

Position-in-frame: gendered mobility, legacy and transformative sacrifice in the screen stories of Susanne Bier.

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ABSTRACT

An integral connection point between the screenplay and reader/viewer is the protagonist's transformative journey. The construction of this narrative backbone is critical to the articulation of overarching thematic concerns and story premise but also reflects the story creator's worldview- one often coloured by representations of gender. The Hollywood model certainly divides narrative function along gender lines but does this representation hold true within a different cultural context? This article examines the selected screen stories of Danish director Susanne Bier whose partnership with screenwriter Anders Thomas Jensen is one of Denmark's most successful film partnerships. Employing a case study methodology I examine the dramatic function of and agency afforded screen characters and the critical dynamic between cultural landscape, practitioner preference and narrative inquiry. Key to this address is an exploration of mobility, legacy and sacrifice as textual considerations of gender and its utilisation as transnational narrative strategy.

KEYWORDS

Transnational, mobility, transformative, collaboration, gaze

Refocusing a masculinised gaze?

With persistent ubiquity Hollywood continues to cast a dominant shadow over much of the global film & TV landscape. Similarly pervasive is the figurehead of such industrial influence - the male protagonist as narrative gatekeeper. This prioritising often domesticates or sexualises female counterparts arguably diminishing access to and impact on the world (and what might really matter) that exists beyond the picket fence women on screen are often constrained by.¹

Primed as dramatic enablers for the transcendence of male lead characters, one might suggest the transformative agency of female screen characters in Hollywood's mainstream narratives is not only limited but often entirely transferred to male protagonists, rendering many female roles muted and functionally hollow. Gender disparity is also reflected in creative presence (or opportunity) of above-the-line practitioners, with women in some industrial analysis accounting for just 20.5% of these filmmakers.²

The dominance of Hollywood and industrial preferences within are often recalled when examining 'combative innovation'; in this instance how US market dominance results in alternate approaches to screen narrative development and delivery. Denmark is a key player in reconfiguring expectations of and access to small nation film & TV. One of the most significant collaborations contributing to Denmark's transnational status is the partnership between director Susanne Bier and screenwriter Anders Thomas Jensen.

¹ Out of the top 100 grossing Hollywood films of 2014 female characters were more likely than male counterparts to be identified through their personal status as wife or mother (58% vs 31%)

<http://blogs.indiewire.com/womenandhollywood/statistics>

² <http://seejane.org/wp-content/uploads/gender-bias-without-borders-full-report.pdf>, p24.

This article explores representation and role-play, not only in relation to screen characters but also how the appropriation of gender can be viewed as a practitioner strategy to attract or maintain international recognition. I consider the utility of gender in the Bier/Jensen collaborations a form of narrative labour that articulates a transnationalized cinematic gaze. In the case study texts I examine [*Efter brylluppet/ After the Wedding* (2006) & *Haevnen/In a Better World* (2010)] this is expressed through thematic binaries (static & mobile, expressive & restrained, passive & proactive) situating gender as a construct with a diminished political or feminist agenda. This kind of narrative neutering situates character as an expression of ideology or ethical dilemma binding concept and screen world(s) together.

I also examine how Bier transfigures what Yvonne Tasker (1998, 5) expresses as the correlative significance of gendered identities & constructions of independence, by exploring perceptions of women behind the lens. Much like the problematic ethical terrain navigated in her films, Bier's, at times, antithetical approach to gender representation can be read as equally agitating. As a female screenwriter I lament her predictable reliance on male protagonists but deeply engage with the spatial tension within the narrative that characters, regardless of gender must reconcile. In turn this leaves me questioning my own gaze and how the interpretation of narrative and authorial intention can also be read as engendered practise.

Genre as key collaborative expression

While the feature film is commonly used to anatomize the screenplay as architectural text, examining practitioner collaboration and developmental pathways significantly broadens the framework of discourse. Indeed if one pivots the axis of inquiry towards Denmark the dialogue converges upon how the writer-director dynamic contributes towards an understanding and analysis of narrative form.

Anders Thomas Jensen and Susanne Bier are arguably one of Denmark's most significant and successful screen partnerships, their conspicuous international presence defined by a predilection for melodrama. This long term dynamic³ reflects a culturally definitive approach to screenwriting, one where writer and director often share a co-story credit. In this way, directors in Denmark contribute towards the manifestation of story in an arguably more organic, seamless fashion where continuing conversations between writer and director develop a valuable understanding of and attachment to the screen idea.

This partnership is framed by considerations of genre. This allows for an interesting examination of gender and the transmutability of melodrama, through which narratives navigate complex geographic & ethical boundaries aimed at attracting the globalized viewer. Bier/Jensen reconfigure the melodrama genre away from what might have once been heralded as an immersive, inclusive site of feminized concerns and dramatic imaginings, towards a cinematic space in which Pam Cook (cited in Gledhill [ed.] 2012, 3) suggests the presentation and perception of identities is wilfully lost rather than confirmed.

