A Companion to Nordic Cinema
The Wiley Blackwell Companions to National Cinemas showcase the rich film heritages of various countries across the globe. Each volume sets the agenda for what is now known as world cinema whilst challenging Hollywood’s lock on the popular and scholarly imagination. Whether exploring Spanish, German or Chinese film, or the broader traditions of Eastern Europe, Scandinavia, Australia, and Latin America, the 20–25 newly commissioned essays comprising each volume include coverage of the dominant themes of canonical, controversial, and contemporary films; stars, directors, and writers; key influences; reception; and historiography and scholarship. Written in a sophisticated and authoritative style by leading experts they will appeal to an international audience of scholars, students, and general readers.

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A Companion to Nordic Cinema

Edited by
Mette Hjort and Ursula Lindqvist
Contents

Notes on Contributors viii
Acknowledgments xii

Introduction: Nordic Cinema: Breaking New Waves
since the Dawn of Film 1
Mette Hjort and Ursula Lindqvist

Part I States of Cinema: Nordic Film Policy 13

Introduction 15
Mette Hjort and Ursula Lindqvist

1 Regional and Global Dimensions of Danish Film
Culture and Film Policy 19
Ib Bondebjerg

2 Developing a Bhutanese Film Sector in the Intersection
between Gross National Happiness and Danish Guidance
41
Nis Grøn

3 Cinema in the Welfare State: Notes on Public Support,
Regional Film Funds, and Swedish Film Policy 60
Olof Hedling

4 “Education, Enlightenment, and General Propaganda”:
Dansk Kulturfilm and Carl Th. Dreyer’s Short Films 78
C. Claire Thomson

Part II Making Filmmakers: Models and Values 99

Introduction 101
Mette Hjort and Ursula Lindqvist

5 How to Train a Director—Film Schools in the Nordic Countries 105
Astrid Söderbergh Widding
6 Non-Fiction Film Culture in Sweden circa 1920–1960: Pragmatic Governance and Consensual Solidarity in a Welfare State
Mats Jönsson 125

7 Crossing Borders: Going Transnational with “Danish” Film Training, Capacity Building, and Talent Development
Mette Hjort 148

Part III Reeling ’Em In: Spectatorship and Cinephilia 173

Introduction
Ursula Lindqvist and Mette Hjort 175

8 The Rise and Fall of Norwegian Municipal Cinemas
Ove Solum 179

9 The “Capital of Scandinavia?” Imaginary Cityscapes and the Art of Creating an Appetite for Nordic Cinematic Spaces
Maaret Koskinen 199

10 Jörn Donner and the Emergence of a New Film Culture in Postwar Scandinavia
Kimmo Laine 224

Tommy Gustafsson 242

Part IV Reinventing the Reel: Transitions and Triumphs 265

Introduction
Ursula Lindqvist and Mette Hjort 267

12 Searching for Art’s Promised Land: Nordic Silent Cinema and the Swedish Example
Casper Tybjerg 271

13 Aki Kaurismäki—From Punk to Social Democracy
Andrew Nestingen 291

14 Swedish Cinema of the 1940s, a New Wave
Fredrik Gustafsson 313

15 Between Art and Genre: New Nordic Horror Cinema
Gunnar Iversen 332

16 A Tradition of Torturing Women
Linda Haverty Rugg 351
Contents

Part V Connecting Points: Global Intersections 371

Introduction 373
Mette Hjort and Ursula Lindqvist

17 Memories of Cultural Dismemberment: Nils Gaup, Mons Somby, and the Re-Membering of Sámi History 377
Wendy Gay Pearson

18 The Scandinavian Colonies of Silent-Era Hollywood 396
Arne Lunde

19 Films into Uniform: Dogme 95 and the Last New Wave 417
Scott MacKenzie

20 Nordic Remakes in Hollywood: Reconfiguring Originals and Copies 436
Anna Westerståhl Stenport

21 The Global Distribution of Swedish Silent Film 457
Laura Horak

Part VI The Eye of Industry: Practitioner’s Agency 485

Introduction 487
Ursula Lindqvist and Mette Hjort

22 The Writing of Television Drama: Issues of Creative Collaboration and Authorship in Danish Writers’ Rooms 491
Eva Novrup Redvall

