the narrative elements, each time varied in terms of perspective and focus. This insisting repetition is to counteract the automatic response of the reader or listener who tends to feel he knows the main plot and readily assumes that for Abraham it was only a matter of brief testing “saa hurtigt forbi som det er sagt” (p. 49). In order to oppose the misconception that the tale is easily comprehended, Silentio furthermore wants to fill out Abraham’s emotional state every step of his four-day journey: “Hvis jeg skulde tale om ham, da vilde jeg først skille Prøvelsens Smerte. Til den Ende vilde jeg som en Igle suge al Angst og Nød og Qval ud af en Faders Lidelse” (p. 50). He would make sure that one related so thoroughly to the angst Abraham must have felt, that the four days “skulde blive uendelig meget længere end det Par tusind Aar, der adskiller mig fra Abraham” (ibid.). What Silentio wants to avoid is the easily devoured “Godtkjøbs-Udgave af Abraham” (ibid.).

The second aspect of Silentio’s strategy is to make Abraham’s test relevant and comprehensible by retelling the tale as if it just happened: “Jeg taler helst menneskelig derom, som var det sket igaar” (p. 33). Silentio explains: “Det er min Sjæl imod, at tale umenneskelig om det Store, at lade det dæmre i en uhyre Afstand i ubestemt Skikkelse, at lade det være Stort, uden at dog det Menneskelige deri kommer frem” (p. 59). The poet or speaker, then, has to overcome two types of temporal obstacle: the compressed time of the narrative and the temporal distance separating the mythical event from today. Johannes de Silentio is not a poet himself, but he leaves his good advice to those who might feel the call to adapt the event, promising that “Abraham belønner digteren – ikke omvendt” (p. 23).

“Historien om en Moder”

Ibsen’s Brand and Andersen’s “Historien om en Moder” both carry an intertextual relationship to the Old-Testament tale of Abraham and Isaac through Kierkegaard’s deliberations in Frygt og Bæven. In the case of “Historien om en Moder”, the Old-Testament intertextuality is not established directly in the text, but in an analysis of the text, Jacob Bøggild convincingly illustrates the relationship between Andersen’s tale and Frygt og Bæven. Bøggild regards “Historien om en Moder” as an inversion of the tale of Abraham and Isaac which ultimately supports Kierkegaard’s understanding of the religious. The most obvious inversion is, perhaps, that the story of a father becomes the story of a mother. The father who is willing to kill his son becomes the mother who refuses to let her child die; the believer who lies sleepless in angst, becomes the mother who dozes off during her vigil; the Biblical figure who believes through the absurd becomes a contemporary pseudo-believer whose faith is based on rationality. Abraham, who regards the ways of the Lord as past understanding, becomes the mother who regards his ways as comprehensible; and Abraham, respecting the distance between himself and God, turns into the mother assuming an intimate understanding of God. Through the logic of inversion, the mother ends up realizing that she has been wrong and as she finally accepts her child’s death, the story ends up illustrating Kierkegaard’s moral.

A master at creating small, sentimental genre pictures pertaining to the intimate space of Biedermeier romanticism, Hans Christian Andersen, then, is able to convey the message of the Old Testament and of Kierkegaard’s philosophical writings through a fairytale focusing on a mother’s grief and desperation. As Andersen’s
mother, trying to catch up with Death who has taken her child, offers up her memories, her blood, her tears and her youthfulness, her suffering is certainly drawn out, leaving a strong impression of a mother’s “Angst og Nød og Qval”. Andersen is no doubt a good example of Kierkegaard’s leech-like writer who knows how to suck these emotions out of his main character – and his readers.

Introducing the grieving mother is a modern twist, the appeal of which has lasted through Brand and deUSYNLIGE. Yet, we may also regard Kierkegaard’s Frygt og Bæven as a possible source of inspiration for this inversion. In the opening pages, entitled “Stemning” (Mood), Johan de Silentio repeatedly compares the story of Abraham and Isaac to the situation of a contemporary mother weaning her child (pp. 14, 15, 16). In addition, the mother–child relationship is introduced through Silentio’s increased focus on Sarah in his Biblical scenarios. In the first scenario, Silentio dwells on Abraham and Isaac. Abraham arises, departs with Isaac, and the only thing we are told about Sarah is that she looks after them until they disappear from her view (p. 14). The indication of Sarah’s feelings regarding her son is tentative. In the second scenario, Abraham wakes up, embraces Sarah, who, in turn, kisses Isaac. The scene establishes the relationship between the three of them with Sarah as the intermediary figure. In addition, we are told that Isaac is Sarah’s “Stolthed, hendes Haab i alle Slægter” (p. 15). In the third scenario, Abraham wakes up and kisses Sarah, who kisses Isaac. Isaac is Sarah’s “Lyst, hendes Glæde i alle Tider” (ibid.). As in the case of the contemporary mother weaning her child, a motif of grief is introduced: “da er ei heller Moderen uden Sorg, at hun og Barnet mere og mere skilles ad” (p. 16). In the last vignette, the narrator does not dwell on the morning scene. There are no embraces and kisses; Abraham just departs from Sarah. Instead the figure of Sarah is brought into focus when Abraham and Isaac return home and she eagerly runs towards them (ibid.). In “Stemning”, then, one finds a possible transition towards the focus on the relationship between mother and child. “Af Abraham have vi ingen Sørgesang” (p. 19), writes Silentio, but one way of dwelling on grief and despair is to focus on Sarah or a contemporary mother losing her child.