Driven by restrained expressions of masculinized desires and frailty, their screen worlds pull focus from a feminine emotionality commonly associated with melodrama. However, the genre's tonality persists in the heightened affectivity of secondary female characters, revisiting conventional characteristics of melodrama. These re-presentations reflect an inevitability regarding roles and role-playing but arguably avoid a didactic approach to modes of genre and gender.

³ This writer/director partnership co-share story credits on 6 feature films: *Elsker dig for evigt/Open Hearts* (2002), *Brodre/Brothers* (2004), *Efter brylluppet/After the Wedding* (2006), *Haevnen/In a Better World* (2010), *Den skaldede frisør/Love is all you need* (2012), and *En chance til/A Second Chance* (2014)

The him and her in critique

Genre is also used as an avenue for critique, where sentiment is framed as an inherently weak articulation of craft. Peter Bradshaw (2011) disparagingly dismisses *Haevnen/In a Better World* (2010) as a ‘faintly preposterous cine-soap opera for haemophiliac-hearted liberals’. As director, Bier’s work is often classified as popular rather than high art with emotion emphasized as a female-centric failing rather than reflection of directorial sensibility. A similarly unbalanced line of critique assumes female dynamics present within the storyline dictates a feminist rendering of the unfolding narrative, binding gender to process and practitioner. However, one of the main issues is gender imbalance within the reviewer profession. Dr Martha M. Lauzen’s (2016, 2) recent study of the film review website Rotten Tomatoes found that of the ‘top critics’, only 27% were women. Given the report also established that writers reviewed a higher proportion of films with a protagonist of their own sex, more films with a masculinized gaze attain visibility through the apparatus of critique.

While the Bier/Jensen collaborations dwell in a space of expressively heightened drama the often dubious boundary between objective and subjective interpretation renders critique itself a gendered construct, evidenced in a persistent ‘historical devaluation of women’s production through a conflation with negatively feminized discourses, including genre and emotion’ (Smaill 2014, 15). Such positioning reflects a perpetual reconciliation of femaleness; the inherently pathological need to question ‘her’ relevance, role and relationship to the material.

Stigma bound to this kind of problematizing is often serviced through mainstream media’s referential language use. Where male directors’ work is notably articulated through a technological prism such as the architectural components of the drama, female directors are often critiqued according to emotionality and character dynamics. This build/nurture dichotomy presents distinct ways to examine viability or adequacy of craft through biological pre-determinates; women cocoon fragile narrative traits and men construct clear, bold statements through the mechanics of cinema as man-made innovation. This is demonstrated most clearly through the genre/gender prism. The Sundance Institute’s longitudinal study sites a higher concentration of drama, comedy or romance films exhibited at the Sundance Film Festival, directed by female directors.⁴ These genres typically traverse female-oriented emotional landscapes, rather than the masculinized and hyper-physical realms of action, horror or sci fi rendered much more conspicuously through technology such as CGI or green screen. The study also found a default ‘think director, think male’⁵ perception at play within industry, which positions women as working despite or around their perceived lack of authority or commitment.

This oppositional approach can be evidenced in regards to the acclaim bestowed upon Anders Thomas Jensen as feature film writer/director. Diverging from Bier’s preference for melodrama as transnationalising narrative device, his own projects utilise an absurdist/black comedy tone tapping into the cultural specificity and humour of a domestic audience.

The appropriation of masculinity in Jensen’s films and those he writes with Bier separate into two distinct modes: masculinity in the Jensen/Bier collaborations is maintained with a brooding introspection and

⁴ 92% of films by female directors vs 69% of films by male directors. <http://www.sundance.org/pdf/artist-programs/wfi/phase-iii-research---female-filmmakers-initiative.pdf> p4.

⁵ <http://www.sundance.org/pdf/artist-programs/wfi/phase-iii-research---female-filmmakers-initiative.pdf> p5.

restraint, and male protagonists are worldly or seek wisdom. In Jensen's stand alone projects a more externalised cinematic maleness is emboldened by a physicalized presence. Often loud, brutish or unsophisticated, their limited worldview generates indifference to or ignorance of the world at large.

While aimed at a domestic audience, these films also attract international intrigue if not significant box office success. Peter DeBruge's (2015) review of Jensen's latest film *Men & Chicken* (2015) frames aspects of the film as 'wonderfully off-putting' and 'tonally astounding'. The eccentricity that typifies Jensen's films is often critiqued with a convivial 'boy's will be boy's' attitude endorsing presentations of juvenile masculinity. As individual filmmakers Bier and Jensen's dissimilar approach to characterisation feeds an evolving discourse on the legitimacy of creative sensibilities as an expression or extension of the engendered practitioner.

