Abstract:

One of the recurrent images in Norwegian films produced in the 2000s is that of the socially inhibited male protagonist suffering from various psychiatric diagnoses. This article claims that the popularity of suffering manhood on screen must be understood in the context of Norway’s cultural and political self-comprehension as generous and compassionate. Through an analysis of two films, Elling (Næss 2001) and Kunsten å tenke negativt /The art of negative thinking (Breien 2006), the article further demonstrates how compassion as a Norwegian ‘state emotion’ often consolidates established notions of manhood and Norwegian national identity.

Key words:

struggling men, Norwegian film, state emotionalism, compassion
Male mental illness and Norwegian compassion


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Introduction

Norwegian popular films produced in the 2000s have assigned a privileged epistemic position to socially inhibited male protagonists with various psychiatric diagnoses. By virtue of their emotional and mental struggles, these male protagonists are granted access to truths that normal others fail to see and understand. One of the most memorable recent productions depicting struggling men is Elling (Næss 2001). Elling is a film adaptation of Ingvar Ambjøren’s novel Brøder i blodet/Blood brothers (1996), the third in a series of four books whose main character is Elling. Capitalizing on the popularity of the book series as well as the success of the theater play Elling og Kjell Bjarne/Elling and Kjell Bjarne, which was adapted for stage by Axel Hellstenius and directed by Petter Næss in 1999, Elling the movie, also directed by Petter Næss, starred the same actors as the theater play and turned out to be a Norwegian block buster with 769,923 tickets sold in Norwegian cinemas in 2001 (LUMIERE Data base on admissions of films released in Europe). In 2002, Elling won an Oscar nomination for the Best Foreign Language Film and, until recently, the film used to be the best Norwegian grossing of the last three decades.1 Elling had two follow-ups, Mors Elling/Mother’s Elling (Isaksen 2003) and Elsk meg i morgen/Love me tomorrow (Næss 2005), both of which topped the list of best grossing Norwegian films in Norwegian cinemas in the year of their release (Nordisk Film & TV Fond 2003, 2005). In addition, films such as Mongoland (Ommundsen 2000), Himmelfall/Falling Sky (Vikene 2002), Hawaii, Oslo (Poppe 2004), Reprise (Trier 2006), Kunsten å tenke negativt/The art of negative thinking (Breien 2006), and De gales hus/House of fools (Isaksen 2008) favor mental illness as a propitious site for understanding selfhood and the world.

In all these films, the suffering protagonists are ethnic Norwegians, and, in most of the cases, they are men who live as outsiders and have yet to discover their sexuality. In Scandinavia, the prevalence of struggling men in popular cinema has mostly been interpreted from the perspective of masculinity theories. For example, Swedish film scholar Anders Marklund (2008) argues that Elling is primarily about men’s search for a supportive com-
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Community. Discussing the same film, Norwegian gender scholar Jørgen Lorentzen (2004) focuses on male friendship and what he calls ‘naïve manliness’ as embodied by Kjell Bjarne, one of the film’s main male characters. This naïve manliness is not about control, power, rationality, and strength, but about lack of control, fragility, innocence, fear, powerlessness and the need to take and be taken care of (Lorentzen 2004). Both Marklund and Lorentzen flash out the inspirational potential of the film, as the audiences are encouraged to feel with the struggling men, accept them as they are, and even recognize themselves in the manly characters. In the process, what is ultimately cured is not necessarily the men’s illness, but the society’s postmodern sense of alienation. In other words, by feeling with the struggling male characters, the audiences learn a lesson in generosity, compassion, and good community.

But how is this good community defined? Who is entitled to be part of it and what type of bond does the compassionate response to the cinematic representation of male mental struggle forge? What does this cinematically induced compassion tell us about the construction of masculinities in contemporary Norway? How can this compassion for mentally ill men be understood in a larger socio-political context in Norway? In order to answer these questions, I analyze two films produced in the 2000s, Elling and The art of negative thinking. In both films, the protagonists are middle-aged men whose mental, sexual and intimate struggles are presented in a way that is likely to elicit compassion from the Norwegian audiences. In contrast to reception studies that focus on the actual affective experiences of the audience, I follow cognitive film theorist Carl Plantinga (2007) and locate compassion at the level of film narrative and character presentation. With Plantinga, I further acknowledge that compassion is neither the only elicited emotion by the trope of male mental illness on screen; nor is it a guaranteed outcome in the spectator. Rather, I treat compassion as what Plantinga called a ‘potentiality’ prescribed by cinematic representations of mentally ill men and which, as we will see, find fertile ground in the socio-political context in Norway. While the analysis below remains grounded in the film narrative, it occasionally references the reception histories as exemplified through film reviews and public interviews with those involved in the film productions such as actors, director and, in the case of Elling, with the author of the Elling-books, Ingvar Ambjørnsen. These extrafilmic references serve the purpose of contextualizing the cinematic representations of struggling men and the subsequent cinematic compassion in the larger politics of compassion in Norway.

