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Modern Norwegian Occupation Drama Films: The Heroes and the Villains

The article focuses on modern Norwegian occupation drama films released between 2016 and 2023. It builds on a thematic phase division of the genre by film researcher Gunnar Iversen. The author suggests that by the year 2019, Norwegian World War II films were entering a new phase that focussed on alternative storytelling represented by women, children, sailors or Jews. In spite of this, however, the traditional master narrative of hero stories was maintained. Moreover, contemporary debate about the genre's development, its representation in literature and in other European countries is discussed.

Keywords: occupation drama, Norwegian film, film history, war film, World War II

1. Norwegian occupation drama

World War II remains an important topic in Norwegian public consciousness. The goal of this paper is to present and analyse contemporary Norwegian film production devoted to the events of the war. In the last decade, several films as well as series related to this subject have been released. So-called occupation drama emerged in Norway immediately after the war and remains a distinctive sub-genre of the war film up until the present time. The article builds on the thematic phase division of the genre by film researcher Gunnar Iversen (2011).

The war film is a genre in which war plays the central role. Such a film can focus on soldiers and civilians, and often displays elements commonly found in action films. Throughout its history, the war film has depicted both World Wars, the Vietnam war and many others. In the Norwegian context, the occupation drama, that is, films taking place during World War II, constitute the most important sub-genre of the war film (Andresen 2022).

In his division of occupation drama films, Gunnar Iversen defines four phases. In the period he analyses, 1946–2009, a total of 26 occupation dramas were released in Norway, which also rank among the most popular and famous Norwegian films, underlining the importance of the genre. The genre has, however, evolved

and continues to do so. In the following paragraphs, I introduce Iversen's phases of the Norwegian occupation drama films. This does not include an analysis of documentary films.

The first phase, is "trauma". *Two Lives* ("To liv", 1946) and two other films from the same year fall into this category which is different from the later phases as there was still no clear narrative about World War II. This period is followed by "collective heroism". The second phase started with the film *Operation Swallow: The Battle for Heavy Water* ("Kampen om tungtvannet", 1948) about sabotage carried out at the Norsk Hydro factory at Vemork, Rjukan. This docudrama became a model for occupation dramas in the 1950s. What is characteristic for this period is that there are no individual heroes, on the contrary, the heroic act or mission is conducted by relatively anonymous members of a larger community, emphasizing the necessity of solidarity and unity. Films such as *Nine Lives* ("Ni liv", 1957) or *Suicide Mission* ("Shetlandsgjengen", 1954) fall into this category.

The film *Cold Tracks* ("Kalde spor", 1962) is seen as a turning point in the occupation drama, starting a new phase – "revisionism". It is typical for this phase that it is no longer only about external enemies, the Germans, instead, the focus shifts towards psychological struggle. The protagonists are not heroes in the traditional sense, they are complicated personalities. Moreover, throughout the 1970s, the main focus is on everyday life during the war. As examples, the films *Desertion* ("Fane-flukt", 1975) or *Little Ida* ("Liten Ida", 1981) can be mentioned.

Finally, the fourth and so far last phase defined by Iversen is "extraordinary individual heroism". This phase began with the film *The Last Lieutenant* ("Secondløytnanten", 1993), and culminated with the high-budget film *Max Manus* (2008) which generated unprecedented public interest – almost every fourth Norwegian has seen the film. In this phase, occupation dramas tell stories of a chosen single hero, while their individual heroism is the driving force behind the narrative (Iversen 2011).

2. A new phase of Norwegian occupation drama films

In my analysis, I am going to focus on Norwegian World War II films released since 2016 up until the present.¹ In total, eleven films were released. Moreover, at least four more films are currently in production and should be released in cinemas within two years. In terms of quantity, there is no doubt that the production of World War II films in Norway is rising. In fact, between 1946 and 2009, a total of 26 occupation dramas were produced in Norway (Iversen 2011). Approximately half of these have been released in the last decade, suggesting a growing interest in World War II films in the country. In the following paragraphs, I would like to focus on answering

¹ The article was written in February 2024. Iversen's analysis ends in the year 2009, and no other Norwegian (besides coproduction) full-length World War II film was released before 2016.

the question what types of war films have been released in the last decade and how do they fit into the phase division.

I suggest that although the phase of individual heroism continues, a new type of occupation drama film has started to emerge since 2019. While the previous phases had clear turning points, this cannot be said about the new phase as it is only just beginning and so it is too early to draw conclusions. Nevertheless, I believe two opposing forces in modern World War II film storytelling can be identified.