Position-in-frame: case studies of male protagonist as narrative navigator

Case study 1

Efter brylluppet/After the Wedding (2006)

Jacob Petersen left Denmark long ago to work with street kids in India, and revels in his role as beloved father figure to orphan boy Pramod. When the orphanage he helps run is in danger of closing, Jacob must return home to negotiate with the orphanage's benefactor, wealthy businessman Jorgen who is willing to donate a conditional \$4 million dollars. Jorgen invites Jacob to the impending wedding of his daughter. Through a series of revelations the past dramatically collides with the present and Jacob is forced to reconcile the presence of his ex-lover and now Jorgen's wife Helene, and their newlywed daughter Anna. Jorgen's plan soon becomes clear when his terminal illness is revealed. The orphanage will be fully funded but only if Jacob stays in Denmark to assume a paternal role in Jorgen's family's life after his imminent death. Jacob is torn between commitments to his surrogate son Pramod in India, his biological daughter Anna and Jorgen's twin boys with Helene in Denmark. Either way, Jacob is in danger of losing one family in order to gain another.

Where and how a screen character sits in the text often indicates if dramatic intent challenges, reflects or revises the serviceability of gender. As two of their most critically acclaimed collaborations the screen narratives of *Efter brylluppet/After the Wedding* (2006) and *Haevnen/In a Better World* (2010) pre-suppose a world order where sites of conflict are combatted by male-dominated positions, preferences and persuasions. This creates a binary of mobility where male characters instigate and move forward with action whilst female characters *re-act* to the unfolding drama. Story placement takes on a geographic context when male characters journey into foreign spaces of conflict and women attend to interior cohesion, suturing emotional/psychological damage.

This imposed passivity⁶ does not present female characters as incapable of negotiating conflict; they are simply not afforded primary access to it. And though dimensionally drawn, their relational positioning as mother or partner prevents transcendence from the domestic into the global, limiting female influence and revelatory authority.

In *Efter brylluppet/After the Wedding* (2006) Jacob's attendance at his (as yet unknown) daughter's wedding can be read as inciting incident. His physical presence when introduced to his daughter and ex-lover Helene generates tension leading to pivotal plot revelations. Male characters steer the drama as they move between physical spaces and relationships while female counterparts wait to be introduced into conflict and utilized accordingly. A significant example of this is the disclosure scene when Helene confirms that Anna is in fact

⁶ I refer to this as waiting room syndrome- female characters sit in the background of the story until dramatic urgency requires them to facilitate or generate conflict in line furthering the masculinized narrative arc.

Jacob's biological daughter. Helene is a linchpin between male characters and given the imminent revelation of her husband Jorgen's terminal illness, Helene's connective role allows for a necessary transfer of paternal responsibility from Jorgen to Jacob. This consequently provides Jacob with redemptive commitment to both personal relationships and geographic locale.

But both Anna and Helene's narrative arcs remain housebound so to speak, limited by the utility they afford the male protagonists who journey further afield in order to attain transformative experiences. Interactions between mother and daughter reveal character with a feminized predictability, articulating emotional landscapes with considered philosophical insight that feeds back into the male protagonist's conflicts and overarching thematic concerns. When Anna asks Helene if (as a single mother with young child) she married Jorgen for love, the inquisitorial subtext reflects the sacrificial and somewhat primal nature of mothering; that one seeks to attain a father figure who will protect & provide in lieu of the 'real' thing.

Ultimately the narrative conflict rests between Jorgen and Jacob. Jorgen makes a secret plan to bring Jacob into the family fold as a paternal replacement after his imminent death. Familial security both emotional and financial becomes a transaction between males without the implicit knowledge or involvement of the women who lie at the heart of such an agreement. It is also Jorgen as affluent businessman who has the financial acumen to manipulate Jacob into the position that he desires- one that also decides the fate of the women and children in the Indian orphanage. Rendered helpless without his intervention one might cynically suggest Jorgen's is a calculated, self-serving compassion. Conflicted by Jorgen's emotional blackmail Jacob retaliates: 'Is it fun playing God, you big, fat pig?' (*Efter brylluppet/After the Wedding* 2006)

Gender is also layered into the narrative through rituals such as the fishing trip Jorgen takes with his and Helene's twin boys. Hoping to avoid the inevitable conflict that awaits her with Jacob and Anna, Helene tries to come along but is humorously rebutted by Jorgen: 'It's sons and their father in the woods. Or else they turn out gay.' While the mother/daughter relationship is fractured as a consequence of Jacob's return, there is little doubt that reconciliation is both secondary concern and inevitable outcome, once the novelty of the new (biological) father and daughter relationship has expired.

Anna is defined through her dual role as daughter and newlywed, betrayed by both significant male figures in her life. In this way she is acted upon, rather than initiating dramatic action and consequently rendered reactive rather than proactive. Granted she must forge her own path and the story allows for a rite of passage strand to emerge as she struggles to reconfigure the position and value of absent father and cheating husband, but her dramatic purpose revolves around the expansion of domestically oriented familial issues, rather than the transnational scope of conflict Jacob must reconcile.

