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Queer World-Making in Nordic Cinema

The Nordic region: a queer film and media culture heaven?

IN THE PRESENT Nordic audiovisual media landscape, queer and trans characters and themes are more visible than ever. In addition to celebrated feature films, such as *And Then We Danced* (Levan Akin, 2019), LGBTQ roles and casting are becoming increasingly common in large-scale broadcast drama series. The ultra-popular Norwegian *SKAM* (NRK 2015–2017) broke viewer records across the Nordic countries and used social media creatively as a part of the *SKAM* world, and in reality television, such as the various national versions of *Big Brother*, LGBTQ participants have become increasingly common. YouTube and other social media platforms have also helped produce a new subset of young queer and trans celebrities, such as the Swedish teenage trans girl YouTuber Viktoria Harryson,¹ who was awarded the Transgender of the Year prize at the televised QX Gay Gala in 2018, and the Finnish gay YouTuber, singer and actor Tuure Boelius,² who also came to fame as a teenager. Publicly well known and loved gay men of an earlier generation, such as Mark Levengood and Lars Lerin, appear to have been elevated to national father figures in Sweden, offering comfort and hope in their roles as hosts for high-profile television broadcasts, such as

the COVID-19 fundraiser *En kväll tillsammans* (“*An evening together*”), hosted by Levengood in 2020, and the traditional public service television Christmas show, hosted by Lerin, also in 2020.

At the same time, queer histories and earlier queer figures are being restored and reinscribed into the national memory, for instance in the Swedish drama series *Torka aldrig tårar utan handskar* (*Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves*, SVT 2012, see Koivunen 2018) and *Vår tid är nu* (*Our Time Is Now*, SVT 2017–2020). Although national archives and museums were long notoriously unable or unwilling to document and preserve queer history, moving image archives such as the Swedish Filmarkivet.se introduced new search terms like “queer” in the late 2010s (Brunow 2018). Around the same time new queer archival projects such as the Swedish Archive for Queer Moving Images (SAQMI),³ the Norwegian Skeivt Arkiv,⁴ and the Finnish Friends of Rainbow History (Sateenkaarihistorian ystävät)⁵ were established. In Finland, homosexuality was decriminalized and gender-neutral marriage law introduced later than in other Nordic countries, but the recent popular biopics *Tom of Finland* (Dome Karukoski, 2017), about the iconic gay artist Touko Laaksonen, and *Tove* (Zaida Bergroth, 2020), about the early life of bisexual artist, author, illustrator and creator of Moomin trolls Tove Jansson, have incorporated queer figures into national narratives and nation branding.

While such moves may, at least superficially, disrupt the heteronormativity of the nation state, they can also be seen as a part of the homonationalist project – “gay-friendliness” as key in the construction of contemporary “progressive” nation states’ image and international reputation, which in turn can obscure other forms of oppression (Puar 2013). For instance, in promoting the image of gay-friendliness abroad, the Swedish Institute offers a package of “LGBTQ themed” Swedish films intended for screenings hosted by embassies and consulates around the world.⁶

A fresh report by the Swedish Film Institute (SFI) (Karlsson 2020) celebrates a growing number of Swedish “LGTBQ-themed” feature films, stating an average annual representation of 8 per cent in

2015–2019 and flagging popular mainstream films such as *Min pappa Marianne* (*My Father Marianne*, Mårten Klingberg, 2020), *Jag kommer hem igen till jul* (“*I’m Coming Home Again for Christmas*”, Ella Lemhagen, 2019) and *En underbar jävla jul* (*Holy Mess*, Helena Bergström, 2015). An earlier report commissioned by SFI showed that in 2014, only 0.3 per cent of the characters in Swedish feature films were transgender or gender-nonconforming, while 1 per cent of all characters were bisexual or homosexual (Miklo 2015, 6–8). In comparison, according to a report on Finnish cinema and television in 2019 (APFI 2020), 2.3 per cent of characters in Finnish films represented sexual minorities, while the figure for gender minorities was 0.07 per cent. In Denmark, the only available figures concern female–male gender divisions and ethnic diversity in film production and representation – gender and ethnic diversity are areas which the Danish Film Institute (DFI) officially emphasizes⁷ – but as Redvall and Sørensen (2018) point out, DFI started paying attention to issues of diversity considerably later and in more conservative ways than for example SFI (see also Thorsen 2020).