The analysed period began with two films that can be placed in the ongoing hero phase.² The first one is *The King's Choice* ("Kongens nei", 2016), which focused on the days around the German invasion of Norway and the decision-making of king Haakon VII who was a symbol of the Norwegian resistance movement. A year later, another hero story film was released – *The 12th Man* ("Den 12. mann", 2017). Jan Baalsrud was one of twelve saboteurs, the only one who escaped the Nazis. Even though the film is a hero story, it shows traces of the revisionism phase. While the main character is hunted by the enemy on his way to Sweden, the natural conditions of Northern Norway prove to be an even greater foe.³ Both films of the new phase represent depictions of individual war heroes.

In contrast to the above, the following six films mark a visible change and have the potential to launch a new trend in Norwegian occupation drama films. The first one is *The Spy* ("Spionen", 2019). This film is also a hero story; however, it is ground-breaking because the hero is a woman.⁴ The main character, the Norwegian actress Sonja Wigert, became a spy for the Swedish intelligence service and gathered information on Nazi officers, including Josef Terboven, the Reichskommissar of occupied Norway. This shift suggests that Norwegian cinematography is now open to new perspectives.

Another film presenting a new point of view on World War II is *The Crossing* ("Flukten over grensen", 2022). Both *The Spy* and *The Crossing* present the viewer with a different type of hero to the one he/she is used to in the traditional Norwegian occupation drama. Whilst *The Spy* introduces a female hero, in *The Crossing*

² The thriller/horror *Huset* ("House", 2016) by Reinert Kiil is excluded from the analysis. While it takes place during World War II, it does not fit the definition of an occupation drama. I have also excluded the film *Lengsel etter nåtid* ("Longing for Today", 2023) due to its inaccessibility. The main protagonist is a girl traumatised by the events of the war in North Norway. The film may support the hypothesis of the article that new/alternative perspectives of storytelling, in this case the inclusion of female protagonists, are on the rise.

³ *The 12th Man* is a remake of *Nine Lives* (1957), which is representative of the phase of collective heroism; even though it is a story of a single hero – Jan Baalsrud – the real heroes are the people who help him on his journey. In contrast to this, *The 12th Man* is an action film rather than one which depicts collective heroism, as it clearly shows a hero and a villain. Therefore, I would classify it in the individual heroism phase. Iversen also places the film closer to the *Max Manus* type of occupation drama. For a more in depth comparison of the two films, see Iversen's article *Å hoppe etter Skouen* (2017).

⁴ That is not to say that there are no other woman war heroes in Norwegian films. For example, in *Betrayal* ("Svik", 2009), there is Eva, a singer, and a double agent.

we get to meet child heroes. Importantly, the film is not only about children but for children. After Gerda's and Otto's parents are arrested, the siblings discover that two Jewish children are hidden in the cellar, and they help them to flee to neutral Sweden. The screenplay was written (and also published as a book) by Maja Lunde, who writes literature for children and cli-fi (climate fiction). Just as Sonja Wigert is not the first female war hero, the children in *The Crossing* are not the only children represented in Norwegian occupation drama. The main protagonist of the Norwegian-Swedish film *Little Ida* ("Liten Ida", 1981), whose mother has a relationship with a German officer, can also be mentioned. Even though Gerda is a child, she could be classified as an extraordinary individual hero while Otto is hesitant and could perhaps be analysed as a character of the revisionist phase.

The third film suggesting a shift towards a new phase is *Betrayed* ("Den største forbrytelsen", 2020) which portrays the life of the Jewish Braude family during the Nazi occupation of Norway. The topic of the Holocaust is an inherent part of World War II. In world-famous cinematography it is represented first and foremost by the critically acclaimed film *Schindler's List* (Spielberg 1993). The deportation of Jews to Auschwitz on DS Donau is one of the most tragic events in Norwegian history. Nevertheless, the topic has not yet been adapted into a Norwegian film. Instead, Norwegian films have focused on various aspects of the war with a dominant focus on heroes, saboteurs, and the resistance movement. Up until now, however, it has not provided a movie where Jews would be the main characters. In that sense *Betrayed* opens a new chapter for occupation drama in Norwegian film.

In autumn 2022, *War Sailor* ("Krigsseileren") was released in Norwegian cinemas. It is a story of two ordinary men who are working on a merchant ship when World War II breaks out. Suddenly, they are no longer civilians, they are in the front line and their ship is attacked. Nevertheless, the focus is not on the events of the war, it is a story of friendship and love. Moreover, the viewer follows the parallel story of the family of the main character, and therefore also gets to see every-day life in Norway during the war.

The most recent Norwegian war film to be released, *The Arctic Convoy* ("Konvoi", 2023), is similar to *War Sailor*. The story takes place at sea; a convoy of ships with materials for the war effort is on its way to Murmansk after Hitler has invaded the Soviet Union. The convoy disperses and the Norwegian cargo ship is left on its own. This film also lacks the traditional war heroes. On board, there are no soldiers with military training, just the members of the crew who are ordinary sailors. At first sight, it is striking that there are two new war films about civilian sailors who ended up engaged in the war. Roger Grosvold (2023) points out that 4,134 Norwegian sailors (on both merchant and navy ships) died during the World War II, which means that almost half of the war deaths in Norway were related to shipping and the sea. In that context, therefore, it is surprising that this type of occupation drama has not emerged earlier.