As a narrative device Jorgen's funeral solidifies Jacob's transcendence as primary paternal figure, contextualized when one of Jorgen's sons asks Jacob to zip his jacket up and moments later when Jacob holds Anna in a tight embrace; these actions establish a union of the lost & found where children both biological and circumstantial are kept under his watchful gaze. It is also a scene that compounds the thematic considerations of family- loss is inextricably tied to love. The very next scene delivers Jacob back into the orphanage. Construction work underway confirms the orphanage's newfound viability. Jacob tells Pramod that he will return to Denmark for good but asks if he wants to come back with him. Pramod is provided with the agency to decide his own fate and rejects the offer now that everything in the orphanage is 'so good'. This gendered rite of passage concludes with a small but significant release:

'Do you want to go out and play?'

'Yes.'

'Then go.'

Jacob watches Pramod through the window, the final reversal of fortune established.

While both genders are capable of betrayal, women chase men in search of answers. Subsequent revelations (true or false) provided by male characters largely sustain the narrative's dramatic momentum. In this regard the attainment of knowledge- affairs, parental status, terminal illness- affords male characters a critical command of and influence on story. This concealment of information arguably feminizes the audience as the viewer and female characters alike must wait for the dramatic full stop commonly punctuated by men's declarative statements. This stimulates a gendered dynamic of calling and answering.

Case Study 2

Haevnen/In a Better World (2011)

Anton is a doctor who commutes between his home in an idyllic town in Denmark, and his work at an African refugee camp. In these two very different worlds, he and his family are faced with conflicts that lead them to difficult choices between revenge and forgiveness. Anton and his wife Marianne, who have two young sons, are separated and struggling with the possibility of divorce. Their older, ten-year-old son Elias is being bullied at school, until he is defended by Christian, a new boy who has just moved from London with his father, Claus. Christian's mother recently lost her battle with cancer, and Christian is greatly troubled by her death. Elias and Christian quickly form a strong bond, but when Christian involves Elias in a dangerous act of revenge with potentially tragic consequences, their friendship is tested and lives are put in danger. Ultimately, it is their parents who are left to help them come to terms with the complexity of human emotions, pain and empathy. (Jorgensen 2010)

This narrative opens in a sparse and bare landscape; the refugee camp immediately engendered with women standing around in the wind and dust, children milling close by. Similar to the opening in *Efter brylluppet/After the Wedding* (2006) Anton enters the scene on the back of a ute; a beacon of white hope with children running after him cheerfully calling out. But his gaze and interaction is removed and measured.

Where *Efter brylluppet/After the Wedding* (2006) addresses third world otherness through poverty, *Haevnen/In a Better World* (2010) contextualizes with the savagery of conflict. Africa is a place where the local warlord routinely butchers pregnant women. In both scenarios western maleness is utilized as a verb with Jacob and Anton fixing, feeding, mending; their agency offering (limited) respite to others as well as themselves. The extreme presentation of third world reality- passivity or survivalist brutality- reflects the Bier/Jensen preference for thematic binaries; in this case the safety of the known opposed to a fear of/for the other.

Given the third world entities of India and Africa are inevitably disposed of as protagonists return to the safety and stability of family life in Denmark, one might suggest that the audience has also been provided with the protagonists' privilege of whiteness. However many life lessons are embraced by the Danish characters on their return home, the legacies of war and poverty remain safely on foreign shores for characters and viewer alike. This also provides an example of Bier's binary strategy extended to encompass race and geography.

The dramatic concerns within both case study narratives contribute to a normalisation of the male gaze whilst affording authority to a Eurocentric whiteness. Despite reflecting the Nordic region's ethnic homogeneity⁷ this can also be viewed as a marketing strategy privileging the white male in his familiar role as transnational

⁷ The politicizing of issues such as migration/refugees has resulted in a conservative push away from more inclusive policy towards more restrictive agendas aimed at preserving the (largely white and Christian) constitution of the Danish nation state. However the current European refugee crisis is shifting attitudes towards and expressions of ethnic representation.

story guardian. This status is actualised through aspects of craft such as plot, structure and character arc that impose a fractured authority regained by way of transformative journey.

Narrative mobility and the transformative sacrifice

Holding dual citizenship to narrative realms the male protagonist is utilized as figurehead for Denmark's transnationalised status and the increasing urbanisation of screen stories that intersect with the world at large. Accordingly both Jacob and Anton are situated as (semi) bi-lingual Danish nationals able to transcend cultural and political borders. The Jensen/Bier preference for the melodrama also privileges their male protagonists with personal development through the negotiation of crisis. But for this to hold significance on the page, a sacrifice of character depth and mobility is required. In both case study films the romantic partners of male characters provide a base of emotional solidity. This grounding suggests an inherent feminized strength of character that the male protagonist must draw upon or remain in close proximity with to counter doubt or lack of direction through his narrative transcendence.