23 Universal Aspirations and Ecocosmopolitan Rhetoric: The Finnish Ecodocumentary 510
Pietari Kääpä

24 The Emergence of a Tradition in Icelandic Cinema: From Children of Nature to Volcano 529
Björn Nordfjörd

25 The Art of Not Telling Stories in Nordic Fiction Films 547
Ursula Lindqvist

26 The Death of Porn? An Autopsy of “Scandinavian Sin” in the Twenty-first Century 566
Mariah Larsson

Appendix 589
Index 591
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In the course of preparing *A Companion to Nordic Cinema*, we have received a great deal of support from many people, some of them anonymous, many of them very well known to us. Jayne Fargnoli, Executive Editor at Wiley Blackwell, was supportive throughout and brought considerable energy and inspiration to the project—which she kindly initiated—from the very beginning. Six anonymous readers’ reports, brimming with generosity, constructive thoughts, and careful, detailed comments, provided guidance of the most motivating and enabling kind at a time when it was helpful to receive it. To these six readers: We are immensely grateful to you and wish the veil of anonymity could be lifted, allowing us to say so far more directly! Commissioned for the *Companion*, all twenty-six chapters represent new research undertaken specifically for it. Our contributors, without whom there would be no *Companion*, have in every way been a delight to work with. We are immensely grateful to them for having been so committed to the project. Designed to emphasize practitioner’s agency where possible, the volume reflects the generosity of filmmakers, film producers, and festival organizers, among many other practitioners. The willingness of many practitioners to make time for in-depth conversations with our authors is very much appreciated and has, we believe, brought a very important dimension to the thinking about Nordic cinema that the *Companion* presents. Finally, for responsive and enthusiastic professionalism, we thank the Wiley Blackwell team, including Allison Kostka, Julia Kirk, Mary Hall, Anandan Bommen, Tessa Hanford, and Roshna Mohan.

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Introduction

Nordic Cinema: Breaking New Waves since the Dawn of Film

Mette Hjort and Ursula Lindqvist

The Nordic region's contributions to world cinema have been significant and span the entire history of the medium. Nordisk Film in Denmark, founded in 1906, is one of the oldest production companies in the world, and several filmmakers of the Silent Golden Age—Victor Sjöström of Sweden, Mauritz Stiller of Sweden/Finland (who “discovered” Greta Garbo), and Benjamin Christensen of Denmark—were all recruited by Hollywood studios in the 1920s based on the global successes of their films, now silent classics of the Nordic cinema (Horak and Lunde, this volume). Boxed DVD sets with the films of global auteurs such as Carl Theodor Dreyer (commonly known as Carl Th. Dreyer) and Lars von Trier of Denmark, Ingmar Bergman of Sweden, and Aki Kaurismäki of Finland have been released by the New York-based distribution company The Criterion Collection in special editions that purport to bring “defining moments of world cinema” to wider audiences. Films by these directors are frequently included in film scholarship and taught in film courses worldwide—and not only those devoted to Nordic or European cinema. The Nordic region has also produced a remarkable number of global film stars, from cinema’s Silent Golden Age to today: Asta Nielsen, Greta Garbo, Sonja Henie, Ingrid Bergman, Liv Ullmann, Max von Sydow, Mads Mikkelsen, Pernilla August, Lena Olin, Noomi Rapace, Alicia Vikander, Mikaël Persbrandt, Sidse Babett Knudsen, Stellan Skarsgård, Alexander Skarsgård, and even the famous Icelandic singer Björk, who won the Best Actress Award at the 2001 Cannes Film Festival for her role in von Trier’s Dancer in the Dark.

