

SURVEY OF THE DANISH FILM

1905-10

In 1905 Ole Olsen opened a cinema - one year after the opening of Constantin Philipsen's "Kosmorama" which was the first permanent cinema in Denmark.

In 1906 Olsen founded Nordisk Films Kompagni - the first Danish feature film company. Since 1896 Peter Elfelt, the later photographer to the King, had made newsreels about the Royal family as well as films about the everyday life of the bourgeoisie and in 1908 made the first Danish feature "Henrettelsen" (The Execution), (one minute), but he never started any important feature production.

Compared with other countries - notably France and USA - Denmark was rather slow in starting a production of films, but Ole Olsen soon made up for lost time and a few years later Nordisk Film had reached a level that quantitatively as well as qualitatively was fully equal to that of the best competitors, Vitagraph in America and Pathé in France.

In the beginning the production of features was mainly concentrated on small comedies, in 1907 the classics of literature became, however, the favourite subjects, and tales by Andersen and plays by Holberg and others were transformed into film dramas of about 10 minutes, interpreted by unknown actors and shot in open air with the primitive sets flapping in the wind.

One of the early big hits was "Løvejagten", 1907, (The Lion Hunters), an amusing film shot on the small island of Elleore in Roskilde fjord.

About 1908 other companies turned up. Søren Nielsen's "sensation films" from Biorama could not in any way compete with those of Olsen's, whereas the production which the distribution company Fotorama started in 1909, was quite successful.

Among the Nordisk films from this time must be noticed the elegant farce "Eksen og Cyklisten" (The Witch and the Bicyclist) because of its remarkably precise editing. This film seems to be inspired by the trick films of Méliès. In addition to the farces and the literary classics one genre now became more and more popular: the melodrama which later in the "great period" formed the main part of the Danish cinema.

Ole Olsen's first man as director and actor ~~was~~ till 1910 Viggo Larsen. Then the growing artistic demands made him realize the necessity of engaging professional actors, directors and writers. At that point he was in advance of his competitors abroad and thus he made even before 1910 Danish cinema famous for carefully prepared scripts and fine acting and

direction. In 1908 the later director Holger-Madsen who in 1915 made "Evangelieemandens Liv" (The Evangelist) was engaged as actor together with several other famous actors, among these Carl Alstrup.

The first studio was built in 1909 and much technical progress was made. By 1910, when August Blom who had also started as an actor, was engaged as director, a new epoch began - the primitive era was over and the great period started.

1910-15

Two films from 1910 mark the change from the primitive to the artistically mature era of the Danish silent pictures. One of the first is "Den hvide Slavehandel" (In the Hands of the Deceitful) which was 600 meters long and thus technically breaks the stagnated tradition of 200 meter films which reigned not only in Denmark but with a few exceptions in all other countries. The other one is the private production by Hjalmar Davidsen and Urban Gad "Afgunden" (The Abyss) in which Asta Nielsen made her screen debut. This film proved the possibility of the cinema for an artistic presentation of a realistic drama.

The finest period of Nordisk began one year later with the August Blom film "Ved Fængslets Port" (Temptations of a great City), in which Valdemar Psilander played the main part.

What made the films from this period remarkable was the detailed milieu description, the often brilliant photography and the controlled acting. These qualities together created an artistic style that made the best part of the Danish dramatic films outstanding in world production.

In connection with this style one usually mentions actors like Psilander, Olaf Fønss, Robert Dinesen, Clara Wieth, Betty Nansen. Their technical efficiency and intuitive control before the camera have certainly contributed to the excellent results of Nordisk, but first and foremost the results were due to the writers (among these Sven Lange and Otto Rung) and to the directors, especially August Blom, Holger-Madsen and Hjalmar Davidsen. These people and the excellent photographer Johan Ankerstjerne formed that constellation of a capitalist producer (Ole Olsen) and first class writers, directors and photographers which usually takes place behind a famous school in the history of film. Some of the best films were "Atlantis", 1913, "Revolutionsbryllup", 1915, (A Marriage under the Revolution) and "Evangelieemandens Liv", 1915, (The Evangelist).

However, the style which Nordisk went in for in this period also suffered from important defects. The subjects were too often taken from a nobility milieu and the creative possibilities of editing were too much

neglected, the interest being concentrated upon the single shot and a detailed milieu description.