While Andersen’s tale of a mother might shed some light on the development of modern narratives based on Abraham and Isaac, it is also a text that is so well known in Denmark that it is likely to figure as an intertext for a Danish audience watching deUSYNLIGE. This intertextual link is hinted at in Henrik Uth Jensen’s review of the film in Kristeligt Dagblad entitled “Historien om en morder” (The Story of a Murderer), thus punning on the title of Andersen’s tale.11

Brand

In a Norwegian context, deUSYNLIGE is more likely to evoke Brand as an intertext. The clues to an intended Brand intertextuality are found primarily in the naming of the characters. As in Brand, the mother’s name is Agnes, and her child carries the name Isak, establishing the link further back to the Old Testament text informing both dramas. The link to the Old Testament is clearly established in Ibsen’s Brand as the main character reflects on “Isaachs redsel” once the possibility of God taking his son away from him arises.12 Since it was first published, Brand has also been read in relation to Kierkegaard’s writings. In the immediate reception, Kierkegaard was considered Brand’s main topic. Arne Garborg, for instance, views Brand as a regrettable aestheticization of Kierkegaard’s philosophical seriousness – as “uægte kierkegaardianisme, Qvasi-Kierkegaard”,13 In recent times, Per Thomas Andersen has analysed Brand’s Old-Testament intertextuality traced through Kierkegaard’s Frygt og Bæven, viewing Ibsen’s Brand as
conveying quite a serious message rather than just providing poetic liberation.14 

In *Brand*, Ibsen combines the stories of the believing father, the grieving mother and the dying child. As in Andersen’s case, this is not a case of a straight adaptation seeking to reproduce the text – or, to use Stam’s terminology, *Brand* is not an “attempted resuscitation” of either the Old-Testament tale or *Frygt og Bæven*. Rather it represents Stam’s “turn in an ongoing dialogical process”. In the Old-Testament tale about Abraham, the religious is set up against the ethical (as Kierkegaard would put it), the religious triumphs, and the child’s life is saved. In *Brand*, on the other hand, the religious is set up against the ethical with several elements of uncertainty and the child dies. The reader never finds out whether God demands the sacrifices Brand offers – or demands that other people offer – and thus we do not even know whether they at all should be considered sacrifices. Read realistically, the death of the child, Alf, is caused by illness, while read idealistically, it is caused by the father’s willingness to sacrifice his son. The reader never finds out whether God demands the sacrifices Brand offers – or demands that other people offer – and thus we do not even know whether they at all should be considered sacrifices. Read realistically, the death of the child, Alf, is caused by illness, while read idealistically, it is caused by the father’s willingness to sacrifice his son. In either case, Brand will not give up his call at a local parish and thus refuses to move to a warmer place so that Alf may survive.

Compared to Andersen, Ibsen is a master of the more complicated, dramatic œuvre in which Agnes’s role may remind us of that of Andersen’s mother, although the play is set more realistically in contemporary Norway. Modern Norway of the 1860s is a nation in which priests and politicians argue, and where Gypsies (Tatere) are on the political agenda, forced into cultural assimilation. Ibsen, thus, situates his family tragedy in the midst of national culture-building, spinning together religious, political and nationalist discourses and ideologies. The relationship between parent and child is no longer one-dimensional, as in the patriarchal father-and-son tale of the Old Testament or in Andersen’s sentimental mother-and-child tale of the romantic fairytale genre. Instead, Ibsen fuses the patriarchal and sentimental modes showing us the agony of both Agnes and Brand.

As Per Thomas Andersen points out, “konfrontasjonene [mellom Agnes og Brand] er blant de mest kjente og mest bemerkelsesverdige scener i norsk litteratur” (p. 111).

As is often the case in adaptations, the texts become more complex as elements from the source text are expanded, doubled, inverted and transposed. As Stam sums up his view of adaptations: “It is a matter of a source novel hypotext’s being transformed by a complex series of operations: selection, amplification, concretization, actualization, critique, extrapolation, analogization, popularization, and reculturalization” (p. 68). A main tenet of *Brand*, correspondingly, is that life is inscrutably interwoven: “Så vilt, så broket filtrer inn / de tusen skjebnetrådes spin” (p. 511) – a tenet that may also apply metapoetically to Ibsen’s own text.

If we focus again on the grieving mother, we find Agnes one year after the death of her child. It is Christmas Eve – the evening one is to celebrate that God gave his son to human kind, only to have him sacrificed so that human kind may have eternal life. Yet, rather than contemplating Jesus, Agnes dreams and fantasizes about Alf (pp. 496, 513, 516). She remembers how happy he was last Christmas and pulls out the articles of clothing she has held on to for a year. Gazing at these articles she evokes the situations in which he wore the clothing. Like Andersen’s mother, Agnes is the quintessential grieving mother.