All told, in the 60-year history of the U.S.-based Academy Awards, Nordic films have been nominated 29 times, with Swedish and Danish films garnering more nominations and wins than most countries; only Italy, France, and Spain have had more (The Official Academy Awards Database). In 2010, Danish director Susanne Bier’s In A Better World (Hævnen) won both an Oscar and a Golden Globe Award,
and in 2012, two Nordic films were nominated for Oscars in a single year: Joachim Rønning and Espen Sandberg’s Kon-Tiki (Norway) and Nikolaj Arcel’s A Royal Affair (En kongelig affære, Denmark). While an Oscar nod clearly is not a universal marker of a film’s quality, the fact that Nordic films have been selected in increasing numbers by the giant of Hollywood film institutions, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, through the years is a reflection of global visibility and interest, a sign that Nordic films are understood and appreciated by influential film practitioners outside the region. Nordic films have also performed remarkably well at international festivals; for example, the Sundance Film Festival, which since its inception in 1985 has represented an edgy alternative for both American directors and those from around the world, honored Swedish filmmaker Jens Jonsson’s film The King of Ping Pong (Ping pong-kingen, 2008) with the Grand Jury Prize for best dramatic film. In 2010, Torben Bech and Otto Rosing’s A Person from Nuuk (Nuummioq, 2009), the first Greenlandic feature film to be submitted for the Academy’s Best Foreign Language Award, was also nominated for the prestigious Sundance prize.

While critics, film scholars, and cinephiles the world over have embraced the work of individual Nordic practitioners or distinctive genres, film scholars outside the region have typically studied these as exceptional, contained phenomena, and not in the context of their domestic film cultures and socio-political realities. Examples of such auteurist studies (which are many) include David Bordwell’s The Films of Carl-Theodor Dreyer (1981) and Hubert I. Cohen’s Ingmar Bergman: The Art of Confession (1993). While such studies have done much to advance film scholarship and cinephilia, their global influence becomes problematic when familiarity with the work of singular Nordic auteurs is recast as essentialized knowledge about Nordic cinema as a whole. For example, when Swedish filmmaker Roy Andersson—whose recent work could hardly be more different from Bergman’s in style and content, aside from jointly belonging to the category of art cinema—released his comeback film Songs from the Second Floor (Sånger från andra våningen, 2000), critics abroad nonetheless drew comparisons to the quintessential Swedish filmmaker whose films they knew all too well. New York’s Village Voice reviewer called the film “slapstick Ingmar Bergman” and Toronto’s Globe and Mail reviewer wrote that “The film is like an Ingmar Bergman film as realized by Monty Python” (Hoberman 2002; Lacey 2002). Such reviews imply the general expectation that Swedish films are necessarily depressing and humorless—a skewed characterization of a domestic film market where comedies have long constituted the lion’s share of film production (Gustafsson and Kääpä 2015, 2). Once Dreyer’s films—melodramatic, weighty, and preoccupied with spiritual themes—are added to the mix from which a putative Nordic norm is extracted, it is easier to understand why global audiences have been quick to accept what is seen as a “Nordic” take on certain genres – film noir and horror, for example. By contrast, films belonging to genres targeting a quite different set of emotions—“quirky feel-good” films, for example—tend to be met with bemused bewilderment and confusion regarding
their Nordic provenance. As Ellen Rees has noted, such films combine “drama with comic effects in order to establish emotional connections between viewers and characters” (2015, 147). The Nordic “quirky feel-good” films also tend to play on well-known social stereotypes within the Nordic region, for example: the emotionally suppressed blue collar worker in Kaurismäki’s The Man Without a Past (Mies vailla menneisyyttä, 2002); Copenhagen thugs stuck in the Danish provinces in Anders Thomas Jensen’s Flickering Lights (Blinkende lygter, 2000); the crochety old Norwegian bachelor in Bent Hamer’s Kitchen Stories (Salmer fra kjøkkenet, 2003); and the oddly nationalistic and bohemian taxi driver of Friðrik Þór Friðriksson’s Cold Fever (Á köldum klaka, 1995). Many of these films offer up important social critiques—related to small-nation anxieties in the face of globalization—that are easily overlooked in the absence of nuanced film scholarship providing the necessary historical, cultural, and political contexts (Nestingen 2008). The films’ complexities in this regard, and departure from a well-established “Nordic” norm based on familiarity with a small number of auteurs, create a clear role for Nordic film scholars with a fine-grained understanding of developments within the Nordic region, both within and outside the sphere of cinema. Many of the contributions to the Companion are in fact a matter of nuancing or even challenging some of the “standard” conceptions of Nordic cinema, by encouraging wider and deeper forms of engagement with the cinematic material and its contexts, or by pinpointing changes in the region as the Nordic countries redefine themselves in light of various globalizations.