As the companies in the other companies turned to more realistic subjects and developed their editing technique the only period in which Danish cinema has held a leading position on the international market came to an end.

These critical views are the reason why to-day one is inclined to emphasize certain pictures produced by other companies, in particular two films made by Benjamin Christensen at Dansk Biografkompagni "Det hemmelighedsfulde X", 1918, (The mysterious X) "Havnens Nat", 1915, (The Night of Revenge). Although the plots in these films are melodramatic the editing is dramatizingly used contrary to the greater part of the films by Nordisk.

1915-20

By 1915 the still growing competition abroad threatens to deprive Nordisk of its strong artistic and financial position on the world market. The technical efficiency of Hollywood is developed year by year, and the Swedish cinema finds a gold mine in its national literature and uses it with great talent in films which become a success all over the world. In Denmark the cinema follows the old course, and most of the films from 1915 and the following years are derivative.

Carl Th. Dreyer is engaged as adviser to Nordisk in 1916 and his suggestion is that the way to an improvement is through the adaptation of great novels. His advice is not absolutely good and causes a respectable series of films without any power and cinematic originality.

August Blom is still working with Nordisk and in 1916 he makes "Verdens Undergang" (The End of the World) which confirms that Blom is the most efficient director in Denmark. In this film he combines an exciting and unusual story with an inner drama of convincing power.

World War I gives rise to several pacifistic films like "Ned med Vaabnene" (Down with Arms!) and "Pax aeterna", both directed by Holger-Madsen. They are usually blamed for lacking dramatic action and his Asta Nielsen film "Mod Lyset" (Towards the Light) from 1918 proves that Holger-Madsen in these years in spite of his assiduity is working without the poetry and warmth that gives him a high position in the Danish film. His principal work from this period is "Himmelskibet", 1917, (The Spaceship), a poetic vision.

The most popular film of these years "Klovnen", 1917, (The Clown) was made by A.W. Sandberg. Here the popular circus milieu is used as often

before, and Sandberg does not add anything new to the genre. His direction has, however, personal characteristics; for instance the peculiar pale photo which emphasizes the languishing and sad atmosphere.

Psilander who stars in "Klovnen" is dissatisfied with working conditions at Nordisk and starts his own company but dies before the first film has been made.

Benjamin Christensen's only contribution to the period is the efficiently made melodrama "Havnens Nat", 1915, (The Night of Revenge). Like Dreyer he uses the years up to 1920 to prepare himself for the coming efforts. Two new directors turn up at Nordisk, George Schneevoigt and Emanuel Gregers, the latter succeeding in 1919 with "Lavinen" (The Avalanche). Bodil Ipsen is the star. The most prolific director of farces is Lau Lauritzen who from 1917 to 1920 directed about 100 farces with ever growing skill. Storm Petersen, one of the most famous Danish humorists, starts making animated cartoons.

1920-25

The early twenties can not be characterized by any common stamp as is the case in other countries. The three most remarkable directors from the period are deeply different personalities without any æsthetical or spiritual points of resemblance. A stronger claim for authenticity is, however, expressed by all three of them.

The favourite of public and critics is A.W. Sandberg who made 2 or 3 films a year. His most ambitious and personal efforts are his four Dickens films "Vor fælles Ven", 1919, (Our mutual Friend), "Store Forventninger", 1921, (Great Expectations), "David Copperfield", 1922, and "Lille Dorrit", 1924, (Little Dorrit). These attempts to recreate the novels that continued the literary tradition of the earlier silents, strived to compete with the Swedish Selma Lagerlöf films but Sandberg had not the visually transforming imagination of the Swedes, and the literary starting point was a drag. The force of these films was the acting, the fine effective sets by Carlo Jacobsen and a skilful but conventional photography.

The same demand for historical authenticity also characterizes Benjamin Christensen's "Heksen" (Witchcraft through the Ages) from 1922 which he wrote and directed. The film is an attempt to give a historical and psychological document about the belief in witches through the ages. The form was partly didactic, partly dramatic. In spite of a certain unevenness in the mixture of styles the film has a highly dramatic suspense in the fictive sequences. The contents are interesting because of their serious though rather subjective treatment of the theme and the form is original

and inspired, using advanced camera movements and an impressive editing. The film was produced for Swedish capital.