Accordingly these women embody a prescriptive 'sensitivity, perception, intuition and the necessary privileging of the concerns of the personal life' (Brunsdon in Scheffman 2011, 23). In *Efter brylluppet/After the Wedding* (2006) we are introduced to Helene as a sexualised domestic fixture within Jorgen's world: as he prepares for bed he saunters into the bathroom where Helene lies in the bath ensconced in bubbles. Her opening lines reference the imminent wedding of their daughter: 'it will be fun to see what important thing I forgot.' Though jovial in tone her words embody the self-deprecating, organisational nature associated with motherhood. Jorgen's mother requiring help with her computer breaks their intimate, sexually charged encounter. Jorgen wanders from place to place in the house, delivering what is required with ease and confidence, transitioning seamlessly between domestically oriented roles as father, lover and son.

In essence housebound women provide stability to the dislocated male ego constantly in momentum, seeking and solving to push the narrative forward. The concerns of male characters are entwined with expansive considerations such as an ethical cosmopolitanism (Smail 2014, 21) that extends expressions of identity beyond the self. Indeed through cultural intersections the filmic potency of maleness is enhanced by three dimensions of narrative mobility: *intra-mobilisation*- the drama revolves around male emotional/psychological desires and obstacles, contextualised with an *inter-mobility* through conflict with other characters, all the while transitioning between spatial locales that provide *extra-mobility*.

Conversely female characters are never afforded the same degree of crisis driven self-exploration. Their static positioning affirms sacrifice as a positive aspect of mothering/partnering but also renders the collective *her* a de-personalized construct, unable to initiate or investigate conflict on her own terms. Unable to shed transformative skins she embodies the very antithesis of change while ironically propelling the protagonist into momentum where as Martinsson (2014, 41) suggests 'the meta narrative on women depicts a gender in the margin or as a dramaturgical "spice" to move the narrative forward.'

Though in *Haevnen/In a Better World* (2010) we see Anton's (separated) partner Marianne working as a doctor in a Danish hospital the significance of this role is diminished through a benign conversation with a patient joking about hospital food. The sense of urgency, significance and nobility attached to Anton's work in Africa is missing. After their son Elias is injured after a bomb explosion Marianne is seen running frantically down the hospital in her white doctor's coat. When she sees how badly he has been injured she becomes hysterical, driven by maternal angst. This lack of composure, while authentic reflects a feminine

dramatic that sits uneasily between realism and tired cliché, a predictable connection point for female viewers' perceived maternal empathy.

The gendered legacy of knowledge and violence

The use of children works an expository tool in both texts, expanding upon thematic concerns with naïve poignancy. As Martinsson (2014, 40) suggests many Nordic films masculinize the realm of childhood and associative parental relationships where 'the relation between sons and parents are more frequently depicted than between parents and daughters.' The realm of childhood itself has been engendered in these narratives, providing an important legacy between men and boys to develop throughout.

This is evidenced in *Efter brylluppet/After the Wedding* (2006) through circumstantial binaries; impoverishment in India with Jacob's favoured male orphan Pramod and affluence in Denmark with Jorgen's twin boys. India is largely conceptualised through incapacity to provide for *her* collective offspring, left to fend for themselves on the streets. Jacob teaches the orphans English as his voiceover states: 'I can't leave the kids.' This statement strengthens his status as provider with more impact than the immobilised female orphanage director who pleads for his help to secure funding.

Both screen stories explore the rite of passage experienced in youth where children are granted access to adult realms that inform identity. The thematic threads binding these narratives together- a) aggression as masculine attribute or instinct, b) patriarchal responsibility and c) agency to instil (negative or positive) change are experienced through male children. They are taught that life is inherently about reconciling loss. Orphan boy Pramod chooses to let go of Jacob as father figure. Elias' friend Christian must learn how to openly grieve for his deceased mother. Trying to reconcile his parents' separation, Elias tells his dad jokingly: 'I bet mum would love it if you weren't such a wimp'. This suggestion reflects a childish association between an assertive maleness and virility. Consequently Anton's passive approach to life is seen as a contributing factor in the fracturing of Elias' family unit.

Haevnen/In a Better World (2010) focuses on the ethics that underpin notions of violence and revenge. This resonates through transactions made between father (figures) and sons. Christian's world is framed by perceived injustice. Losing his mother to cancer, having to start life again in Denmark, seeing Elias picked on and an overarching belief that his father lied to him about his mother's illness. Children's inability to fully comprehend the complexities and contradictions of parents and teachers creates a spatial tension between the child and adulthood, a conflict that bonds Christian and Elias together.

Christian's response to this chaos is extreme violence. He savagely bashes the school bully with a bike pump and holds a knife to his throat. This undercuts previous images of emotional sterility that frame his privileged world of wealth. Underneath such pretence the same base instincts prevail. Christian's survivalist logic within an unforgiving reality is expressed when his father confronts him over the attack:

'If you hit him and he hits you then it never ends. Don't you see? That's how wars are started.'
'Not if you hit hard enough the first time.'