Compassion: A Norwegian state emotion

Compassion is feeling someone else’s pain. For philosopher Martha Nussbaum (1996, 2001), ‘pity’ or ‘compassion’ is the basic social emotion that creates a bridge between the individual and the community. By sharing somebody else’s pain through compassion
for the sufferer, individuals come to understand the social injustices that lead to discrimination against some for the benefit of certain privileged others. Compassion as an emotional response has, therefore, a cognitive and ethical dimension: one understands where the suffering comes from and wants to put an end to the injustice that caused it both because the witness sees the suffering as unfair and because she is aware that she may also be exposed to a similar injustice. Consequently, compassion is a political tool for calling attention to social inequality.

Even while praising compassion for its political potential, Nussbaum does not fail to recognize that the projection of oneself into somebody else’s pain also implies a process of separation from the sufferer. Though the witness identifies with the sufferer, she ultimately enjoys a privileged position, which allows her to observe the suffering at a safe distance rather than becoming part of it.3 Despite this, Nussbaum is confident that the separation between sufferer and witness can be successfully overcome by the witness’s active contemplation and evaluation of her own differences and privileges.

Cultural theorist Laurent Berlant (1998) is more skeptical of the revolutionary potential of compassion. According to her, modern spectacles of suffering offered by entertainment culture elicit the pathos one must have to be moral. Agency, however, often remains confined to an imaginary realm indifferent to the normative conditions of the real. Satisfied with her compassionate response to somebody else’s pain, the witness may no longer feel compelled to take action to end injustice. Instead she may retreat into a private world of feelings and indulgent self-satisfaction. In this case compassion is no longer an effective tool to question hegemony and call for social change, but rather, as Berlant suggests, symptomatic of a generic wish for a conflict-free world during moments of social anxiety (1998).

Given these two accounts of compassion, I want to investigate to what extent the trope of male mental illness in Norwegian films and the compassionate response elicited by this trope are indeed put to work to question the social and cultural hegemony that has allowed the promulgation of social injustice and inequality also in Norway. I am interested in the role of compassion in staging and reproducing notions of Norwegian national identity, but also how compassion ties to the construction of masculinities in one of the most gender equal countries in the world (Hausmann et al. 2012).

In Norway, compassion arguably functions as what Berlant (2005) has elsewhere called ‘a state emotion’. In the global arena, Norway has distinguished itself as one of the most committed development aid and emergency assistance donors, with few interests in realpolitik attached to its policies (Ingebritsen 2006, Tvedt 2003, 2007). Compared to other nations in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which all have equivalent aid policies, Norway stands out as one of the countries that mobilizes the largest number of organizations relative to its population and allocates the greatest portion of its GNI to international aid (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign...
Affairs 2008). In addition, starting with the 1990s, Norway has been highly active in peace and conflict mediation (Bercovitch 1996), and in the 2000s, Norwegian politicians and political scientists commonly refer to Norway as a ‘humanitarian superpower’ (Andersen et al. 2010).

Domestically, development aid and peace mediation have been officially justified as door-openers in Brussels and Washington DC, as Norway lacked a colonial past and had no other tradition through which to establish relationships with the non-European world (Tvedt 2007). Yet it would be too simplistic to claim that development aid and peace mediation are just pragmatic Norwegian foreign policies. Political scientists and social anthropologists (Gullestad 2007, Tvedt 2003, 2007) have demonstrated that this official political discourse is also backed up by an understanding of Norway as a regime of goodness enabled through compassionate citizenship. Thus, the national ideal that foreign others have failed to live up to, but which in turn shapes the Norwegian national body, is the imperative to love peace and feel compassion for those in war and misery.

If compassion is closely tied to conventional understandings of what it means to be Norwegian, we need to ask whether a socially inapt and mentally tormented manly character like Elling elicits compassion in a Nussbaumian or Berlantian way. Does this cinematically induced compassion make room for social inclusion of male outsiders, as Marklund has suggested? Or could it be that the compassionate response to cinematic representations of male mental and emotional struggle works to reinforce established notions of manhood and Norwegianness? Before we can answer these questions through an analysis of Elling and The art of negative thinking, it is necessary to historicize the compassionate response to mental illness on screen by a brief overview of representations of mental illness in earlier Norwegian cinema.

Mental illness and Norwegian cinema

In the 1950s and 1960s, several Norwegian directors turned their attention to outsiders with mental health problems in an attempt to advocate for a more inclusive society where the mentally ill are treated with dignity and compassion. Norwegian film scholar Gunnar Iversen (2011) describes these films as social idea dramas, whereas the purpose of the film makers was to use cinematic language to illuminate social problems and spark debate (196-200). Already in 1951, Edith Carlmar, Norway’s first woman director, directed Skadeskutt/Damage shot, a film about a young couple where the husband is plagued by acute depression and suicidal thoughts. Among the many romantic comedies made in the 1950s, Damage shot stands out for bringing attention to the dark side of human psychiatry and for demanding respect for those who are mentally ill. Concerned with the prejudice and discrimination the latter face in the mainstream society, Carlmar is not only didactical in her approach, teaching audiences about mental illness and mental institu-
tions. Through narrative, acting instructions, and careful camera work, she encourages audiences to understand and sympathize with those who struggle.