Agnes is in the midst of a grieving process in which her “helper” becomes Brand and a Gypsy woman. Brand demands that Agnes subjects to God’s will by giving up all her memories, her sorrows and her longing. His motif is ambiguous – he may be convinced that this is God’s will, and he may be driven by an egoistic need for his wife’s undivided attention (p. 515). Under all circumstances, Brand demands a concrete sacrifice, namely that Agnes gives all Alf’s
clothing to a Gypsy woman showing up at their door carrying a child on her arm. Introducing a Gypsy woman at this point, Ibsen dramatizes the notion of a Christian sacrifice by testing it in the face of a non-Christian. Since the Enlightenment, Gypsies (tatere) have been represented as enemies of Christianity whether they were considered as Mongolians or Turks, settled in Russia or the Nordic countries.\(^{15}\) The Gypsy woman, too, represents herself as vile: She is homeless, has another child who has run off with the younger child’s clothes, has given birth to her child in a ditch in the midst of debauchery, surrounded by men, any of whom might be the child’s father. This background story may be recounted sarcastically, with the Gypsy woman parodying the stereotypical tales that were told about Gypsies in the 1860s. As such it may well be read as an example of what postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha calls “mimicry”/mockery aimed at Agnes as well as the reader.\(^{16}\) Yet, Agnes seemingly takes her words at face value, so that she ends up tested in a manner that differs significantly from that of both Abraham and Andersen’s mother. Abraham deals directly with God, and Andersen’s mother is tested in the context of other worthy mothers. When Andersen’s mother threatens to tear up other flowers representing the lives of children on earth, she is asked to imagine a mother like herself whom she might end up causing the grief and sorrow she herself has experienced. This is a convincing argument, and the mother gives in: “’En anden Moder!’ sagde den stakkels Kone og slap strax begge Blomsterne.”\(^{17}\) In Andersen’s Biedermeier portrait all mothers are good and loving. Agnes, on the other hand, is asked to sacrifice in the name of God to a non-Christian, and this, in particular, feels like “helligbrode” and “Blodskyld mot den lille døde!” (p. 520).

Ibsen, furthermore, stresses this point of intercultural bonding by having Brand discover that before marrying Brand’s father, his mother was in love with a learned, young man. When this man proposed, however, Brand’s mother felt obliged to turn him down because of social differences – he was poor and she was wealthy. He, instead, married a Gypsy girl and fathered the Gypsy child, Gerd. Thus, it turns out that neither Brand nor Gerd would have been born had Brand’s mother dared marry the person she loved in the first place. Symbolically, Gerd and Brand become related. Joan Templeton, for instance, regards them metaphorically as “brother and sister” (p. 86). It is in this connection that Brand gains the insight that people’s lives are connected in inscrutable ways:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Så vildt, så broket filtres inn} \\
\text{De tusen skjebnetråders spind, –} \\
\text{Så ligger skyld med skyldfrukt blandet,} \\
\text{Det ene smittende det annet,} \\
\text{At den som ser der inn, ser rett} \\
\text{Og blodigst urett vorde ett.}
\end{align*}
\]

(p. 511)

Important in this realization is that it affects Brand’s understanding of guilt and evil. On
earth, the line between good and evil, right and wrong, is not a clear boundary. Thus, no human being can consider himself entirely rightful, nor can he consider others entirely in the wrong. This line of uncertainty is one that deUSYNLIGE develops further through a series of mirroring scenes in which we see how the “good” person may end up committing nearly the same criminal act as the “bad” person.

As Agnes gives her clothes to the Gypsy woman, she experiences a wonderful sense of freedom. She no longer imagines Alf as a corpse in the graveyard, but as “til himlen båret!” (p. 522), and she is ready to meet him in death (p. 523). The scene may be interpreted negatively, as Engelstad does, as a sign that once she has been deprived of her free will, she is no longer alive existentially: “The possibility of continuing to live as a human being no longer exists. The death of Agnes shortly afterwards is a metaphorical expression of this inhumanity” (p. 90). It is, however, also possible to interpret this death in a positive light. Agnes’s face expresses a “høy strålende glede” (p. 522), she claims that her soul has been saved (p. 523), and she thanks Brand for having shown her the right path (ibid.). She ends up exemplifying the charitable human being whose love is not reserved for a chosen few. She gives not only to those who mirror her, but also to those with whom she fundamentally disagrees. As Errol Durbach expresses it: “Hers is the centrifugal force that generates love in the world […]. Hers is verdens kjerelighet which teaches love in others,”19 In addition to the focus on the grieving mother, the impossible boundary line between Self and Other (culturally and religiously), this topic of all-encompassing love is further explored in deUSYNLIGE.

deUSYNLIGE

The primary hypotext in Harald Rosenlow Eeg’s manuscript for deUSYNLIGE is Brand. This text, in turn, figures as a dialogical source in which its themes are reworked and expanded upon and in which Ibsen’s concentrated types are turned into more complex human beings with whom the audience can relate.20 By operating with a larger cast of characters, Rosenlow Eeg is able to disperse the extreme characteristics of Ibsen’s types onto more people. The theological, social and political questions of the drama are still engaged, but no characters are fanatic like Brand.21 Drama, in other words, is not created through polarization, but rather through a confrontation of two people – a victim and an offender – who turn out to be more alike than what appears at first glance.