Manifestations of violence are utilized to build relationships as well as destroy them. Christian offers Elias his knife as a gesture of comradeship. This thrills Elias; a conspiratorial transaction has occurred and the boys become united in deceit. There is a strange conversation between the boys when they talk about death- Christian says his mother was burnt, that 'corpses rot and seep into the groundwater.' It's disturbing to frame

the death of his mother with such a blunt dissection of decay but also highlights Christian's emotional disconnect with himself and such tragic events.

Anton is tender but firm with his boys, exuding a gentle strength. Even when provoked by aggressive mechanic Lars who slaps him repeatedly for breaking up a fight, he retreats from the conflict. Elias is unhappy with his father's pacifist approach and seems insistent on educating 'his father to be a man' (Bier in Armengol 2014, 141). However Anton predictably chooses a passive direction, returning to confront Lars and demonstrate to the boys that strength of character is far more important than physical intimidation.

When the situation gets out of hand Christian issues a collective punishment for the world's injustices where 'rule breaking' adults penetrate the sanctity of childhood. The boys make a bomb out of old firecrackers, delighting in the noise and force of the bomb exploding on a secluded beach. Christian then reveals his plan to blow up Lars' van in order to please Elias' Dad. This act of violence stimulates their friendship in an us-against-the-world pact.

The structure of this narrative is dependent upon a disintegration of established values, primarily experienced through a male gaze. We return to Africa where the now injured warlord has arrived for treatment in the medical camp. He looks at the deceased body of one of his victims and laughs: 'little pussy, big knife'. This obscene objectification marked by an act of extreme violence unhinges Anton's moral code. Any allegiance to the Hippocratic oath is abandoned as Anton shoves the incapacitated warlord out of the medical station knowing full well relatives seeking their own vengeance will kill him. And indeed they do in a grossly primal act of collective wrath, sanctioned by Anton's lack of intervention. In this appropriation of justice Anton's role of bystander becomes a violently charged position of defiance.

Back in Denmark Elias tries to tell Anton about the bomb he has made with Christian but their bad Skype connection leaves Anton oblivious to Elias's admission. Without any fatherly advice Elias seeks to restore his unravelling relationship with Christian by agreeing to help bomb Lars' van. Violence is justified as a restorative measure with passivity confirmed as an act of weakness.

The thematic utilisation of violence has been used within the discourse on altered depictions and expectations of manhood (Armengol 2014, 139). The metanarrative in these parallel storylines of boy and manhood examines violence as an engendered, perhaps inevitable instinct and intergenerational transfer. Though the story considers versions of violence in an attempt to universalise behaviour this is only expressed through male cultural counterparts; the sadistic warlord in Africa who butchers pregnant women, the aggressive Danish mechanic Lars who talks with his fists, the schoolyard bullies who tease Elias, and Christian whose grief manifests through violent episodes and a preoccupation with death.

It is however worth noting the subversion of sensibility within Anton and Marianne's relationship. Marianne is fiery and passionate. Anton tries to pacify with his considered logic and measured temperament. During a meeting with teachers an incensed Marianne declares that the boy bullying Elias is 'a psychopath!' Anton addresses the teachers in response: 'what do you suggest if we take a constructive approach?'

Marianne is not afraid to forcefully shake her son with disbelief when she discovers the knife Elias is given by Christian. She provides a dominance and physical assertion that Anton lacks. Yet Marianne's actions borne of parental impotence and guilt reflect her compromised relation not only to legacy (McHugh in Smail 2014, 27) but her son's psychological landscape. This provokes an aggressive reaction when Christian comes to the hospital hoping to see the injured Elias. Knowing he is to blame for her son's critical injuries, she

roughly pushes Christian against the wall and holds his head between her hands, telling him (falsely) that Elias is dead.

While this act serves the overarching thematic principle, that we are all capable of violence, in calling Elias a psychopath Marianne is also seeking some sense of retribution for the collective acts of masculinized

violence perpetrated against her son who has been corrupted by association. Violence as circumstantial exploitation is extrapolated upon in the third world not only through the abhorrent in-utero violations committed by the warlord where violence ends life before it begins, but in the resigned acknowledgement of a grim third world order at play. As one of the refugees simply states to Anton: ‘everybody has killed here, man, woman, children.’

This provides a weighty resignation to the scene and more significantly allows for a momentary reversal of roles, in which Anton (and perhaps audience alike) becomes disempowered with despair.

A de-gendered Denmark?

Despite the bleak tone, acquiring personal agency is a recurring theme in the Bier/Jensen collaborations. Given their standing as successful Danish filmmakers whose work transcends domestic borders it is worth considering whether autonomy as narrative theme reflects broader industrial attitudes. The current success of numerous Scandinavian TV series provides an example of how small nation cinemas have revised Hollywood models of gender representation by providing screen worlds accessed through a conspicuously female gaze.