Another notable cinematic contribution to the debate on mental illness, which Iversen does not mention, but equally important in the context of this paper, is Arild Brinchmann’s *Ut av mørket*/Out of darkness released in 1958. Characterizing it as ‘propaganda film’ and ‘documentary case record,’ reviewers applauded Brinchmann’s efforts to engage with the taboo of mental illness and rehabilitation (Rohdin 1958, Schjelderup-Mathiesen 1958, Wig 1958). *Out of darkness* came out when women’s traditional roles as nurturers and housewives were challenged and demands for gender equality were put forth. The main character is Kari (Urda Arneberg), a twenty-five year-old secretary who gets pregnant immediately after she moves in with her new husband, architect Per Holm (Pål Skjønberg). Home alone and systematically ignored by Per, Kari hears voices, has insomnia, and starts taking pills. Her mental state deteriorates as her pregnancy advances and she is finally put in a psychiatric clinic immediately after she gives birth. Through Kari’s eyes, the audience gets a grim picture of the psychiatric rehabilitation in Norway at the time. Upon their arrival, female patients mandatorily give up all their personal belongings and are treated harshly by the personnel. Kari is given no opportunity to speak up and learns quickly that any gesture of rebellion or dissatisfaction is punished with electroshocks. Through her strong will, music therapy, but also Per’s willingness to acknowledge her special needs, she is finally recuperated and is ready to return home. Listened to for the first time, Kari is openly critical of her husband’s negligence and condescension, but also of the dysfunctional psychiatric system that aggravated her sense of being misunderstood while she struggled with mental illness. Taking Kari’s perspective, Brinchmann carefully deploys characterization and film narrative to nuance the audiences’ understanding of female psychiatry and to encourage better treatment and social inclusion of the mentally ill outsiders. In *Out of darkness*, like in *Damage shot*, compassion is the emotion that prompts the audiences’ involvement with the main character and facilitates the director’s call to action.

If Carlmar and Brinchmann chose to focus on adult psychiatry, Arne Skouen brought public attention to children and youth. One of Norway’s most prolific directors, Skouen directed in the 1960s a series of three films, later known as the child-trilogy and which all starred Skouen’s own daughter Synne: *Om Tilla*/About Tilla (1963), *Vaktpostene*/The guards (1965), and *Reisen til havet*/The journey to the sea (1966). These films are heartfelt descriptions of children with various psychiatric problems and are indicative of Skouen’s sympathy and solidarity with the mentally ill. According to Iversen (2011), *About Tilla* is the most emotional and touching of the trilogy, with auxiliary story lines that contribute to complicating the audience’s assumption about child mental illness, and playful camera work and sound that enrich the cinematic experience and evoke compassion for the main character, Tilla.
It is interesting to note that Skouen did not limit his advocacy work to making films. In 1966, he published a seventy-page pamphlet which trenchantly accused the Norwegian state of institutional mistreatment of children with disabilities and blamed mainstream society for their indifference. He called his fellow Norwegians to action by joining Aksjon Rettferd for de handicappede/The Justice Campaign for the Handicapped. Law professor and senior physician within Helsevernet for psykisk utviklingshemmede/Healthcare for the Developmentally Delayed, Aslak Syse (2008) argues that Skouen’s open critique became the catalyst for the social-political movement in the second half of the 1960s which asked for better living conditions, more private life, and a higher life quality for people with disabilities. As a result, in 1967, Norsk Forbund for Psykisk Utviklingshemmede/Norwegian Association for the Developmentally Delayed – today Norsk Forbund for Utviklingshemmede/Norwegian Association for People with Disabilities – was founded and new approaches emphasizing pedagogy and work replaced the old practices which institutionalized the mentally ill and isolated them from the rest of the society. In Skouen’s case, the child-trilogy films together with his public manifesto were at the forefront of a social movement that eventually led to better inclusion and treatment of the mentally ill.

In the 2000s, Norwegian directors maintain interest in mental illness; however several changes have occurred in the depiction of those who struggle. First, the victimized outsiders are no longer predominantly women and children, but ethnic Norwegian men in their twenties and thirties. Thus, of the Norwegian films produced in the 2000s, Falling sky and House of fools are arguably the only films that take up female mental illness, and only as subplot, while Vegas (Vikene 2009) is an investigation of teen outsiders. This cinematic preoccupation with male struggle is an interesting development in the context of the Norwegian welfare state, which, until recently, has primarily focused on women’s and children’s rights also when making policies concerning men’s intimate sphere such as fatherhood (Lorentzen 2012). In this respect, the films of the last decade can be said to compensate for that which has lacked in the socio-political debate, namely men’s intimacies.