Before analysing the characters further, a summary of the film may be in place: Agnes is out for a walk with her 4-year-old son, Isak, along Akerselva (the Aker River) in Oslo. Momentarily she leaves Isak outside a café while she goes in to buy him a hot chocolate. While she is gone, two older boys run off with the stroller and rather randomly end up causing Isak to drown. The crime is not premeditated, Isak’s body is never found, and the boys never admit their guilt; still, they are sentenced to jail. While the episode at Akerselva is shown in flash-backs, the film plot begins as one of the boys, now a young man, Jan Thomas, is let out of jail eight years after the tragedy and is given the opportunity to start anew. In jail he has learned to play the organ – a trade for which he has an extraordinary talent – and he ends up getting a job as an organist in an Oslo church. At the church he becomes acquainted with the young minister, Anna, and her 4-year-old son, Jens. Gradually they fall in love and Thomas (who has stopped using his first name Jan) develops a close relationship with the boy. He does not tell Anna about his past, but one day Agnes, working as a school teacher, shows up at the church with a group of students. Agnes recognizes Thomas and the plot develops in the manner of contemporary family drama and
thriller. Agnes craves confrontation, wants
Thomas to admit his guilt, and also wants to
prevent Thomas from harming another child.
Thomas evidently just wants to bury the events
of the past. The film’s perspective shifts be-
tween their two individual (attempts at) family
lives, their experiences of the past, and it cul-
minates in a confrontation during which Tho-
mas finally admits his guilt and reveals how Isak
died.

Framed within a church setting, the film’s
Christian themes of evil, sin, grief, atonement
and forgiveness are clear. Can Agnes forgive
Thomas? Can Anna forgive him? – and can she
reconcile her two roles vis-à-vis Thomas, i.e.
that of minister and that of girlfriend (leaving
her son in Thomas’s care)? As the questions are
raised, but not finally answered, the film-goer is
left with major existential and religious ques-
tions animated and inflected through complex
roles, relationships and ultimate uncertainty. As
no characters are purely good or evil, the film
explores the complicated ways in which rather
ordinary human beings may end up sinning or
committing criminal acts. The film sympathizes
with the victim as well as the offender as it illus-
trates the degree to which a victim may herself
become an offender. Above all, the film fore-
grounds questions of human kindness, charity
and forgiveness.

Rosenløw Eeg’s primary strategy for creating
characters to whom one may relate is to avoid
exaggerated types. Brand’s characteristics,
choices, demands and dilemmas are dispersed
upon all the main characters: Jan Thomas, An-
na, Agnes, Jon and Selma, one of Agnes and
Jon’s adopted daughters. When it comes to
guilt, Brand primarily becomes Jan Thomas.
Neither Brand nor Jan Thomas is directly guilty
of a child’s death. While Alf dies as a result of
disease with Brand refusing to move, Jan Tho-
mas’s behaviour is by definition more criminal,
but less deliberate. He and his friend run off
with Agnes’s stroller in order to steal the per-
sonal belongings left upon it, including Agnes’s
bag. When Isak unexpectedly wakes up, he in-
dicates that he recognizes Jan Thomas. Jan Tho-
mas then ends up in a state of anxiety – a state
that only augments when Isak gets out of the
stroller, heads for the river, slips and hits his
head on a stone. Jan Thomas frantically grabs
hold of him and ends up carrying him into Ak-
erselva. Ultimately, Jan Thomas is caught in a
series of unexpected events, driven further and
further towards the position of a murderer, and
when he eventually lets go of Isak in Akerselva,
Isak is still alive, left on his own to drift along
the river – and drown. Though Jan Thomas is
no soul-searching “heroic” Brand entering into
hefty dialog with God, the deaths of Alf and
Isak are similar in that they are due to various
levels of random acts and negligence. In
Brand, Alf’s death primarily evokes religious
questions. Does God demand the sacrifice of
children? Can a wife accept a husband’s decision
not to save a child? And what will it require for
her to accept that decision? In deUSYNLIGE, the
religious questions are viewed from the perspec-
tive of psychology and social criminal jus-
tice: When is a person guilty of murder? How
should he be punished? How does a mother
move on in life when she has lost her child?
Brand’s questions are made contemporary and
everyday – with religion still playing a signifi-
cant role in the church setting.

Yet, the issue of guilt is placed not only
upon Jan Thomas’s shoulders, but also upon
Agnes’s. Whereas Ibsen’s Agnes is faced with a
choice between heeding her husband and sav-
ing her child, deUSYNLIGE’s Agnes is implicat-
ed through her careless behaviour. After all, if
Agnes had not momentarily abandoned her
child, Jan Thomas and his friend could not have
kidnapped him. In addition, Agnes, as we shall
see, ends up nearly causing Jens to drown. Does
this turn her into a potential criminal?