It is heartening to note that the Nordic presence in world cinema has grown substantially in recent decades, and has also become far more diverse. Nordic feature films, documentaries, and short films now regularly win top awards at international film festivals ranging from Cannes to Sundance, just as they find distributors in markets worldwide. Regional television dramas and films marketed as “Nordic noir” (Koskinen, this volume) and “Nordic horror” (Iversen, this volume) have avid fanbases well outside the Nordic region, both through DVD distribution and via online streaming services, and a significant number of these works have inspired remakes (Stenport, this volume). Today, widely respected Nordic filmmakers—Lars von Trier of Denmark, Liv Ullmann of Norway, and Roy Andersson of Sweden, for example—have assumed active roles in global conversations about the future of the film medium or otherwise served on international film panels or juries.

The best-known example of the region’s contribution to these global conversations is Denmark’s much-debated Dogme 95 movement. It may have been officially short-lived, kicking off in 1995 when von Trier infamously threw red pamphlets imprinted with its manifesto into the audience at a film conference in Paris, and ending in 2005, with yet another official declaration penned by von Trier. Yet the Dogme movement not only raised the global profile of Danish film, it also sparked global conversations about how to make meaningful films outside of Hollywood’s dictates—particularly in small cinema markets where filmmakers operate with modest budgets and infrastructure—and resulted in
dozens of filmmakers worldwide making Dogme films. A number of these went on to be screened at festivals and to win prizes; indeed, the fact that Dogme #1, *The Celebration* (*Festen*, 1998; see Thomson 2014), directed by Thomas Vinterberg (one of the original four Dogme 95 “brethren”), won the Jury Prize at the prestigious Cannes International Film Festival—along with 31 other film prizes—gave legitimacy to what initially appeared to be a mere publicity stunt. This legitimacy was further reinforced when Dogme #3, *Mifune’s Last Song* (*Mifunes sidste sang*, 1999), directed by another of the “brethren,” Søren Kragh-Jacobsen, won the Grand Jury Prize at the Berlin International Film Festival.

Directors around the world have been able to make good use of the mix that Dogme provides—of its brand, platform, momentum as a movement, philosophy of creativity, and conception of filmmaking. In Hong Kong, for example, Vincent Chui, an untiring proponent of Chinese independent cinema, used the Dogme rules and label as a marketing strategy when making *Leaving in Sorrow* (*Youyou chouchou de zou le*, 2001; Hjort 2003, 154–5), linking his film to the manifesto-based movement in press releases and interviews. On the Chinese mainland, filmmakers affiliated with the Sixth Generation—Jia Zhangke, Lou Yue, Zhang Ming, Ah Nian, Wang Quan’an, Lu Xuechang, Zhang Yuan, Wang Xiaoshuai, and Shi Runju, for example—see themselves as strongly aligned with central aspects of the Dogme approach, exploring contemporary Chinese realities through film, the here and now of China, as it is shaped by globalization, urbanization, and state capitalism. Even in cases where obstacles to making a Dogme film have seemed insurmountable, the inspiration provided by the initiative has been powerful. Ning Ying, a Fifth Generation figure in terms of age and training, yet often grouped with the Sixth Generation filmmakers on account of urban and contemporary emphases in her films, insists that she wished to make the last film in her Beijing trilogy, *I Love Beijing* (*Xiari nuanyangyang*, 2001) as a Dogme film, but pulled back, as this would have entailed an “underground” status for the work and thus blocked access to official distribution channels in China. Yet, as far as Ning Ying is concerned, the idea, when making *I Love Beijing*, was to produce a film that was consistent with the ethos of Dogme, in spite of being unable to follow the rules, on account of state regulations (Hjort 2008, 485).

One of the main goals of this *Companion* is to situate the award-winning films and practices of well-known film practitioners in relation to the larger institutional landscapes that provide the enabling conditions for central Nordic achievements in the area of film. Those landscapes have a specificity that is well worth capturing, for in many instances they are shaped by models and concepts that work well, are fueled by values that warrant affirmation, and have the potential to “travel” well beyond the boundaries of the region. Transferable models, and conversations between practitioners and policymakers in the Nordic region and those outside it, are also central foci for the *Companion* (Hjort and Grøn, this volume).