Moreover, in contrast to the dark side of psychiatry and the militant rhetoric present in the films of the 1950s and 1960s, the films of the 2000s entertain audiences with socially awkward, yet well-intended men portrayed as innocents who do not pose any threat to others, though at times they may be rough and inconsiderate. Victims of nature and circumstance, these men, many of them old virgins, seek assistance from women, commonly in the form of sexual gratification. The more they struggle, the more likable they become. Elling is an illustrative example of this.

Elling: The Norwegian social democrat

Based on Ambjørnsen’s novel Blood brothers, Elling is the story of a virgin, neurotic ‘mamma’s boy’ in his late thirties named Elling (Per Christian Ellefsen). When his
mother dies, he is first sent to Brøynes Psychiatric Clinic, and, two years later, he is moved into sheltered housing in Oslo together with Kjell Bjarne (Sven Nordin), his former roommate at the clinic and Elling’s first and only friend. Unlike Elling, who has philosophical inclinations and the sensitivity of a poet, Kjell Bjarne is an uncouth, giant of a virgin, also in his late thirties, who has an insatiable appetite for food and an obsession for sex. Despite their different personalities and interests, the two grown-up men have cultivated a close friendship that transgresses intimate borders such as sharing a bedroom and, when circumstances require, even sharing underwear.

In an anthology about Norwegian film from the mid 1980s to 2010, Gunnar Iversen and Ove Solum (2010) point out that despite the characters’ peculiarities and disabilities, audiences can easily recognize themselves in the men’s struggles as the film thematizes not only male mental illness, but also more familiar themes such as loneliness, social insecurity, and relational vulnerability. This thematic familiarity in conjunction with sympathetic acting sets the prerequisites for our compassion, but also triggers laughter when we identify incongruence between the situational familiarity and the characters’ unconventional way of dealing with the situation. According to Iversen and Solum (2010), one of the most emotionally charged scenes that evinces such incongruities at the same time it prompts a strong compassionate involvement from the audiences is the Christmas scene (221).

It is Christmas Eve in Norway. The state TV-channel NRK1 transmits live the Christmas concert with the boy choir Sølvguttene. A full screen shot of the nested TV-clip shows boys merrily singing the celebrated Christmas psalm ‘Deilig er jorden.’ The atmosphere is too familiar to Norwegian audiences: Christmas in Norway is about family ties, togetherness, generosity and traditions. In a long shot, the camera moves to reveal Elling and Kjell Bjarne’s living room. In the center of the frame, Kjell Bjarne sits on the couch, fretting his hands and looking down, while Elling sits in profile in an armchair, crossed-legged, eating a piece of cake. The setting is minimalist: a dark grey couch with two pillows, a light grey armchair, a flower print on the wall behind the couch, a small Christmas tree and a lit floor lamp in the left corner of the screen, two small Christmas decorations hanging in the upper right corner, and a coffee table in the middle, covered with a Christmas patterned table cloth with two glasses of orange juice on it. The musical accords imbue the scene with a warm, celebratory atmosphere; the setting strikes one as frugal, almost institutional. Kjell Bjarne suddenly stands up and announces in an agitated tone that he can no longer wait. His hair is combed in a boyish bob; his pants are drawn high up in suspenders. In a series of extreme close-ups, we see a nervous Kjell Bjarne presenting an expectant Elling a big undefined package wrapped in white paper. ‘If you don’t like it, I will go and hang myself,’ confesses Kjell Bjarne. In slow motion against rising psalm music, Elling un-wraps a miniature building that Kjell Bjarne made from matches and which is a model of their current home. ‘Is it okay?,’ asks Kjell Bjarne. ‘Fantastic,’
answers a mesmerized Elling. As the camera zooms in the interior of one of the apartments of the match-made building, Kjell Bjarne explains that he carefully placed two Seigmann candy figurines inside, one representing him and the other Elling. Deeply touched, Elling pulls out a long box carefully wrapped in Christmas paper and hands Kjell Bjarne his present. The music changes to ‘Silent Night’ and Kjell Bjarne rushes to open the box, tearing the paper away and revealing the elongated body of a naked woman. As he lifts the lid, he bursts out in a curse and throws himself on the couch in full delight. ‘How did you know I wanted the one with the blond chick on?’, he asks. ‘I know you a little by now, Kjell Bjarne,’ says Elling. ‘It is the most amazing present I have ever received,’ confesses Kjell Bjarne. ‘Same here,’ replies Elling.

As the two grown-up men exchange presents with the expectancy of children, the public is reminded not only of their frailty and disabilities, but also of the loyalty and friendship they nurture for one another and which are essential in helping them out of mental health institutions and ‘back into the reality,’ as Elling puts it. The Christmas scene is at once moving and charming, serious and comic, whereas both presents and present exchange ritual may be unconventional, but Elling and Kjell Bjarne’s friendship is genuine and unconditional. This elicits the audience’s compassion and reinforces what the film reviewer Demetrios Matheou (2003) identified as the message of the film: ‘one shouldn’t rush to judge people who don’t embrace the world as we think they ought’ (40).