Brand’s dilemma of how to juggle his social
roles is placed upon the minister, Anna’s, shoul-
ders. In *Brand*, the main character faces the impossible integration of his roles as a family man and a representative of God. As a family man he would have moved away in an attempt to save Alf’s life, whereas as a minister with a perceived call he cannot move. In *deUSYNLI\Je*, the dilemma of social roles is placed upon Anna’s shoulders as she has to decide whether she can give Thomas a new chance – not just as a minister, but as a girlfriend. Once more, the decision is de-dramatized, since it is not a question of life and death. Still, it is a tough decision, since it will most likely be difficult to live with either way. As the film ends, we do not know what Anna chooses. We know that she has previously presented herself as an either-or person who chose Jens above her family – above “alt”, as she puts it. She had become pregnant by accident and chose to live as an unwed, single mother. The words “enten-eller” are hers as she explains her situation to Thomas – it was either her parents or her child. The words simultaneously evoke Kierkegaard’s *Enten-Eller* and we realize that her choice is of a religious nature.

Now, she is again faced with a religious either-or as she will either remain religious and thus trust Thomas – through her trust in God – or she will follow her maternal inclination not to let Thomas get near her son, which will then be an indication that she has lost faith in God. Again, *Brand’s* themes are rendered in a more realistic, everyday manner with the film still involving the greater questions of religion and ultimate faith. Going back to the Old Testament, we see that Anna ultimately becomes a modern Abraham whose religious faith is tested based upon her willingness to sacrifice her son.

Finally, *Brand’s* secondary sacrificial demand – that Agnes give Alf’s clothing to a Gypsy woman – is placed on the eldest of Jon and Agnes’s adopted girls. Both Agneses hold on to their dead children’s clothing, refusing to accept that their sons are gone, and both depend on an ethnic Other to move on in life. As mentioned above, Ibsen’s Agnes – upon Brand’s insistence – ends up giving Alf’s clothing to the Gypsy woman who wants it for her poor child. Similarly, *deUSYNLI\Je*’s Agnes ends up adopting two girls from East Asia, with one of the girls eventually burying Isak’s shoes in the backyard as she cries out: “Han er død. Få det inn i hodet ditt.” She yells this at her younger sister, with her mother listening in the background.

In the case of the adopted girl, what comes across as Brand’s megalomaniacal insistence on his wife’s full devotion is turned into the understandable desperation of a child needing her mother’s love. As an adopted child, the girl struggles with feelings of being unwanted, and ultimately her need for Agnes to focus less on Isak helps Agnes progress through her stages of grief. Unlike Ibsen’s Agnes who, upon giving up her material memories of Alf, goes through stages of bitterness, rejoicing and death, the film’s Agnes is one step closer to moving on and finding peace – on earth.

By letting Agnes’ adopted daughters be East Asian, *deUSYNLI\Je* modernizes *Brand*’s motif of the sacrifice and the ethnic Other. The film is able to do this in an elegant manner, leaving it for the viewer to regard ethnic difference as significant or insignificant. The ethnic difference between the two girls and the film’s other characters is never thematized verbally. Their dark skin and dark hair may be considered unmarked as the characters never comment upon it themselves in an age of globalization in which Norwegian adoptions usually involve children from parts of the world outside Northern Europe. Yet, Rosenløw Eeg could have written biological children into the script, and once they were adopted, Poppe could have cast them as white, if it were merely a point that they were not biological. What becomes clear is that the notion of life’s jumbled threads takes on global dimensions in a film written and produced in a new millennium. Ibsen’s concern with national integration turns into an interest in global integra-
tion in which the ethnic Other rather than being portrayed negatively, is presented as a desirable part of one’s community. Ultimately the globalized point of view picks up on one of Kierkegaard’s fundamental arguments for the religious in *Frygt og Bæven*. We have to believe in hidden connections for life to have any meaning. As Silentio puts it: “dersom der intet helligt Baand var, der sammenknyttede Menneskeheden […] hvor var da Livet tom til og trostesløst” (p. 17). Paradoxically, not believing in and through the absurd, becomes absurd in itself.

**Medium Specificity in deUSYNLIGE**

As indicated above, *deUSYNLIGE*, as a film, is able to present issues and scenes in a manner not relying on verbal dialogue, stage directions or verbal narrative commentary. Accessible to film as a medium are visual indications as well as music. When it comes to presenting the “Angst og Nød og Qval” of a parent’s suffering, acting and facial close-ups no doubt become paramount. Trine Dyrholm, portraying Agnes’s grief through a series of close-ups, certainly illustrates the capacity of the close-up to narrate the deepest of human emotions. As Béla Balász puts it, “the film has brought us the silent soliloquy, in which a face can speak with the subtlest shades of meaning […]. In this silent monologue the solitary human soul can find a tongue more candid and uninhibited than in any spoken soliloquy, for it speaks instinctively, subconsciously”. Dyrholm’s face communicates strongly from all angles, in daylight and evening light, and seen through water, windows and mirrors. It even communicates from the back in the scene in which she recognizes Jan Thomas and realizes he is out of jail. Filmed obliquely from the back, Dyrholm’s trembling throat indicates how upset she is that Thomas once more is part of her world – and how moved she is by the music he plays on the organ. Captured is Agnes’s pain as well as her ability to be moved and eventually forgive.