To understand the region’s contributions, it is crucial to examine the policy-based regional cooperation that has helped to sustain “small-nation” cinema in
Introduction

the North. While the Scandinavian capitals of Stockholm, Copenhagen, and Oslo certainly retain their appeal as film cities (Koskinen, this volume), regional film funds based in the provinces have changed the landscape of Nordic film production in recent years (Hedling 2008; Hedling 2010). In Sweden, where three major regional film funds have been set up since the 1990s—Film i Skåne in Ystad, Filmpool Nord in Luleå, and Film i Väst in Trollhättan—this initiative has transformed the southwestern city of Trollhättan, aka “Trolleywood,” from a moribund industrial town to a regional film production center serving filmmakers from throughout the Nordic region. Trolleywood has achieved fame through films such as Lukas Moodysson’s Show Me Love (Fucking Åmål, 1998; Stenport 2012), Vinterberg’s The Hunt (Jagten, 2012), and von Trier’s Dancer in the Dark (2000), Dogville (2003), and Melancholia (2011). Indeed, the reinvented town of Trollhättan has attracted such international stars as Nicole Kidman, Lauren Bacall, Kirsten Dunst, Kiefer Sutherland, and Charlotte Gainsbourg to Sweden, through the efforts of canny producers at Zentropa Entertainments in Denmark and Memfis Film in Sweden, in association with the regional film fund Film Väst (literally, “Film West”).

The institutional perspective is also critically important in connection with film training, capacity building, and talent development. Thanks to film reforms undertaken in the latter part of the twentieth century throughout the Nordic region, there is a certain cohesion to the methods and institutional support for training Nordic filmmakers today, although there is also a degree of differentiation (Söderbergh Widding, this volume). Two institutional sites in particular, one in Denmark and the other in Sweden, help to make the point that the achievements of the region are partly anchored in film pedagogies and the institutional environments that support them. Widely regarded as one of the most effective conservatoire-style film schools in the world, the National Film School of Denmark, founded in 1966, has played a decisive role in the region, especially in the wake of rethinking initiated by Henning Camre in 1975. The school’s efficacy is reflected in its ability to attract film talent from across the Nordic region, in its influence on the development of film pedagogies in the North (Philipsen 2004; Philipsen forthcoming), and in the remarkable achievements of its graduates, including Lars von Trier, Lone Scherfig, Thomas Vinterberg, Susanne Bier, Mikala Krogh, Phie Ambo, Per Fly, Sami Saif, Christoffer Boe, Anthony Dod Mantle, and Dagur Kári (Petrie & Stoneman 2014, 37–39; Redvall 2010). A far more recent initiative, the University of Gothenburg’s film program, in western Sweden, has established itself as another key institutional site, having at this point trained many of Sweden’s globally acclaimed directors of the new century, such as Ruben Östlund (The Involuntary/De ofrivilliga, 2008; Play, 2011; Force Majeure/Turist, 2014) and Gabriela Pichler (Eat, Sleep, Die/Äta, Sova, Dö, 2012). With its film training initiative, the University of Gothenburg’s Valand Academy has brought diversity to the sector and further energy to regional endeavors. Indeed, it has effectively challenged the dominance of Stockholm, where Sweden’s first film school was
founded in 1964 with Bergman as its managing director (Stenport 2013). In sum, the point of including detailed discussions of film policy and film training in the Companion is to clarify the extent to which filmmaking in the Nordic region is rooted in distinctive institutional arrangements.