This scene is only one of many in Elling that present male friendship as a positive force that leads to improved mental health and integration and which, through compassion, advocate for an acceptance of forms of male intimacy that until recently have been regarded as potentially homoerotic, hence problematic (Rotundo 1993). In this respect, Elling is in line with societal trends that indicate that in the 2000s, a larger proportion of men have, or want to have, close friends than previously (Holter et al. 2009). On the other hand, secondary narrative threads in Elling make it clear that it takes more than male friendship and understanding to secure the two men’s integration into the mainstream society. In Elling, successful socialization and the ability to function in public are closely linked to heterosexual norms, or what queer scholars call heteronormativity.4 Elling reinforces heteronormativity right from the start. The film makes it clear that in order to lead a normal life, the two virgin men, Elling and Kjell Bjarne, need to figure out how to control their unconventional intimacies and instead follow the path of heterosexuality. This is to be done by attaining conquest over the eroticized woman, which rules out any allegations of homoeroticism between the two. In the opening scenes, the omniscient narrative voice of Elling familiarizes the audience with their sexual longings. Through multiple voiceover flashbacks, Elling the narrator informs how he and Kjell Bjarne initially gratify their sexual desires through fantasy. Using his vivid imagination as well as his rich knowledge of the world – accumulated through reading books and newspapers – Elling tells phantasmagoric bed-time sex stories to a less creative but sex-obsessed Kjell Bjarne. In
one of these stories, he envisions himself as a sailor embarking on exotic sexual adventures in the Caribbean and as a member of the outlaw motorcycle club Bandidos. After they leave the clinic, the two add phone sex to their bedtime rituals, but when the phone bill arrives and the two are disciplined by their social worker, Elling and Kjell Bjarne understand that the only way to meet women is to leave their apartment and start socializing.

By the end of the film, Kjell Bjarne seems to have made significant progress towards becoming a normal person: he has met, fallen in love with, and lost his virginity to the pregnant Reidun Nordsletten (Marit Pia Jacobsen). Elling, on the other hand, is less fortunate with women, as he is more insecure in public places. Unlike the sex-obsessed Kjell-Bjarne, he rationalizes his sexuality by analyzing both his own and his friend’s mental illness with the utmost critical distance. This combination of suffering and ability to acknowledge his own abnormal behavior make Elling a charming figure that audiences can hardly resist falling in love with. In an interview for Dagbladet, Per Christian Ellefsen, the actor who plays Elling, explains:

Because he tries so hard, fights back, and struggles, he wins people’s compassion. We all have similar thoughts we struggle with. There is an Elling in each of us. Elling’s problem is that those difficult thoughts take over … It is the recognition of ourselves that makes us so engaged with such figures (Olsen 2001).

The Norwegians’ affective investment in Elling is well documented by both Ambjørnsen, author of the Elling-books, and the media. Ambjørnsen has said in interviews and on his website that the public has sent him concrete requests for what Elling should do or must have in order to be happy. One of the most popular requests from Norwegian fans is that Elling find a woman. In response to Ambjørnsen’s negative reaction to these requests, Ellefsen admits:

I understand why Ambjørnsen eventually grew tired of it, but I actually agree with those who think that Elling should have sex. I would let him do it. But Ambjørnsen is strict, and without his help there will be no lady for Elling (ibid).

On numerous occasions, Ambjørnsen has tried to nuance the debate following the film’s huge success. In the media, he expressed concern that all of Norway was cheering for a mentally ill person as well as idealizing and normalizing his problems by claiming that ‘[T]here is an Elling in each of us.’ That is why he strongly opposed the making of the two follow-ups, Mother’s Elling and Love me tomorrow, also based on his Elling-novels. Yet, both films were made despite his initial objections. In fact, Ambjørnsen ended up supporting the third production precisely because he hoped it would tone down the humor and present a more nuanced, if not somber, image of mental illness. With the best box
office in Norwegian cinemas in the year of their release, the follow-ups demonstrated the Norwegians’ lasting affection for Elling and their willingness to feel with the man’s suffering. But has that compassion translated into social action against the structures of power that have led to Elling’s alienation? Are the Elling-films the new Skouen’s child-trilogy of the 2000s?