In an adaptation in which the number of characters have multiplied compared to those of the hypotexts, Poppe is able to maintain coherence through integrated *leitmotifs* and symbols, expressed verbally and visually, through plot, dialogue, music and colours. As the very beginning of the film indicates, water constitutes *deUSYNLIGE*’s main symbol. A loaded symbol, water refers to new beginnings (baptism), but also to time and emotions in general: to the constant passing of time, the instability of which Zygmunt Bauman has termed “liquid modernity”, and the oceanic state of emotions and irrationality.

In terms of the plot, Isak drowns; Agnes is a swimmer who spends hours swimming and connecting with the element in which she lost her son, and Jan Thomas is nearly drowned in a hazing incident as he is about to leave jail. This last scene reflects Jan Thomas’s crime and foreshadows his own near-drowning incident towards the end of the film. Many scenes are shot under water. In terms of dialogue, the church setting opens for Biblical allusions with the minister’s assistant, for instance, explaining that water is the source of life – through baptism, and obviously not through drowning.

As to the music, Thomas may be viewed as having “inherited” Brand’s ability to play the organ and use his musical talent therapeutically. In *Brand*’s final act, the schoolmaster and the sexton come across Brand playing the organ in his new church. Brand clearly gets across his inner pain as the sexton comments:

> Han gnages av en lønnlig tann alt siden han ble enkemann; han gjemmer sorgen, det er visst; men ut den bryter her og hist; det er som om hans hjerte var et overflyt og utett kar; – så spiller han. Hor, hver en tone er som han gred for barn og kone. (p. 528)
As in *deUSYNLIGE*, the organ music places the audience in an uncomfortable, ambiguous situation in which they are tempted to give into an emotional response, but struggle to hold on to their rational thinking and social identity. The uncertainty provoked in Brand’s audience is similar to that provoked in Agnes, listening to Jan Thomas in *deUSYNLIGE*. Playing into the water theme, so to speak, Jan Thomas repeatedly plays “Bridge over Troubled Water” as a psalm on the organ, while Agnes understands that someone playing that beautifully cannot be entirely evil.

In terms of visual components, the interior decorating and clothing of Agnes’s family are kept in the aquatic colours of blue and green. In this connection, the use of colours works to symbolize Agnes’s inability to proceed through the stages of grief. As Agnes and Jon are about to go out for a business dinner, Jon suggests that Agnes wear a black dress. Agnes demonstratively grabs a blue-green dress instead. As opposed to a more frumpy, day-time floral dress, a black cocktail dress can signal a dressed-up party mentality. Yet black clothing also marks a conventional progression through stages of grief based on an initial acknowledgement of a person’s death. Agnes’s colours, by contrast, are those of the river from which Isak’s body has never been retrieved. Evidently, Agnes refuses to let go of her overwhelming emotional pain as well as the thought that Isak may still be alive.

Water ultimately plays a significant role towards the end of the film, when Agnes brings Thomas back to Akerselva and Thomas finally, through a dramatic series of near-drowning accidents, admits his guilt and breaks down crying. The scene brings together tears, water and emotions, and it is under these labile circumstances that admittance and forgiveness finally can occur.

**Danish–Norwegian Connections**

With Trine Dyrholm in the lead as Agnes, *deUSYNLIGE* becomes a Danish–Norwegian story opening up for different types of intertextual readings in a Danish and a Norwegian context, respectively. The choice of Trine Dyrholm may, of course, have been a pragmatic one with Dyrholm being the best actress auditioning for the role and with her star quality and renown making it more likely that the film would attract attention outside Norway, at least in Denmark.

For the argument of this article, though, the inscription of Danish characters and subplots opens up for a particularly Danish way of viewing the movie, seeing Kierkegaard and Andersen as intertextual references. In a Danish context, *Brand* is not a particularly well-known text, and for most Danish audience members it most likely will not figure as an intertextual reference. Instead, in a Danish context *deUSYNLIGE* allows for a viewing position in which one relates the film to the better known Hans Christian Andersen tale ”Historien om en Moder”.

In *deUSYNLIGE*, the intertextual link to Andersen’s tale appears through the theme of the grieving mother and adds in a particular way to the scene in which Jon and Agnes (wearing her blue-green dress) are out for dinner with Jon’s potentially new boss and his wife, both of whom are Danish. The scene ends up a mirroring scene in which Agnes gains insight into another grieving mother’s heartache. Agnes initially dreads going, and as it turns out the Danish wife is not exactly eager to “represent” in a superficial way, either. When Agnes – to her husband’s dismay – starts sharing with the Danish couple that they have lost their son, the Danish wife responds by telling the story of her own son. He is a drug-addict, and the mother feels that she has lost him and that he might as well be dead. She has even buried him symboli-
cally by burying his clothing in the yard. Upon hearing this, Agnes bursts out laughing. For a split second we are not sure whether she finds the comparison absurd, but it turns out she is laughing out of a sense of relief. She finds comfort in the Danish woman’s account.