An equally distinct sense of cinematic form characterizes the young Carl Th. Dreyer who makes his debut by now with "Præsidenten", 1920, (The President) and in this period directs six films of which three are made abroad. His style is more simple, and submitted to a strong artistic discipline. In his second film "Blade af Satans Bog", 1921, (Leaves from Satan's Book) his personal manner becomes evident. He concentrates upon the individual and emphasizes the passive suffering opposite the active wickedness. By use of frequent close-ups he gives a profound analysis of the souls, for instance in the suicide sequence with Clara Pontoppidan. Afterwards he went to Sweden and Germany and failed with the fairy-tale "Der var engang", 1922, (Once upon a Time).

Like Benjamin Christensen, Dreyer went abroad to look for the possibilities that the Danish cinema in a still decreasing degree gave the great talents who had fought the last years to keep it alive. The loss of those two and the lack of a genuine artistic tradition were the main reasons for the following darkness which was only sparsely lit up by the popular "Long and Short" films by Lou Lauritzen. They were produced by Palladium which started in 1920.

1925-30

Between 1925-30 the crisis in the Danish cinema becomes acute, but this period brings the never exceeded climax of "Jeanne d'Arc", (Joan of Arc), which had world premiere at Palads Teatret in 1928. The film is entirely Dreyer and Dreyer is not Gallic but Danish. "Jeanne d'Arc" is closely connected with his other fanatic passion and martyr films: "Blade af Satans Bog" (Leaves from Satan's Book), "Vampyr" and "Vredens Dag" (Day of Wrath), "Ordet" (The Word) and the planned film about Christ. In film history it belongs to the Danish chapter; a man like Dreyer never loses his personal and national distinction. Before "Jeanne d'Arc" he made at Palladium "Du skal are din Hustru" (The Master of the House) adapted from the play by Rindom "Tyrannens Fald" (The Fall of the Tyrant). Among the purely Danish films made in this period it must be considered the most important. The atmosphere is saturated with a detailed realism and the mordant and satirical tone were completely new elements. Dreyer's detailed description of the milieu and his intensity in the painful conflicts refine the story and from being a popular comedy it becomes a study of the sufferings in everyday life though it has a happy ending.

These years mark a decline for A.W. Sandberg and the final catastrophe for Nordisk. Sandberg's two last films for Nordisk "Maharadjaens Yndlingshustru", 1925, (The favourite Wife of the Maharadjah) and "Klovnen", 1926 (The Golden Clown) with Gösta Ekman are somewhat tame and everything goes wrong at Nordisk. The company is liquidated in 1928-29.

Lau Lauritzen keeps the fun going at Palladium with "Long and Short" played by Carl Schenstrøm and Harald Madsen. "Long and Short" are by now rather a comic institution without the nice childish charm of the early twenties but their films are solidly based on technical efficiency.

The most ambitious film of the period "Don Quijote" from 1922 is also connected with Palladium and the names of Lauritzen, Schenstrøm and Madsen. The film was partly shot in Spain but the noble Spanish madness of the sad knight could not possibly be captured by the amiable Lauritzen, and the two clowns could give Quijote and Sancho Panza nothing but their physical shape.

Apart from Dreyer the films from these years of the approaching sound film are of no value. In 1923 the sound system of Petersen and Poulsen is demonstrated in Palads but has no influence upon the production until 1929 when Nordisk is reconstructed. The start is hesitant. In March-April 1929 the cinemas present the first Danish sound films consisting of short programmes in cabaret style and with the popular music-hall stars. The first long Danish sound film is presented in 1930 by Skandinavisk Talefilm (The Scandinavian Sound Film Company). It is a Danish-Norwegian melodrama from the polar regions "Eskimo", directed by George Schneevoigt and interpreted by Norwegian, Swedish and German actors. Technically fine but weak from an artistic point of view the Danish cinema enters its second childhood.

1930-35

Sound was established. The first films from this period are serious and heavy but can be seen even to-day with some interest. "Hotel Paradis", 1931, "Præsten i Vejlby", 1931, (The Parson of Vejlby) and "Kirke og Orgel", 1932, (Church and Organ) were slow, somewhat theatrical and awkward. However, there was a content in these films, taken as they were from good sources in literature. The scripts were not written cinematically, the long dialogues mostly demanded a static camera, but the director George Schneevoigt managed to adapt them with indisputable ability. His following films were all farcical comedies which became the unfortunate pattern for a lot of films during the twenty years to follow. Among the light comedies of the next five years only one is worth of notice: Schneevoigt's "Tango" from 1932.