In 1960s, Skouen’s social idea dramas sparked debate and encouraged audiences to ask for better institutional treatment and social inclusion of the mentally ill. In response to Elling’s struggles, modern audiences turn to the private domain and plead that Ambjørnsen grant Elling the heterosexual experience he is perceived to desperately need. In the wake of the film, the public debate mostly entailed questions about the extent to which ‘[T]here is an Elling in each of us’, and less about structures of power that have led to the social exclusion of men like Elling and Kjell Bjarne. In this way, Elling does not only leave unquestioned structures of power; the film ends up reinforcing them by prescribing heteronormativity and encouraging compassionate bonding with the Norwegian national body as exclusively Norwegian. Mental illness, as we have seen, resonates well with the Norwegian national ideal to sympathize with those who struggle. Unlike other Scandinavian productions such as Lars von Trier’s Idioterne/The idiots (1998) or Ágúst Guðmundsson’s Mávahlátur/The seagull’s laughter (2001), Elling encourages the Norwegian public to feel compassion for a character that is not just any man, but the ultimate Norwegian social democrat. Elling is a dedicated supporter of the Norwegian Labor Party (Arbeiderpartiet) and an avid reader of Arbeiderbladet. His idol is the legendary Gro Harlem Brundtland, whose biography Elling has been reading for several years now and whose portrait hangs in the family living room. The only radio station he listens to is the state channel NRK P1, which, according to Elling, has remained faithful to quality news. He is annoyed with the new media and entertainment, because they have corrupted the sense of social responsibility that used to prevail in the Norwegian society. After attending a poetry reading in one of Oslo’s bars, this aspiring poet understands he has nothing in common with eccentric poetry circles, and decides to scribble his poems on bathroom doors and secretly smuggle them into food packages. In this way, they reach the common people who need a poetic intervention to cheer up their gray existence. Elling’s habits blend well with discourses of Norwegian national identity. In a book review of Fugledansen/The Bird Dance (1995), Ambjørnsen’s second Elling-novel on which Mother’s Elling is partly based, Linn Ullmann (1998) notes:

Elling is the perfect Norwegian! He is a man of reason, not sophisticated, jaded or ironic (which is not to say that the novel lacks irony). He is equipped with integrity, knowledge, empathy, and dreams. He is, like most Norwegians, somehow tolerant and prejudiced. And although he – at least in his thoughts – is willing to subscribe to the collective spirit of voluntary work, he is an individualist from head to toe.
Since *Elling* is an adaptation of Ambjørnsen’s novel *Blood brothers*, the director obviously had to decide what to preserve and what to leave out. One of the motifs the cinematic production consistently follows throughout is Elling’s Norwegianness. On the other hand, the film systematically ignores the book’s scenes that portray Elling as potentially dangerous, for example when Elling and Kjell Bjarne find the inebriated Reidun Nordsletten lying unconscious on the stairway in their apartment building. At first, Elling is both scared and infuriated to see a woman in that condition. However, when Reidun’s big, round stomach becomes visible, he is strongly aroused:

> For a short, ugly moment, I saw myself in the abuser’s place, I could see the abuser take advantage of the situation, see him go down on one knee and let his tongue move around the sunken navel. As mentioned, it was a short moment; I did in fact maintain the erection, but with a stick I chased the image of the abuser into the stinkiest sewers of my unconscious (Ambjørnsen 1996, 62).

Instead of a man plagued by dark thoughts and sexual fantasies, the film portrays an innocent, if not naïve, social-democrat whose social inclusion and participation in the Norwegian public sphere is first and foremost a question of finding a supportive female companion that can provide curative sex. In this way, *Elling* conditions a compassionate response from the audiences that reinforces solidarity with ethnic Norwegian males in spite or rather because of historically high migration, mainstreamed gender equality, and increased neoliberalism in Norway. That is why the political potential of compassion identified by Nussbaum remains unexplored, with compassion becoming a tool to reinforce white male hegemony. In comparison, *The art of negative thinking* stands out as a different commentary on male disability and compassion. Let us take a closer look at this film.

**Geirr: A negative thinker**

In *The art of negative thinking*, a car accident leaves thirty-three year-old Geirr (Fridtjov Såheim) with good insurance money but paralyzed from the waist down and impotent. Doomed to life in a wheelchair, he feels depressed, suicidal, and denies contact with other people, including his partner Ingvild (Kirsti Eline Torhaug). He spends most of his days locked in his darkened room watching movies about the war in Vietnam, smoking pot, drinking, listening to Johnny Cash, playing with his gun, and bitterly rejecting Ingvild’s attempts to help him. ‘I don’t like women who are into cripples,’ he sarcastically tells her. Desperate about the whole situation, Ingvild invites a municipal therapy group for the disabled to their home. The group therapist is Tori (Kjersti Holmen), a self-absorbed, condescending master of positive thinking who teaches her patients to focus on solutions, not problems. One of the central objects in the therapy of positive thinking is ‘the
shit bag’, a knit bag into which the patients are to dispose all of their ‘difficult emotions’, i.e., negative thoughts and complaints. The rest of the group is comprised of sixty-five year-old Lillemor (Kari Simonsen), a whining divorcee in a neck brace whose husband left her with no possessions; Asbjørn (Per Schaaning), a forty year-old former businessman who went bankrupt and suffered a stroke which has led to his loss of speech and ability to walk; twenty-eight year-old Marte (Marian Saastad Ottesen), who is paralyzed from the neck down after a climbing accident; and thirty-eight year-old Gard (Henrik Mestad), Marte’s boyfriend who failed to secure her climbing rope. Lillemor uses the shit bag most frequently, Asbjørn has a lot of pent-up aggression, Marte always puts on a goofy grin, and Gard is overwhelmed by guilt.