As mentioned above, Hans Christian Andersen’s tale is about a mother who refuses to accept that Death has taken her child and finally finds comfort in the account of other mothers. To prevent the mother from tearing up two flowers representing other children, Death reminds her that she will make another mother as miserable as she is. Afterwards, in the water of a well, he shows her the image of the fates of two children. One child grows up to live a happy life, and the other to a life of misery. Which would be the fate of my own child?, the mother wants to know. Death cannot answer that question, and the mother finally accepts her loss. The turning point then pertains both to a sense of charity – not wanting to cause another mother’s grief – and to an acknowledgement that a child might be better off dying at an early age.

The scene with the Danish couple seems to function in similarly illustrative ways. Agnes finds comfort in identifying with another mother’s grief. She may also realize that even if her son were still alive, there is no guarantee he would have lived a happy life – he, too, could have ended up in misery, causing himself and those around him grief and despair. Finally, the solidarity vis-à-vis another mother of Andersen’s tale is reflected in Agnes’s subsequent attempt to save Anna and Jens from Thomas. Agnes does not want Anna to experience what she did. Still, like Andersen’s mother, Agnes goes through a stage of inadvertently threatening the life of another mother’s child. In her efforts to protect Jens – and even force Thomas to admit his guilt – she ends up nearly causing Jens to drown. Towards the end of the film, Agnes’s and Thomas’s roles are inverted as she kidnaps Jens at a moment when Thomas has left him unattended. She does so to protect the child, but loses control of herself and the outcome. This, in turn, gives Jan Thomas an opportunity for atonement through saving Jens at the exact same spot in the river at which he previously caused Isak to drown. Again, Rosenlow Eeg expands the elements of a literary intertext, working in an element of crime and various levels of expiation – issues allowing for psychological, theological as well as sociological debates.

Compared to its literary forerunners, deUSYNLIGE focuses on the emotions of a mother, while introducing a contemporary social theme of crime and punishment. In fact, the literary intertextuality most often referred to in reviews of the film is that between Jan Thomas and Dostoyevsky’s Raskolnikov. Thus, the film allows for a viewing position in which the audience may identify less with questions of religious ideology and more with those of social ideology in Scandinavian countries with liberal criminal justice systems. With deUSYNLIGE, Harald Rosenlow Eeg, in sum, weaves the threads of classical Biblical and literary texts together with threads of contemporary issues of crime and punishment. As a director, Poppe tightens these threads through his unifying symbol of water – developed in the film’s plot, dialogue, music and colours. As Jon Selås puts it in his enthusiastic review of deUSYNLIGE, Poppe’s (and presumably Rosenlow Eeg’s) “nådegave i livet er mot, vilje og evne til å tolke klassiske, historiske spørsmål og problemstillinger i en ny tid”.

Conclusion

This article has traced a series of Danish and Norwegian adaptations of the tale of Abraham and Isaac in order to show how Kierkegaard set the parameters for expounding upon, humanizing and modernizing a relatively compact and mysterious Old-Testament text. Thematically, I
have traced the development towards a focus on a mother’s – rather than a father’s – grief; I have traced the development of the relationship between a religious and a cultural Other; and I have traced the development of a crime motif.

DeUSYNLIGE is no doubt a film that may be enjoyed on an immediate level for its intense plot pertaining to the crime-thriller and drama genres, for its exciting editing (cross-cutting in rather surprising temporal ways), for its great acting performances and for its aesthetic unity. In terms of intertextuality and the interpretations of classical questions, it may, as reviews of the film show, be regarded from many different angles: (1) that of world literature emphasizing Dostoyevsky, (2) that of the director’s œuvre with deUSYNLIGE constituting the third film in Poppe’s Oslo trilogy, (3) that of film history, with Poppe being viewed as directing films in the tradition of Lars von Trier, Ingmar Bergman, the Dardenne brothers and Krzysztof Kieslowski, and (4) that of contemporary film foregrounding the theme of lost and abused children.

The focus of this article has been on its Scandinavian intertextuality as I have wished to explore the film as a particularly interesting case in which the intertextuality pertains to the greatest classics of two Nordic countries.

Turning back to the interest of Nordic film scholars in the turn away from the nationally and historically culturally marked towards more contemporary issues, one finds that deUSYNLIGE transcends these categories through its employment of indirect intertextuality. DeUSYNLIGE represents a Scandinavian film that allows not only for Mette Hjort’s “denationalized audience”, but also for a national audience aware of particular Danish and Norwegian literary history. The audience does not have to know Ibsen and Andersen, but their viewing experience may be enriched by this knowledge – not least if they enjoy thinking not only in contemporary social terms, but also in historical terms. DeUSYNLIGE, then, allows for viewing positions that are more or less historically inclined, and also more or less national. Overall, when it comes to films like deUSYNLIGE, it seems pertinent to discuss the text in light of ostensibly outdated categories like nation and history while emphasizing the ambivalent status these categories are given as they are not forced upon the audience.

Works Cited
Christensen, Pernille Fischer 2008. Dansen.


Poppe, Erik and Harald Rosenlow Eeg 2008. DeUSYNLIGE.