The recent expansion of queer audiovisual publicity in the Nordic region must be seen in relation to social and legal changes as well as cultural policymaking related to diversity and gender equality, most notably in the case of the Swedish Film Institute, where the 50/50 by 2020 campaign has attracted international attention. It is remarkable, however, that not much has been done to challenge the cis- and heteronormative underpinnings of the 50/50 model, and SFI’s “diversity initiatives” have remained mostly performative: difference for the sake of difference (see Ryberg 2020; Lee 2018).

The focus on measuring and reporting diversity echoes global trends, such as the new representation and inclusion standards for eligibility for the Oscars by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, or the streaming service Netflix investing in and promoting diversity and inclusion through new executive positions and content (The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences 2020; Viruez 2017). The diversity policies of national film bodies and media corporations are, however, a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they signal recognition of the

lack of representation for marginalized groups as a problem, but on the other hand they can be used to avoid real changes through quoting statistics and “ticking boxes” (see Lee 2018). For example, according to Maggie Hennefeld (2020), the Oscars new diversity policy can be seen as a publicity stunt whereby “the industry gatekeepers can ruthlessly monetize identity-based difference to exploit its niche markets while watering down the inclusion criteria.” Similarly, the complexity of queer and trans experiences, stories, aesthetics and politics easily gets lost and watered down in mainstream contexts, where questions of representation and inclusion are all too often reduced to tokenism.

Furthermore, while increased visibility can be understood as an indication of increased recognition of cultural relevance and worth, there is no escaping its ambivalence for queer and trans people (see e.g. Brunow 2018, 176), especially queer and trans BIPOC, for whom it can be associated with increased surveillance, policing, and violence. Queer cinema and media in the Nordic region are increasingly addressing questions of sexuality and gender as intertwined with race, ethnicity, and national/regional belonging – a theme on which several texts in this special issue focus. In addition, the documentary *Sparrooabbán (Me and My Little Sister*, Suvi West, 2016) was the first feature-length Sámi film to examine formations of queer Sámi identity in relation to the ongoing process of Nordic settler colonialism (see Kyrölä & Huuki forthcoming), and the documentary *Kelet* (Susani Mahadura, 2020) follows a young Black Somali-Finnish transwoman finding community in the small Helsinki ballroom scene.

Academic research on queer and trans cinema has delved deeper into the conditions, contents and contexts of representation – dimensions which statistical reports rarely address. Queer aspects in Swedish cinema, for example, have been studied in relation to shifting sexual and gender norms, for instance in the context of the sexual revolution (e.g. Björklund 2012); the gay liberation era (e.g. Ryberg 2015); queer breakthrough in the mainstream, epitomized by *Fucking Åmål (Show Me Love*, Lukas Moodysson, 1998; see Stenport 2012); recent social and legal changes regarding trans issues (Wallenberg 2015); cross-dressing,

androgyny and queer moments in early film (e.g. Gustafsson 2007; Wallenberg 2000; Horak 2017); queer film production (Ryberg 2012); and the ways in which queer histories are incorporated into contemporary ideas of the “caring nation” (e.g. Koivunen 2018). While the internationally well-known image of sexual radicalism in Swedish cinema may have extended to Nordic film cultures more broadly, this image can also contribute to a discourse of exceptionalism: LGBTQ issues have been taken care of and are already inherent in the Nordic countries’ film histories – they thus need no further addressing (see e.g. Dawson 2015, Wood 2012). Moreover, the region’s long and rich queer film histories and cultures are still not a self-evident part of overviews on Nordic cinema: for example, the recent anthology *A Companion to Nordic Cinema* (Hjort & Lindqvist, eds., 2016) barely addresses queer or trans representation at all.