At first, Geirr is infuriated by the presence of the therapy group and refuses all communication. But when Ingvild warns him that this is the last chance she is giving to their relationship, he decides to join the discussions. He, however, has no intention of obeying the rules of positive thinking therapy. Instead, he challenges Tori’s authority, first by rejecting her comments, then by punching her in the face. When the others refuse to leave, Tori decides to abandon her patients, after which Geirr takes over and leads the rest of the group down the path of negative thinking. Along this path, angst, frustration, hopelessness, suicidal behavior, pessimism, cynicism, and sexual deprivation explode in a burlesque and tragic manner.

Referred to as a ‘feel-bad’ comedy, The art of negative thinking depicts characters that are not only fragile, but also absurd and (self)destructive caricatures. The journalist Jon Selås (2006) from Verdens Gang (VG) rightly calls the film ‘the “Jackass” of psychiatry.’

One of the main ‘psychiatric stunts’ is performed after the patients have consumed significant quantities of alcohol and smoked pot. They gather around the table and play Russian roulette in a scene inspired by The Deer hunter (Cimino 1978). In the context of Norwegian cinema, The art of negative thinking is unique because it eschews political correctness when dealing with the taboo topics of physical disability and mental illness. The film refuses to treat these severe handicaps as positive and instead focuses on the physical challenges, depression, sexual frustration, fear of loneliness and dependency which affect the disabled and their loved ones.

The director Bård Breien confesses to Bergens Tidende that his film is best understood as a response to American positivity which is invading the affective landscape of Norway with its emphasis on positive thinking as a means of overcoming problems and achieving self-fulfilment. ‘The American way of thinking is gradually instituting itself’, he explains; ‘[E]verything is up to you, and all you have to do is be positive. This jars a bit with the Norwegian temperament which is basically skeptical, sulky, and depressed (Wehus and Berentsen 2006).’

The art of negative thinking is a critique not only of the Norwegian embracing of mainstream American positivity, but also of stifling compassion and false sincerity. The film
rejects mental illness as an arena for exercising compassion and instead gives the audiences feelings of guilt and bad conscience. In that respect, it is interesting to see how Ingvild and Gard relate to their loved ones, Geirr and Marte. Torn between fear of loneliness and dread of becoming a burden, Geirr and Marte reject the comfort of pity and compassion from their partners in the intimate sphere. Geirr’s refusal of help is, therefore, first and foremost a refusal to become the object of Ingvild’s compassion. Marte, on the other hand, has learned to live with Gard’s guilt and allows him to tend to her, but when Geirr takes over and teaches Marte and the others negative thinking, Marte is able for the first time to confess her deep hatred of Gard, not only for having failed to secure her climbing rope, but also for being so self-absorbed. Concerned with his own guilt rather than Marte’s mental and physical state, Gard pushes her toward a life of fake happiness and pretense.

When booze, cigars, depression, and frustration replace positive thoughts and the shit bag, both Ingvild and Gard agree that the situation has gotten out of control. Gard breaks up with Marte, and Ingvild goes to the bedroom to pack her things. In the meantime, total chaos is unleashed in the downstairs living room. Accompanied by punk-rock rhythms, Lillemor, Asbjørn, Geirr, and Marte go loose on glass, furniture, paintings, books, and the stereo. Ingvild grows increasingly uncertain about her decision to leave, but Gard relieves Ingvild’s guilt by assuring her that this is a manipulative strategy to make her stay and insists that both of them deserve more. The camera crosscuts back to the chaos in the living room where Lillemor unplugs the stereo and is ready to break it, when Geirr stops her. A moment of silence allows off-screen moans to be heard. In a crosscut filmed in overhead, we see that Gard and Ingvild are having sex. The ‘party’ downstairs comes to a halt and Ingvild sarcastically comments: ‘I think they’ve heard us’. Neither Ingvild nor Gard leave in the end, and by dawn they are all eating cake on the porch. A guilt-ridden Tori returns, not only with a swollen lower lip, but also with a more open attitude, for as Geirr puts it, ‘You see, Tori, you’ll never solve any of your problems until you learn the art of negative thinking’.

In contrast to Vidar (Trond Espen Seim) in Hawaii, Oslo, a sensitive male nurse with paranormal powers who saves his patient by offering his own life, Tori fails in several ways. First, her work with the disabled is not motivated by genuine compassion. What chiefly interests her is to become famous by writing a book on positive thinking. She uses the group as a case study, testing ground for her theories, and to bolster her self-image as a competent helper. Second, Tori is often patronizing, so the way she communicates discourages her patients and hurts their feelings. Third, Tori abandons the group at the most critical moment. When she refuses Gard’s pleas that she come back, Gard accuses her of willfully neglecting her responsibility to her patients.