Notes


2 Pil Gundelach and Eva Novrup Redvall, “Breaking the Borders: Danish Coproductions in the 1990s”, in: Andrew Nestingen and Trevor G. Elkington (eds.), Transnational Cinema in a Global North. Nordic Cinema in Transition (Detroit: Wayne State University Press 2005), 156. Henning Carlsen’s Sult (Hunger 1966), based on Knut Hamsun’s novel, tends to be regarded as the early precursor to the trend catching on especially in the 1980’s and early 1990’s of making internordic literary adaptations. A key concept behind these films was that the films would appeal to an internordic audience because more than one Nordic country had a cultural investment in the film. Writing on historical Nordic coproductions, Brandstrup and Redvall draw a line from Sult to Jan Troll’s Hamsun (1996) as these films appealed to audiences despite an internordic cast speaking their own language in an unnatural setting (e.g. speaking Swedish as Hamsun or as Hamsun’s protagonist in Sult) (141–63). Other important adaptations in a Scandinavian context are Bille August’s Pelle Eksoten (Pelle the Conqueror, 1988) and Gabriel Axel’s Babette’s gæstebad (Babette’s Feast, 1987).


4 “Epiphanic culture” refers to “the kinds of significant texts or events that figure centrally in various heritage discourses because they are understood somehow to reveal or make manifest an enduring national identity”. They disclose or reveal “the favored or sedimented narratives of certain nations”. Mette Hjort, “From Epiphanic Culture to Circulation: The Dynamics of Globalization in Nordic Cinema”, in: Andrew Nestingen and Trevor G. Elkington (eds.), Transnational Cinema in a Global North. Nordic Cinema in Transition (Detroit: Wayne State University Press 2005), 209, 193. Borrowing her terminology from Carley H. Dodd, Hjort uses "homily" to refer to the tendency among people to communicate with others who have similar looks, backgrounds, attitudes and values (210).

5 According to Hjort, “unmarked” coproductions develop story worlds that, while culturally inflected in the sense that they are necessarily situated in a particular cultural context, are not intended or likely to appeal to an audience’s sense of cultural ownership. Films that qualify as ‘culturally marked’ typically foreground language and heritage as elements requiring special attention on part of an audience that can reasonably be assumed to have something at stake in these cultural elements” (163).

6 In Palimpsests (1997), Gérard Genette explains that the subject of poetics is transtextuality, i.e. “all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts”. Gérard Genette, Palimpsests. Literature in the Second Degree (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1997), 1. This article may thus be viewed as analysing deUSYNLIGE from the perspective of poetics. I will, however, use the term intertextuality, rather than Genette’s proposed term, transtextuality, simply because his term has not become commonplace.


8 I am using Genette’s terminology in which the older text is referred to as the hypotext while the newer text is called the hypertext.
The film’s “intertextual dialogism” also includes contemporary references to different national cultures. These references can be found in various contexts and are open for different viewing positions in different national contexts. I am grateful to Harald Rosenløw Eeg for communicating with me about this (personal mail correspondence Aug. 19th, 2009).

One may object that towards the end of the film, Agnes loses control and becomes fanatical; yet, this is not her modus operandi on a life-long basis as it is for Brand.

I place the word heroic in quotation marks since the drama itself questions whether Brand really is heroic or whether he is an anti-hero who likes to think of himself as heroic. For a discussion of Ibsen’s heroism, see Atle Thomas’s cheek as an indication of forgiveness or at least reconciliation.

I should mention that Agnes’ willingness to forgive is a matter of definition and interpretation. I interpret the final scene in which she wipes the tears from Jan Thomas’s cheek as an indication of forgiveness or at least reconciliation.

I do not intend to say that all Norwegians only relate the text to Brand, and all Danes only relate the text to Henrik Ibsen’s Brand; I place the word heroic in quotation marks since the drama itself questions whether Brand really is heroic or whether he is an anti-hero who likes to think of himself as heroic. For a discussion of Ibsen’s heroism, see Atle Thomas’s cheek as an indication of forgiveness or at least reconciliation.

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tended through the naming of characters, the intertextual links to “Historien om en Moder” are unmarked. Thus, no intertextual links to Andersen’s text may have been intended from the author’s side. Yet, the fact that they may appear in a Danish audience’s mind may, as I hope this article has illustrated, be understood from the perspective of a 19th-century literary interest in the recounting of the tale of Abraham and Isaac, elaborated upon by Kierkegaard and then reworked first by Andersen, then by Ibsen.


28 Cf. Per Haddal, “Skremmende god”, Aftenposten 22.08.08; Geir Lovli, “De usynlige”, Fredrikstad blad 25.09.08; Sven Grotdal, “Skyld og forsoning”, Oppland arbeiderblad 26.09.08; Sven Grotdal, “DeUSYNLIGE”, Romerikes blad, 25.09.08; Theis Christiansen, “De Usynlige,” OnFilm, 07.11.08.

29 Jon Selås, “Mesterverk fra Erik Poppe”, VG NETT 21.08.08.

30 Eva Novrup Redvall, “To sider af samme sag”, Information 07.11.08 (refers to Bergman and Kieslowski); Per Haddal, “Skremmende god”, Aftenposten 08.22.08 (refers to Bergman and the Dardenne-brothers); Jon Selås, “Mesterverk fra Erik Poppe,” VG NETT 08.21.08 (refers to Bergman, von Trier and Kieslowski).