Despite the longstanding global visibility of cinema from the Nordic region, “Nordic cinema” as a category has, until recently, remained elusive and enigmatic, with the majority of published scholarship on the subject treating the region as a collection of distinct national cinemas (for example Hardy 1952; Cowie 1992; Soila, Söderbergh Widding & Iversen, 1998; Soila 2000; and Sundholm, Thorsen, Andersson, Hedling, Iversen, & Møller 2012). There are some compelling reasons for this. First, Nordic film scholars have understandably been reluctant to construct an overly broad or essentializing account of a diverse array of film cultures and histories. The Nordic region is, after all, home to five nation-states as well as four distinct territories—Sápmi, the homeland of the indigenous Sámi; Greenland, which adopted self-rule in 2009 following a long colonial relationship with Denmark; the Faroe Islands, self-governing islands in the North Atlantic; and Åland, Swedish-speaking islands off the coast of Finland. There is also remarkable linguistic diversity; while the Danish, Norwegian and Swedish languages are similar enough to be mutually comprehensible (with some effort), Greenlandic, Finnish, and the Sámi languages are not even part of the Indo-European language family, while modern Icelandic and Faroese are closest to Old Norse, the language spoken by the Vikings. Given the high levels of education and literacy in the region, as well as significant waves of immigration to Denmark, Norway, and especially Sweden since the 1990s, English often becomes the default language for transnational communication. This region’s diversity extends, as well, to its film cultures, which—as this volume demonstrates—have developed at vastly different paces and in different ways. Jon Woronoff, editor of a book series that includes the Historical Dictionary of Scandinavian Cinema (Sundholm et al. 2012), explains in the book’s foreword that it is the heterogeneity of Nordic national film histories and cultures that necessitated the volume having six authors. “Scandinavian cinema does not exist,” he wrote, “at least not yet, and what we remain interested in is the cinema of five Scandinavian countries” (x).

This Companion to Nordic Cinema asserts not only that Nordic cinema does indeed exist, but also that its heterogeneity is a vital asset for the region’s film production, exhibition, and distribution in the globally networked, media-saturated environments of today. Nordic cinema today is thriving—no small feat for a geographically peripheral region with a combined population of around 20 million people and a combined GDP of about $1.3 trillion (2014 est.; comparatively, Germany was at $3.6 trillion and the United States $17.5 trillion in 2014 [CIA World Factbook]). It is our view that a transnational approach provides the necessary framework for pinpointing the specificities of Nordic cinema, from its manifest achievements to its cultural and institutional conditions. We are not alone in this. Indeed, the past decade has seen the publication of several edited anthologies
on Nordic cinema, all of them with a genuinely transnational focus: Transnational Cinema in a Global North (Nestingen & Elkington 2005), Northern Constellations: New Readings in Nordic Cinema (Thomson 2006), and Nordic Genre Film: Small Nation Film Cultures in the Global Marketplace (Gustafsson & Kääpä 2015). While these represent important contributions to the field, each limits its scope either to contemporary cinema or to a particular mode of filmmaking. Films on Ice: Cinemas of the Arctic (Stenport & MacKenzie 2015) provides an ambitious survey of cinematic works from, about, and filmed in the Arctic, much of which lies within the Nordic region. An academic journal devoted to the study of film throughout the region, the Journal of Scandinavian Cinema, was founded in 2011, with editors based in the Nordic region and in North America, and a 2010 issue of the journal Scandinavian-Canadian Studies devoted to Nordic cinema was reprinted in book form in 2012 as Evaluating the Achievement of One Hundred Years of Scandinavian Cinema (Tucker 2012). Yet, what has remained absent is a comprehensive scholarly volume that not only provides a rich history of the Nordic cinematic traditions, from their origins to the new millennium, but also links already well-known names and titles to the practices and forms of institutional creativity that facilitated their emergence and success. The time is thus ripe for this Companion to Nordic Cinema, a collection of 26 original chapters by Nordic cinema scholars from around the world. Together, the chapters bring into sharp relief some of the essential historical, cultural, and political contexts for what might otherwise appear to be a series of disconnected—although striking—successes from one of the world’s earliest film-producing regions.

The academic study of Nordic cinema has increased greatly since the turn of the new millennium, and we have designed this Companion with the needs of the classroom, as well as the interests of film scholars, cinephiles, and practitioners, in mind. Whereas in the past, Nordic cinema has been taught piecemeal in university film courses, often through the work of select auteurs such as Dreyer or Bergman, today American and European universities increasingly offer courses on Nordic or Scandinavian cinema as such; and at universities on the Chinese mainland—Fudan University in Shanghai, for example—there is similarly considerable interest in the cinematic output of the region in the context of teaching. Yet existing scholarship on the subject has been fragmented, which not only diffuses its influence and impact but also makes it difficult to adopt for a film course. Another historical issue is that relevant research on Nordic cinema has typically been exclusive in its orientation, speaking more to Scandinavian specialists than to film scholars and students more generally. The chapters in this volume speak to both, bringing together the work of established and promising young Nordic cinema scholars for the kind of comprehensive treatment this field so richly deserves.