These tensions between inclusion, exclusion and terms of visibility show that the status of queer film and media in the Nordic region is not as established as one might assume. Many aspects of queer film histories as well as current developments remain underexplored and unacknowledged. In this special issue, we are therefore happy to be able to present a selection of original articles and essays that address rather recently produced queer, trans and non-binary films across the region and, at the same time, pose complex questions about national, regional, sexual, gendered and racialized belongings in the present.

From queer cinema to queer world-making

Another key context in this issue, in addition to queer film cultures, is of course queer film studies. Queer film studies has been an established field of inquiry since the 1990s, with its own conferences, journal special issues and textbooks. It has also had its own caucus within the Society for Cinema and Media Studies since 1991 – the Queer Caucus was renamed the Queer and Trans Caucus in 2019. Building on crucial work by Richard Dyer (1977), Vito Russo (1981), B. Ruby Rich (1998), Andrea Weiss (1992), Alexander Doty (1993) and others, queer film studies have included studies on the representation of queer characters,

films by queer filmmakers, queer aesthetics and queer audiences. As Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin underline in their introduction to the field in 2004, queer film studies relies on a queer theoretical understanding of sexuality as “complex, multiple, overlapping, and historically nuanced, rather than immutably fixed” (Benshoff and Griffin 2004, 2). Importantly, they argue, the notion of queer encompasses filmmakers and audiences that are not necessarily identified only as gay or lesbian. Benshoff and Griffin suggest a fluid understanding of the concept of queer for film studies: “an authorial voice, a character, a mode of textual production, and/or various types of reception practice” (ibid.).

In this special issue we are not concerned with defining which audiovisual texts count as “queer” or promoting a category of “Nordic Queer Cinema”. Neither is it our aim to provide a comprehensive overview of queer film in all Nordic countries. Rather, we approach the ongoing proliferation of audiovisual publicity around non-normative gender, sexuality, kinship, and relationships in the Nordic region as an expanding, ever-moving field, where “queer” is constantly being redefined. This rich field offers new possibilities for queer world-making, as queer experiences, aesthetics and horizons are explored not just on screens, but also in various contexts of production and reception. Here, we are inspired by queer and trans film scholars such as Teresa de Lauretis (2011), Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt (2016), Eliza Steinbock (2019) and Caél Keegan (2018) who argue, respectively, that queer and trans cinema should be seen as not only about explicitly queer or trans characters or narratives, but about queer and trans aesthetics, sensibilities, and readings – things on the surface and well beneath or beyond the surface. Lifting such queer and trans sensibilities is by necessity also a political project, or as Steinbock puts it: “[o]ur carnal vision affirmatively perceives what to others is a blind spot, seems inscrutable, or, worse, seems simply illusory” (2019, 8). At the same time, it is important not to dilute the political force of queer and trans, to see queer and trans film production, representation, and reception not only as questions of broad, thus vague, critiques of all kinds of normativities, or instances of the “language of diversity” (Ahmed 2012). This issue’s texts are, accordingly,

concerned with queer and trans film-making, characters, narratives, and spaces of reception, but also with aesthetics and sensibilities that might complicate and expand our understanding of what these things mean in the first place.

The notion of queer world-making, crucially put forth by Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner (1998) as well as José Esteban Muñoz (2009), draws attention to how queer culture opens up counterpublic spaces where new possibilities of “identity, intelligibility, publics, culture, and sex” (Berlant & Warner 1998, 548) beyond heteronormativity materialize. For Berlant, Warner, and Muñoz, the transformative and radical potential of queer culture as a world-making project exceeds fixed identities and communities. Muñoz especially discusses how queer cultural production entails a utopian longing for, picturing of and insistence on the possibility of another kind of a world. This utopian practice responds to and refuses the heteronormative world’s denial of queer existence. In Schoonover and Galt’s words, queer cinema “projects worlds that are otherwise unimagined and unimaginable” (2016, 39).