Nordisk had a foreign guest about that time - the Hungarian director Paul Fejos had come from Hollywood to make films in Valby. This visit was not too successful and "Det gyldne Smil" (The golden Smile) from a script by Kaj Munk is remembered mostly because of the great actress Bodil Ipsen's performance.

In 1935 the "outsider" Poul Henningsen made his film about Denmark and was met with indignation from critics and Danes abroad. The film showed everyday life instead of the usual tourist idyls, and it formed the basis of the documentary school in Denmark. Most of the directors of documentaries are indebted to Poul Henningsen.

1935-40

The foundations of that false popular style on which the greater part of the Danish films ever since has been built, were made in the years between 1935 and 1940.

The two collaborating writers and directors Alice O'Fredericks and Leu Lauritzen junior who made a quantitatively imposing part of the entire production, deserve notice, although their films do not differ from the low standard of the other popular comedies, because of a certain technical ability -- one of the very few bright sides in this period of stagnation.

Though this is the golden age of Lubitsch and Capra it is difficult to find any trace of the sophisticated comedy style in Denmark. The tone is somewhat hesitating in the young and talented Johan Jacobsen's first film "Under Byens Ege", 1938, (Under the Roofs of the City) but a year later he has gained self-confidence and precision and succeeds with "En lille Tilfældighed" (An Accident), an unpretentious and witty film from a script by Mogens Skot-Hansen.

A long and dreary series of unimportant but pretentious films adapted from plays and with actors from the Royal Theatre were made in these years, and the only effort to tell a story cinematically is "Skilsmisens Børn", 1939, (Children of Divorce), written and directed by Benjamin Christensen, a serious social drama about the vacillating sex life of the youth and the lack of moral responsibility of the parents. This is the penetrating and shrill voice of an artistic personality which together with the gay rhythms of Poul Henningsen rise above the others' humdrum muttering.

1940-45

During these years of occupation the Danish cinema began finding its way back to reality. The political events were reflected in the films - until the end of the occupation not directly - but indirectly in the atmosphere

and tone. Furthermore, a number of new people went into the production, people who had ideas and were possessed by the desire to raise the level of the Danish cinema. The writer Leck Fischer set his mark upon the films, and the critic Ole Palsbo, whose achievements as a director were not made until after the war, in these years started as a writer of scripts and assistant director and worked partly with features and partly in the production of documentaries.

Johan Jacobsen got the opportunity to develop and control his cinematic talent on a number of farcical comedies and in 1944 established himself as the most promising of the young directors with the serious episode film "Otte Akkorder" (Eight Chords).

Carl Th. Dreyer, who for several years had made no features, returned in 1943 with the interesting "Vredens Dag" (Day of Wrath) about the psychological reasons for the prosecution of witches. The film was more estimated in other countries than in Denmark but holds a place apart as a stylized work of cinematic art.

The years of war brings only one other film with style: Svend Methling's "Sommerglæder", 1940, (Summer Joys) from Herman Bang - in fact one of the most charming Danish films since 1930. Very much attention was lavished on Kjeld Abell's and Svend Methling's social comedy in Frank Capra style "Tak fordi du kom, Nick", 1941, (Thanks for coming, Nick), an attempt to create an intimate and sophisticated comedy style.

The most important event of the period is, however, the new and interesting partnership Lau Lauritzen junior and Bodil Ipsen who started in 1942 by directing together the French inspired gangster drama "Afsporet", (Derailed) with Ebbe Rode. The film gave a psychological analysis of the characters and created a realistic milieu unlike most of the other Danish sound films to date. In 1945 they made the film about the resistance "De røde Enge", (The red Meadows) and Mrs. Ipsen's remarkable direction of actors influenced Danish cinema highly.

Besides the production of features it is worth noticing the documentaries which in these years reached a position of great importance. Dansk Kulturfilm and the film committee of the government in inspiring collaboration with Thomas P. Hejle and Mogens Skot-Hansen produced a number of documentaries distributed by Statens Filmcentral and shown in the cinemas. The pioneers were the director Theodor Christensen and the theorist Karl Roos who inspired the rising school of documentarists: the Henning-Jensens, Hagen Hasselbalch, Torben Anton Svendsen and Ole Palsbo.