Our contributors demonstrate a strong commitment to anchoring discussions of central issues—policies, institution building, traditions, movements, genres, and style, among many others—in concrete examples of specific films, just as they are mindful of the importance of providing fruitful references to global cinematic
contexts or developments outside the Nordic region. A clear commitment when designing the Companion was to foreground practitioner’s agency. The point was to encourage scholarly discussions reflecting carefully focused exchanges with, for example, directors, producers, policymakers, festival organizers, and film commissioners about the constraints, opportunities, values, and strategies that underwrite developments within the broad domain of Nordic cinema. A significant number of our contributors have made excellent use of the access that they have to the milieus of practice in the North, working in a collaborative way with the filmmakers through a series of practitioner interviews or observations of their filmmaking techniques over a period of time. With its emphasis on practitioner’s agency, the Companion offers a model of scholarship relevant not only to Nordic cinema but to Film Studies generally.

This Companion is divided into six distinct sections, each with its own introduction to provide additional context for the phenomena under study in the relevant chapters. The first section, “States of Cinema: Nordic Film Policy,” sheds light on regional (in both the sub-national and supra-national sense of “region”) developments in the North. Attention is given to Nordic film’s institutional underpinnings, with contributors analyzing the factors that have allowed for innovation, as well as stability, and for a potent embedding of notions of public value in many of the spheres of cinematic activity. The region’s engagement with other parts of the world well beyond the North are also brought into play, through accounts of collaborative endeavors made possible by global conceptions of the Nordic region as having demonstrated, through its policy work with film, a compelling commitment to the idea that film and film culture are important pillars in the construction of a good society. That commitment is explored in great detail and depth, through a case study focusing on a specific national initiative, Dansk Kulturfilm.

The second section, “Making Filmmakers: Models and Values,” examines both the region’s well-established conservatoire-style film schools with a long history as well as the plethora of alternatives that have emerged in tandem with the opportunities afforded by new technologies and various types of globalization. Careful attention is also given to the role of production companies in the shaping of filmmakers’ identities as practitioners. Together the chapters cover developments in the history of “making” filmmakers in the Nordic region from the 1920s to the current day.

The third section, “Reeling ’Em In: Spectatorship and Cinephilia,” discusses the important role of audiences and fans in the development of Nordic film cultures. The chapters in this section are devoted to the strategies film practitioners and producers used to develop audiences for a new medium in Nordic cinema’s early days; to the study of “high impact” films and television dramas that have fostered audiences’ interest in, and commitment to, the national cinemas of the North; to the role celebrity has played in building support for Nordic cinema; and to Norway’s municipal cinema system, which until its unraveling in 2013 was unique in the world.
The fourth section, “Reinventing the Reel: Transitions and Triumphs,” accounts for moments of peak international exposure in Nordic film history as well as periods of intense domestic renewal, examining the ebb and flows of influence and innovation. All of the chapters in this section create a basis for more general claims pertaining to the region as a whole through discussion of examples from various historical periods; identify the cinematic voices that can be said genuinely to have made a difference in the course of Nordic film history; and locate social, cultural, artistic, and political factors that have created environments conducive to innovation or convergence in decisive periods of Nordic film history.

The fifth section, “Connecting Points: Global Intersections,” is devoted to the contributions that specific interactions between the North and other parts of the world have made to Nordic cinema and its constitutive national cinemas. Its chapters examine the decisive links between the filmmaking of an indigenous Sámi filmmaker and a body of work by indigenous artists worldwide; the impact of Nordic film practitioners outside the North; Dogme 95’s role in reframing cinemas in transnational, rather than national terms; Nordic cinema’s engagement with global audiences from the earliest decades of film’s history; and the implications for Nordic filmmakers of American remake practices, as they are brought to bear on successful Nordic films.

The Companion’s sixth section, “The Eye of Industry: Practitioner’s Agency,” contains a collection of chapters devoted to the study of the practice of film as informed by film practitioners themselves. The contexts vary widely, from the writing rooms of popular Danish television dramas, to Finland’s ecodocumentary film production, to an emerging tradition of Icelandic cinema, to Nordic “non-narrative” fiction filmmaking, and to a rethinking of pornography in the twenty-first century.