This TV content showcases a contemporary Danish femaleness with striking diversity. Detective Inspector Sarah Lund, the protagonist in *Forbrydelsen/The Killing* (2007-12) is a loner and has trouble communicating with others. *Borgen* (2010-2013) follows the political (mis) fortunes of a female Prime Minister and *Arvingern/The Legacy* (2014-present) charts the conflict of inheritance between four siblings after their mother’s death. These narratives focus on a worldview instructed by a feminized drive and importantly, where humanistic failings are permitted in both personal and professional roles.

Behind the camera practitioner attitudes reflect a benign value association with gender. Indeed Bier’s commentary suggests ambivalence if not outright rejection of a feminist agenda or imposed expectations:

I’ve never had to fight for the right to be a woman and a film-maker. So in a certain sense I’m not preoccupied by feminist issues. I don’t make films because I want to make some political statement about women (Bier cited in Hjort and Bondebjerg 2000, 247).

Another entry point into the gendered constitution of Danish screen narratives comes through marketplace orientation. I argue that industrial traits prioritizing female visibility are evidenced primarily within small screen narratives and domestically driven feature films. Many of the dramatic conceits proffered by contemporary Danish directors that are ‘not obsessed with defining human beings by traditional notions of gender’ (Shriver-Rice 2015: 5) resonate more strongly with home grown audiences; due in part to the art-house sensibility of these films more so than the border-crossing genres of comedy, action or drama⁸. In contrast Danish cinematic output with a transnationalized orientation echoes the conventionality of a

⁸ The Danish Film Institute’s Autumn 2015 catalogue of films promoted at film festivals reflects the prominence of (heterosexual) male driven narratives as cultural exports and includes Jensen as writer/director for *Maend & Hons/Men & Chicken* (2015) and the latest Jensen/Bier collaboration *En chance til/A Second Chance* (2014). The significant number of period dramas in this list also suggests a gendered retrospective approach to the reframing of history. (<http://www.dfi-film.dk/catalogue-fall-2015>)

Hollywood model of gender representation. Within a wider industrial context Terese Martinsson's (2014, 24) analysis suggests that a (historically) Scandinavian socialist ideology does not cross over into the cinematic realm; of 98 Scandinavian films released in 2012, 85% of directors, 80% of scriptwriters and 69% of producers were male whilst male leads in a film accounted for 64%.

The perceived cultural egalitarianism of Denmark is I argue more applicable to the industrial conditions and attitudes that allow for Bier's status as international director, rather than the kind of stories she chooses to tell. The Danish film industry has supported her as a practitioner who primarily preferences the male gaze, rather than as a female director contributing to a feminist discourse within the frame. This address also demonstrates that support extended to women as practitioners does not presuppose a feminist blueprint stamped into the screen text. Nor does it generate an inclusive story world that promotes gender equality through various text mechanisms such as protagonist preference, premise or thematic consideration.

In order to attain international viability I argue the Jensen/Bier collaborations utilize gender as a strategic consideration preferencing the male gaze. This is an approach as Danish director Annette K Olsen reflects, that situates male characters as 'non-gendered beings and thus as representative of a kind of universal humanity' (cited in Shriver-Rice 2015, 5). Olsen's critique references a cinematic prism of maleness through which the narrative is both revealed and reconciled. Certainly the case study narratives I analyse in this article do not attempt to disrupt this standardized approach. And though a favourable relationship is often apparent between female directors and the percentage of girls/women on screen⁹, this is not demonstrated within Bier's story worlds. One might then consider Bier's approach to gender as a creative currency servicing transactions made between story creator and (transnational) audience.

Meryl Shriver-Rice's (2015,19) illuminating analysis demarcates contemporary Danish cinema by a willingness to push the boundaries of western ethical subject matter. Certainly the premises at the heart of both case study films are framed by ethical considerations, but the dissection of morality and interrogation of personal dilemma are interpreted through a decidedly masculinized lens. What this suggests is fragmented industrial liberty seen more clearly through innovative screen ideas rather than the dynamics of gender that service them. In light of this assertion, more focused inquiry is needed to qualify how practitioner sensibility and domestic/international story orientation may impact on the application of gender within the Danish screen text.

Conclusion

Though limited in scope this article has articulated a number of reference points that may be useful in understanding the utilisation and functionality of gender within the screen stories of Anders Thomas Jensen and Susanne Bier. Key to this address is the placement of text as a mechanism for creative agendas and industrial forces.