The experimental movement also started in this period with the names of Jørgen Roos and Albert Mertz as some of the most outstanding directors

In 1942 they made "Flugten", (The Escape) and the following year "Ejertetyven", (Thief of Hearts). Their feature film "Historien om en Mand", (The Story of a Man) was never finished.

1945-50

From January 1945 to the capitulation the 5th of May four Danish films were released. Apart from Lau Lauritzen and Alice O'Fredericks' "Affæren Birthe", (The Affair of Birthe) about a sexual crime, the quality was very poor and the last months of the war can be considered as a waiting time. After the capitulation Johan Jacobsen directed the first resistance film "Den usynlige Hær" (The invisible Army) from a script by Knud Sønderby, which is the best film made about the occupation. A few months later appeared Bodil Ipsen's and Lau Lauritzen's "De røde Enge", (The red Meadows) from Ole Juul's novel, very unlike "Den usynlige Hær", as it was too full of self-pity. The atmosphere is, however, genuine and realistic and the acting is fine. Those two films about the occupation are complementary to each other.

In May 1946 the sensational documentary "Det galder din Frihed", (Your Liberty is at Stake) was released by the film group of the underground movement.

The first post war years were rather promising. Ole Palsbo made his debut as a director with "Diskret Ophold" in 1947 (Discreet Residence) which found a new milieu and contained a modern characterization of country people. The following year he made the bitter film "Ta' hvad du vil ha'" (Take what you want). An exceptional effectiveness in the description of characters and a realistic conception of the post war years were introduced by Palsbo. The same year Johan Jacobsen made "Soldaten og Jenny" (Jenny and the Soldier) with Poul Reichardt and Bodil Kjer from the play by Soya: "Brudstykker af et Mønster" (Fragments of a Pattern). The adaptation of this play about the vagaries of legal justice was excellent - an art of special Danish nature was flourishing and culminated with Astrid and Bjarne Henning-Jensen's "Ditte Menneskebarn", (Ditte, Child of Man) in 1946 from Andersen-Nexø's novel and "De Pokkers Unger", (Those dratted Kids) in 1947. After this nothing happened. The standstill may be due to the need of new subjects or to the fact that the interest of the audience was mostly concentrated on the foreign films.

1950-55

67 features were distributed from January 1950 to March 1955 the best being Astrid Henning-Jensen's "Palle alene i Verden", (Palle alone in the

World) in 1954, Ole Palsbo's "Familien Schmidt" 1951, (The Schmidts), Erik Balling's "Adam og Eva" 1953, and Carl Th. Dreyer's "Ordet", (The Word) in 1955.

"Palle alone in the World" did not pretend more than it was able to fulfil and it possessed a charm that otherwise seems to be almost non-existent in Danish films. The film is lively and the editing and the composition of the images form a fine unity. **Foreign** critics enjoyed it. They would not have enjoyed "The Schmidts" and "Adam and Eve" - they were too heavy with dialogue and theatrical acting but on the other hand unveiled flaws in the national character and made at any rate an attempt to create an artistic form without the usual Danish tardiness.

As regards the rest of the production in this period no names deserve notice. It will be enough to mention the tendencies: first and foremost the unhappy attempts to make smart comedies, further the pedagogic film which strived to moralize, make people stop drinking etc., films that cannot be taken seriously from an asthetical point of view. Finally there was the typical Danish "glamour-idyl" with traditional manor-houses, rich uncles, football playing clergymen, brave sailors, changeling children and so on and so forth and all of them below even third class entertainment films from Hollywood. Separately may be mentioned the sober resistance film "Der kom en Dag", (A Day came) by Svend Methling junior.

From a critical point of view the situation was rather hopeless. But none the less this period brings single pieces of work on which one's hopes can be fixed. In a few cases one traces a certain dissatisfaction with the state of affairs and even a desire for experimentation. Two features were recently made independently: "Himlen er blaa", (The Sky is blue) and "Vores lille By", (Our little Town). Something is brewing and in spite of everything there is a basis for optimism. At any rate many talents are now working within the framework of the industry, and it may be hoped that sooner or later their insight will bear fruit.

The Danish Film Museum