Spaces and locations of queer world-making

In this issue, the ways in which queer cultural production projects utopian longings and creates queer worlds are explored particularly in Wibke Straube’s article on the films of non-binary Swedish filmmaker Ester Martin Bergsmark, as well as in Bergsmark’s own essay, and in John-Paul Zaccarini’s piece on the music video *Brother* (John-Paul Zaccarini, Erwin Semler and Joachim Karlsson, 2019). Exploring what they term the “ecological aesthetics of intimate otherness” in Bergsmark’s films *Pojktanten* (*She Male Snails*, 2012) and *Nånting måste gå sönder* (*Something Must Break*, 2014), Straube discusses how the two films represent polluted nature as a space of wonder and enchantment that creates potential for hope, survival and trans livability. Also focusing on *Pojktanten* and *Nånting måste gå sönder*, Bergsmark discusses their own artistic practice by elaborating on the concept “voice-under” as a tool for depicting non-binary experiences and addressing the queer potential of film, while avoiding formulaic recipes and fixed identities. By “making

film that reaches beyond representation and beyond the binaries of body and mind, nature and culture,” we can queer and recreate the world, Bergsmark argues. Exploration of “voice-under” includes challenging attachments to injury and trauma, acknowledging violence and fear as central to queer realities, but at the same time offering glimpses of other worlds and opening up spaces where it is possible to breathe.

In similar ways, John-Paul Zaccarini accounts for the making of the stunning queer of colour music video *Brother* in the context of an overwhelmingly white Swedish art academy. The video and Zaccarini’s performance in it function as a “staging of intersectionality” where the white male gaze is unraveled and reversed. Employing circus gear such as ropes, shackles and pulleys, the video assigns white male bodies to the roles of props and objects for a queer of colour gaze. Zaccarini discusses the video in terms of a revenge fantasy that uses contemporary visual and musical tropes to “re-imagine the injustices of colonialism, slavery and homophobia.” The work and Zaccarini’s artistic practice draw from and respond to personal experiences of micro-racism and the need to create safer spaces. This is why in the video, but also on the film set, Zaccarini “created a small brown island in a vast sea of white, where we could develop our own language and do some re-writing of the script we had felt forced to perform in.”

Zaccarini’s article along with other essays and articles in this issue underline how the very practice of producing queer culture – in Muñoz’s words, the performative practice of “casting of a picture of potentiality and possibility” (2009, 125) – holds transformative potential. This understanding of queer audiovisual world-making relates to Miriam Hansen’s (1991) conceptualization of film as an alternative public sphere that has the potential to provide audiences with new experiential horizons, not least in terms of gender and sexuality. Such new horizons are shaped by the spaces in which creative processes happen, the space on the screen and the physical spaces where films are viewed, consumed and discussed.

Film festivals and other community-based screening events have been and still are fundamental to sustaining, vitalizing and creating queer counterpublicity (White 1999). In the Nordic region, and globally, the

number of LGBTQAI+ film festivals has increased significantly in the last decade, even during “times when Netflix and other, much cheaper, platforms to view films are available”, as Skadi Loist and Leanne Dawson (2018, 3) note. They argue that this testifies to the continuous attraction that these festivals hold for queer audiences as safer physical spaces: “A significant factor of film festivals is the liveness of the event, i.e. the bodily presence of audiences, filmmakers and critics” (3). As we write this in late 2020, LGBTQAI+ film festivals face unprecedented challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many organizations – already precarious, volunteer-dependent and grassroots-based – have had to reduce their audience capacity or cancel their physical festivals altogether and resort to online alternatives.

In order to make visible the multitude of LGBTQAI+ film festivals not only in the Nordic but also in the Baltic region, this issue includes a survey where seven festivals provide important reflections and insights into their valuable work and divergent histories, resources and struggles in the present situation. We are delighted and grateful for the time and effort representatives of the festivals have put into answering our questions. For example, Trans Film Fest Stockholm, a yearly event centered on marking the Trans Day of Remembrance on November 20, expresses concern over the isolation and loneliness that the community members have suffered during the pandemic, at a time when backlash against trans issues is gaining momentum. They see collaborations among trans and queer cultural organizations as essential: “We are stronger when we are together,” they write, and we could not agree more.