Efter brylluppet/After the Wedding (2006) and *Haevnen/In a Better World* (2010) identify a number of practitioner preferences that situate the narrative with an outward, transnationalized orientation. Accordingly the Bier/Jensen employment of melodrama observes a position-in-frame that largely domesticates female characters as agents of change for the male protagonists' transformative journey. Another key avenue for the expression of gender is realised through ritualization of childhood where violence in particular has been

⁹ A report by *The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media* found that female roles increased by 6.8% with at least one female director attached and 7.5% with one or more female writer attached. <http://seejane.org/wp-content/uploads/gender-bias-without-borders-full-report.pdf> p.23

masculinized and rites of passage situate male characters as belonging to the world with static female characters remaining enclosed within. Bier's strategic and at times antithetical approach to representation reflects the complexities inherent in deconstructing gender and how practitioner sensibility impacts not only on contextualising gender, but how critical analysis of creative expression is often an engendered practise in its own right.

While a cinematic culture of inclusivity is in part evidenced through a number of 'visible' female practitioners¹⁰ in Denmark I suggest that distortions of gender representation through story premise and character arc are largely articulated and received within a domestic landscape. This further implies reticence within transnational marketplaces to embrace such agitations, in turn echoing the habitual practise (Martinsson 2014, 45) of prioritizing and promoting maleness within the narrative.

The novelty of Bier as antidote to the European male auteur has long since lost currency. She now holds independent authority based on her engagement with the dynamic conditions of both big and small screen (co) productions across geographic borders. From a personal standpoint there are conflicting points of entry into the texts; though Bier says she is interested in exploring female stories, the persistence of a male POV demonstrates inopportunities for such perspectives to emerge. This raises questions as to how scholarly discourse critiques the dramatic intentions, success and placement of women as practitioners. As Smaill (2014, 16) asserts Bier is 'successful when classified in relation to popular European cinema and negatively gendered as a female director when evaluated against the imposed criteria of (European) art cinema modernism.'

Yet as I view the film translations of text, the utilization of gender seems less important. Consequently I have at different times with varying analytical intentions de-gendered my position as viewer, tapped into feminized textual qualities, and conceded the privileging of the male gaze as an inevitable insignia of the Western imaginary (Smaill 2014, 27). This personal consideration draws out two final points: whether Bier has neglected 'sisterly' concerns, or demonstrated how female practitioners can ably stake out territory in the masculinized playground of transnational production, her ongoing body of work as story collaborator and director challenges how critical associations and expectations of gender on and behind the screen are voiced. While the reading of text and viewing of film often elicit varying responses there is a singularity of intent (if not consistent success) within the Jensen/Bier story collaborations that boldly exposes humanity and the inequities within that arguably travel further and deeper than gender alone.

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¹⁰ Sisse Graum Jorgensen is one of Zentropa's most acclaimed and prolific producers. Director Lone Scherfig's fourth feature *An Education* (2009) was nominated for 3 Academy awards. Director Annette Oleson's success remains largely within a European realm with *Sma ulykker/Minor Mishaps* (2002), *In your Hands* (2004) and *Lille Soldat/Little Soldier* (2008) all premiering at the Berlin International Film Festival.

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Filmography

Alskar dig for Evigt/Open Hearts (2002), Wr: Anders Thomas Jensen, Dir: Susanne Bier, Denmark, 113 mins.

An Education (2009), Wr: Nick Hornby, Dir: Lone Scherfig, UK/US, 95 mins.

Arvingerne/The Legacy (2014-), Creator: Maya Ilsoe, Denmark, 55 mins (episode).

Borgen (2010-13), Wr: Adam Price, Jeppe Gjervig Gram, Tobias Lindholm, Dir: Adam Price, Denmark, 60 mins (episode).

Brodre/Brothers (2004), Wr: Anders Thomas Jensen & Susanne Bier, Dir: Susanne Bier, Denmark, 117 mins.

Den skaldede frisør/ Love is all you Need (2012), Wr: Anders Thomas Jensen, Dir: Susanne Bier, Denmark, 116 mins.

Efter brylluppet/After the Wedding (2006), Wr: Anders Thomas Jensen, Dir: Susanne Bier, Denmark, 116 mins.

En chance til/A Second Chance (2014), Wr: Anders Thomas Jensen, Dir: Susanne Bier, Denmark, 102 mins.

Forbrydelsen/The Killing (2007-12), Wr/Creator: Soren Sveistrup, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Germany, 57 mins (episode).

Haevnen/In a Better World (2010) Wr: Anders Thomas Jensen, Dir: Susanne Bier, Denmark, 118 mins.

In your Hands (2004), Wr: Kim Fupz Aakeson & Annette K. Oleson, Dir: Annette K. Oleson, Denmark, 101 mins.

Lille Soldat/Little Soldier (2008), Wr: Kim Fupz Aakeson, Dir: Annette K. Oleson, Denmark, 100 mins.

Maend & Hons/Men and Chicken (2015), Wr/Dir: Anders Thomas Jensen, Denmark, 104 mins.

Sma ulykker/Minor Mishaps (2002), Wr: Kim Fupz Aakeson, Dir: Annette K. Oleson, Denmark, 109 mins.

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