Through Tori, The art of negative thinking delivers a subtle critique of group therapy which poses as compassionate and well-intended, but in fact fails to properly assist cases
like Geirr, Marte, Lillemor, and Asbjørn. In addition to institutional compassion, the film makes clear that compassion in the intimate sphere almost unavoidably invites pity in the Arendtian sense, particularly in the case of Marte and Gard, where compassionate intentions are thwarted by personal guilt and self-image. Moreover, when the method of change – therapy through positive thinking – is, according to Breien, unsuited to the Norwegian context, change can never occur. Rather positive thinking works as an analgesic that allows hidden problems to escalate.

The art of negative thinking ends with Geirr holding Ingvild on his lap in a scene that is reminiscent of Michelangelo’s ‘Pieta’. As in Falling sky, Hawaii, Oslo or Reprise, the ultimate message is love and sacrifice, but here, salvation comes not from compassion, but from an acceptance of negative thinking, skepticism, sulkiness, and depression as legitimate Norwegian ways to deal with mental and intimate dilemmas and challenges. In this sense, The art of negative thinking breaks with an understanding of compassion as a means to create the good community while simultaneously reinforcing hegemonic discourses of Norwegian identity – Norwegian sulkiness and depression versus American positive thinking. Unlike Elling, the film refuses to prescribe heterosexual love and hetero-romanticism as the ultimate solution to male mental struggle. At the end of the day, the bizarre sex scene between Gard and Ingvild is totally gratuitous. It briefly intervenes in the course of events by distracting Geirr’s attention and calming down the destructive party, but the sexual act itself bears no other consequences. For once, heterosex does not have curative effects. Moreover, if in Elling, male friendship was presented as an important factor contributing to social integration and better mental health, in The art of negative thinking, the determining force that enables intimacy and closeness between Ingvild and Geirr is the couple’s mutual acknowledgement of Geirr’s physical disability and the possibility of living out one’s negativity rather than sexual desire.6

Conclusion

Men with psychiatric diagnosis seemingly enjoy a special position in the Norwegian cinematic landscape of the 2000s. With a few exceptions, the majority of the films produced in the last decade depict the lighter side of male psychiatry, with struggling men being presented as victimized innocents in need of love and sexual gratification, and for whom audiences are encouraged to feel compassion. In the discussion above, I have taken a closer look at this prescribed compassionate response by tying cinematic representations of male psychiatry to compassion as a state emotion in Norway. Starting from two approaches of compassion, Nussbaum’s and Berlant’s, I have asked to what extent the Norwegian cinematic preoccupation with male mental illness expands the audience’s ability to feel with the disabled minority. I have demonstrated that in Elling, the inclusionary potential of the compassionate bond is high-jacked by heteronormativity and Norwegianness. The
film implies that social inclusion in the good community is ultimately meant for ethnic Norwegian men who have won the lucky entry ticket, i.e., heterosexual experience. On the other hand, *The art of negative thinking* criticizes compassion, suspends sexual gratification as an effective means to provide male relief and inclusion, and prescribes Norwegian sulkiness when dealing with anxiety and depression. If *Elling* expresses a generic wish to maintain a Norwegian order that has been shaken by phenomena such as neoliberalism and gender mainstreaming, also *The art of negative thinking*, in its lament of the imposition of American positivity on Norwegian negativity, continues to deploy the trope of male mental illness to maintain cultural hegemony in Norway.

To conclude, as stated in the beginning of this paper, grounded in masculinity theories, Lorentzen and Marklund argue that by depicting men who struggle mentally and emotionally *Elling* affords audiences an emotional involvement which cures the society’s postmodern sense of alienation and gives us a lesson in generosity and good community. Through a comparative analysis of *Elling* and *The art of negative thinking*, I have instead demonstrated that feeling with struggling men on screen is not simply about a universal sense of alienation and solidarity with any outsiders. Rather through narrative, character depiction and cinematography, both films reinforce affective bonds with the hegemonic group, i.e., ethnic Norwegian heterosexual males. In the process, they alleviate the sense of national confusion and anxiety that Norway experiences as socio-political, cultural and ethnic landscapes change in response to increased neoliberalism, migration and globalization.

Notes


2. According to Nussbaum, except for ‘some real, subtle differences’, the terms ‘pity’ and ‘compassion’ describe the same emotion. Aristotle uses ‘pity’ to refer to the emotional state by which one feels someone else’s pain. Following the Victorian era, however, the term ‘pity’ has been systematically associated with the condescension and superiority of the sufferer. When Nussbaum refers to the historical debate from Aristotle to the Victorian era, she prefers using the term ‘pity’. When she turns to contemporary issues, she employs the term ‘compassion’. In this article, I will maintain Nussbaum’s (1996) distinction and adopt her vocabulary.


4. According to Warner (2002), the term refers to an entire set of social relations, institutions, policies, and beliefs that code sexuality as a form of intimacy and heterosexuality as the universal standard for identity.

5. For Arendt (1963), pity is a paternalistic emotional response that involves distance and sets out to change the world. Compassion, on the other hand, is symmetrical and involves solidarity.
For a recent discussion on how intimacy and desire have acquired a meaning beyond sexuality, see Andersen (2011).

References

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