It is our hope that this Companion serves as a definitive guide for all with an interest in the well-established, dynamic, and diverse field of Nordic cinema. As the following chapters demonstrate, film in the Nordic region has been breaking new waves, both at home and in the world, since the dawn of the medium.

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Part I
States of Cinema

Nordic Film Policy
Introduction

Mette Hjort and Ursula Lindqvist

In the Nordic region, film is, and has long been, a matter of keen interest to the state. How exactly this interest finds expression varies across national contexts, just as important differences emerge when we opt for a broader view, spanning many decades, with regard to regulatory decisions, policy work, and institution building in the area of Nordic film. Beneath the differences, however, and fueling, among other things, the articulation of film acts and creation of state-funded bodies devoted to film are a number of convictions that are deeply and widely held. These convictions are intimately related to the status of the countries in question as small nation-states, each with a national tongue without much reach or resonance beyond national borders, and with a population size limited enough to render the sustainability of a film industry on a purely commercial basis difficult if not impossible from the second half of the last century onwards.

Of these convictions, two are especially important, and this because they are persistently present in the region and capture some of the specificity of the Nordic region’s engagement with film. One pervasively held belief is that it is crucial to ensure that filmmaking is a locally embedded activity with sufficient density and scope to allow for authentic cultural expression, for what Rod Stoneman, referring to his work commissioning films by African filmmakers for Channel 4, calls “direct speech” (2013, 69). The implicit contrast with indirect speech points to the difference between an authentic voice, expressed in idioms—natural languages or aesthetic styles—that are recognized as having a degree of local provenance and thus cultural specificity, as compared with modes of expression that are somehow mostly on loan from an external source. At stake here is not the possibility of an isolated filmmaker making a highly personal film from time to time, but the much
bigger idea that film can and should be part of the public conversation through which a community defines and understands itself. The commitment is, in large measure, to film as authentic cultural expression that can serve as a vehicle for the manifestation, shaping, and sustaining of collective identities.

A second belief driving trans-generational thinking about film in the Nordic region is that film spectators are also citizens and that film is a means of engaging citizens with norms and values that are integral to the project of building what, at a given moment in time, counts as a good society. In this case the commitment is to film as politically and socially efficacious, as profoundly “useful,” to use the term proposed by Haidee Wasson and Charles Acland (2011). Thus, for example, a thread running through the policy histories of Nordic cinemas is various versions of the idea that film has a role to play in supporting the emerging conditions for, or actual pillars of, what we now know as the welfare state, a phenomenon that has long been constitutive of collective identities in the Nordic region. As the region embraces the inevitabilities of various kinds of globalization, and with neo-liberal models, an ageing population, and other factors exerting pressure on the welfare state model, policy-style discussions regarding the “usefulness” of film have less to do with the sorts of issues that Claire Thomson (this section) brings into focus through her account of Dansk Kulturfilm—film’s contribution, for example, to educating citizens about their rights and obligations or to the mediation of normative understandings of how best to live—and a lot more to do with the gains that are to be had from successful branding. With globalization an acknowledged and inevitable reality, what is sought, through policy provisions, is a virtuous circle whereby film and television productions with global appeal contribute to the branding of entire nations, regions, and cities. The branding of these entities as “creative” is seen as a policy goal that is well worth pursuing inasmuch as success in this regard helps to foster the conditions under which the creative industries—and a host of related phenomena, ranging from film festivals to tourism—can thrive (Bondebjerg, this section).

During the earliest decades of Nordic film history, filmmaking was, it is true, largely a commercial undertaking, unfolding under economic conditions that involved little of the public/private hybridity that characterizes what Olof Hedling (this section) calls the “mixed economy” of later decades. If we look to figures such as the Dane Ole Olsen, who founded Nordisk Film in 1906, or to production companies such as AB Svensk Filmindustri, which emerged from the fusion of Svenska Biografteatern and Filmindustribolaget in 1919, we find ourselves focusing on a private sector where film was a commercial product and filmmaking a matter of contributing to a business undertaking that was very much subject to market forces. Yet, if we broaden our scope, so as to include the full span of Nordic film history, and especially the latter half of the last century and the first decades of the current one, what we find is a constantly evolving, yet continuously dense institutional landscape. Indeed, policy density, combined with high levels of institutional persistence or stability, is one of the salient features of the region when it