In Russia, the pandemic provided authorities with new opportunities to restrict the St. Petersburg based Side by Side festival that, since its start in 2007, has struggled with the country’s increasingly homophobic legislation. In November 2020, the police stormed the opening of the festival and forced organizers to shut down the physical, coronavirus-adjusted, parts of the program. At the same time a large group of protesters from the “Anti-LGBT Movement” gathered for a demonstration outside the venue, with the permission of the police (*Moscow Times* 2020).

Estonian Festheart, the only queer film festival in the Baltic region held every year since 2017, also warns of the development towards a more conservative legislation. Relatedly, Clinton Glenn's article in this issue connects the lack of LGBTQ representation in Baltic media to the Lithuanian "anti-gay propaganda" legislation and contrasts them with the simultaneous tendency to lay claim to "Nordic values" and identity rather than identify as Eastern European. Focusing on two Lithuanian films with gay protagonists, *Nuo Lietuvos Nepabėgsi* (*You Can't Escape Lithuania*, 2016) and *Porno Melodrama* (2011) by the openly gay filmmaker Romas Zabarauskas, Glenn investigates how sexual identity and national identity are placed in contra-distinction to one another. He argues that the focus on concepts such as homonationalism in Western queer theory does not take into account contexts like Lithuania, where processes of neoliberalization and westernization have gone hand in hand with rampant homophobia, and where the possibility of a depoliticized queer identity simply does not exist.

Maxine Savage's article on queer Icelandic cinema also asks important questions about queer and national belonging: about who are assimilable into the parameters of national narratives, and who fall outside them. Savage reads the figures of the queer and the foreign as habitually intertwined in the influx of queer film in Iceland within the last two decades, focusing in particular on two films, Baltasar Kormákur's *101 Reykjavík* (2000) and Ísold Uggadóttir's *Andið edlilega* (*And Breathe Normally*, 2018). Savage explores how the legacies of Icelandic (and Nordic) colonialism and exceptionalism infiltrate the ways in which certain cinematic subjects can become legible as parts of the nation state, while others are abjected. In Savage's reading, critical race studies and queer of colour critique are key in highlighting how the two films stage white anxieties about disintegrating national and racial boundaries, while they also entail potential to create improbable connections and affinities, if only momentarily.

The situation in Baltic and Eastern European regions cannot be seen as completely opposed to or different from the situation in the Nordic countries, and the ways in which sexuality and gender intertwine with

nationality and race there. The Nordic region is facing, for example, an aggressive anti-trans backlash, often combined with anti-sex work, anti-porn and anti-sex education standpoints, from women's organizations in the last few years. In Sweden, lobbying against pornography and sex work has resulted in outrageous calls for boycotts of and blocked funding for organizations working with sexual and reproductive health and rights such as RFSU (Riksförbundet för sexuell upplysning/The Swedish Association for Sexuality Education) and RFSL (Riksförbundet för sexuellt likaberättigande/The Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex Rights) (See Åhbeck Öhrman 2020; Palacios and Berglund 2019). A disheartening and warning example of how such tendencies restrict queer and trans culture could be seen in London in 2019. London Porn Film Festival, a small grassroots organization celebrating "queer, feminist, radical and experimental porn" and supporting trans and sex worker rights, was attacked by trans and sex worker exclusionary feminists who attempted to have the Camden Council block the festival (*Dazed Digital* 2019). As a consequence, the original festival venue pulled out and the festival had to move to a secret location. As the organizers noted, the situation largely resembled a throwback to the Sex Wars of the 1980s. A recent issue of RFSU's magazine *Ottar* (4/2020) aptly named "Sexkriget" ("The sex war"), testifies to a similar sense of throwback in Sweden.

Furthermore, in Nordic public debates, accusations of "identity politics" – cast as a caricature where the (marginalized) identity of a filmmaker/writer/creative determines and uplifts the value of the content created – are used for dismissing and discrediting discussions about diversity and inclusion. Such debates have taken place in relation to powerful institutions and financiers as well as smaller cultural agents – queer film festival MIX Copenhagen's decision to boycott films where cisgender actors play transgender characters (MIX Copenhagen 2018) is one example. There was also a heated debate around trans representation and the politics of casting in Finland in 2020, when the National Theatre's production of *All About My Mother* cast a male actor in the role of Agrada, a *travesti* character in the film by the same name, directed by

Pedro Almodóvar in 1999. Activists demanded that the male actor be replaced with a trans actor, a demand that others saw as a sign of “cancel culture” and limitation to freedom of expression. At the same time, the public sphere was momentarily filled with discussions of gender non-conformity and politics of representation of unforeseen rigour.

Queer excess

On the cover of this special issue, artist Josephine Baird has created an image of the Swedish queer comedy/action/tongue-in-cheek B movie *Dyke Hard* (Bitte Andersson, 2014) about a lesbian rock band adventuring through Sweden to a battle of the bands. The film, crowd-funded through Kickstarter and inspired by John Waters, Pedro Almodóvar, and Lizzie Borden’s *Born in Flames* (1983), already enjoys a cult classic reputation in the Nordic countries. Full of references to queer film history, *Dyke Hard* is carnivalistic, excessive, violent, rude, and warm-hearted. Notably, it is also effortlessly diverse, with its characters falling all across the gender spectrum and many of them non-white, but the film is not “about” identities – in its world, queerness and queers of colour are both radical and “normal”. *Dyke Hard*’s director Bitte Andersson has said that the film’s politics of casting were very consciously meant to break the white queer normativity of Nordic countries (*Homocrom* 2015).

In exceeding multiple norms while “normalizing” queer excess, *Dyke Hard* can be seen as a thoroughly queer text, following de Lauretis for whom sexuality in queer texts is always about more than sex, “an unmanageable excess of affect” (2011, 244–245). Embedded in queer community through its financing, production as well as circulation at film festivals, *Dyke Hard* also embodies queer world-making, imagining alternative worlds both outside and within dominant narratives (Muñoz 1999). Moreover, it raises a question about the role of joy, laughter and “reparative” impulses in queer cinema and its studies. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003, 147–150) has critiqued the common academic practice of, in her words, “paranoid” readings of cultural products which emphasizes the unveiling of insidious normativities and oppressive structures. Instead, she calls for “reparative” readings that would underline hope

and potential. According to Sedgwick, a lot of queer cultural production is in fact already reparative in its focus on surprises, surpluses, excesses, and queer possibilities even within the most extravagantly violent circumstances. For Muñoz (1999, 3), this excess characterizes particularly queer of colour cultural production, as the relationship between dominant and marginalized cultures is necessarily more complicated than either adoption or rejection. Queer twists and excesses can become a strategy of community self-representation and survival, while simultaneously insisting on queer presence and recognition in the mainstream. All the texts in this issue also tackle the issue of queer excess in some form or another: from the queer “foreign” that pushes against the boundaries of the nation state (Savage) to the murderous, ironic, border-eclipping queers of Lithuanian cinema (Glenn) and the enchanted, magical pollutedness of trans and non-binary bodies (Straube) – from the role reversals and utopian imaginings of a queer of colour music video (Zaccarini) to the collective “voice-under” in non-binary filmmaking (Bergsmark).

We hope that this issue will not only highlight the vitality of and high stakes in queer film and media culture in the Nordic and Baltic regions in the present, but also encourage further inquiries into its under-explored histories. Queer world-making in cinema and elsewhere has always exceeded and will continue to exceed the language of diversity and statistics, as its transformative potential draws on “unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies” (Berlant & Warner 1998, 558).

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NOTES

1. Viktoria Harryson's YouTube channel:
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCrEb8cs5V4T_dmuD7QJtydg
2. Tuure Boelius' YouTube channel:
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCb378IS5_z8Qf-6zGapENCw
3. <https://saqmi.se/>
4. <https://skeivtarkiv.no/om-skeivt-arkiv>
5. <https://sateenkaarihistoria.fi/>
6. See <https://sharingsweden.se/toolkits/lgbtq-in-film/>
7. DFI website's diversity section even has a promotional image with people who appear gender non-conforming, but the statistics only concern cisgendered binaries. DFI: Mangfoldighet. <https://www.dfi.dk/branche-og-stoette/publikationer-og-indsatser/mangfoldighedsindsats> (accessed December 12, 2020).