Finally, the title *Narvik: Hitler's First Defeat* ("Kampen om Narvik", 2022) might suggest that it is a film about heroes fighting against the Germans and stopping them from shipping iron ore from Sweden. The battlefield, however, is only a pretext. The main characters are a couple and their son Ole. While the husband is a soldier fighting on the Norwegian side, his wife works for the Germans. In order to save little Ole's life, she becomes a traitor. Even though the whole town and her husband look down on her, she does not have remorse. *Narvik* does not show us a great battle, but every-day life in occupied Norway and the difficult decisions the main characters had to make. There was one more occupation drama released in 2022, *Gold Run* ("Gulltransporten"). The film is perhaps an exception to the new type of occupation drama films that have emerged since 2019, as it represents a single hero. It is the story of Fredrik Haslund who was in charge of the transport of Norwegian gold to England after the invasion of the Germans. In comparison to the other films, it was not released in cinemas but put onto a streaming platform – Viaplay.

To sum up, six films released between 2019 and 2023 may suggest a thematic shift in the Norwegian occupation drama, the shift from individual male heroes of the resistance movement towards new perspectives: women, children, Jews, civilian sailors and every-day life in occupied Norway. The films are new, and so it is not possible to determine whether a new phase in Norwegian occupation drama has been entered. Kathrine Ridderseth, however, comes to such a conclusion in her Master thesis *De andres fortelling* (2021), where she argues in favour of the thematic change and presents the hypothesis that *The Spy*, *The Crossing* and *Betrayed* lay the foundation for such a change in the genre, where the era of the "stories of others" has begun. The question is whether this trend is to be continued.

Furthermore, another interesting trend has surfaced in connection with Norwegian occupation drama films in the last decade. Besides the increased interest in World War II films in Norway, it seems that the release of war films has become connected to Christmas. Half of the above films premiered on 25th December (*The 12th Man*, *Betrayed*, *Narvik* and *The Arctic Convoy*).

Lastly, I should mention that this analysis focuses only on full-length films. The last decade has, however, witnessed the growing popularity of so-called miniseries or limited series which viewers enjoy both on broadcast television (in this case Norwegian state television NRK) and streaming services (such as Netflix or HBO). Three of the series were broadcast on NRK. The first one was *The Heavy Water War* ("Kampen om tungtvannet", 2015) which is a remake of the classic film of the same name from 1948. The film and the series can be classified in the collective heroism phase. In *Atlantic Crossing* (2020), we follow the story of the Norwegian royal family as in *The King's Choice*, however, the main character is Crown Princess Märtha. The newest NRK series, *Gutta på skauen* (2022), is a comedy which makes fun of masculinity and the traditional heroism of war films and undermines the national narrative of Norway's role in World War II. The last miniseries, *War Sailor* (2023), streamed on Netflix; it is an extended version of the film (2022) divided into three

episodes. In connection with this trend, however, only four Norwegian occupation drama miniseries have been released and therefore the sample is too small to draw any firm conclusions.

3. The forecast for the Norwegian occupation drama

Recently, a shift in theme and perspective can be observed in Norwegian World War II films. However, the question arises of whether this change can be considered permanent? Have we entered a new phase? Gunnar Iversen (2011) claims that the four phases are distinct and clear, follow chronologically and have only a small overlap. Can the same be said about the new phase?

In the coming years, four new occupation dramas are planned for release in Norwegian cinemas. The first one is *Quisling's Last Days* (“Quislings siste dager”) which should be completed in 2024. The film is directed by Erik Poppe who also directed *The King's Choice*. Vidkun Quisling was a Nazi collaborator who led Norway during the occupation. After the war, he was put on trial and sentenced to death. The film is, therefore, a milestone in Norwegian World War II film history: it does not represent a traditional hero, on the contrary, it depicts perhaps the greatest Norwegian villain. In that sense, the film could support the hypothesis that the new wave of Norwegian occupation drama tells the story of others.

However, the other three films do not seem to point in that direction. On the contrary, the forecast is that there will be a return to traditional heroic stories following national narratives. Another film planned for autumn 2024 is *NR. 24* about Norway's greatest war hero Gunnar Sønsteby. Interestingly, the Norwegian public is also awaiting two films about the same historic event – the sinking of the *Blücher* in April 1940. The first one is to be titled *Blücher* and the other one *Night to the 9th* (“Natt til niende”).

What does this sudden change in the “new phase” mean for the Norwegian film? Some may perceive it as a step back, others may argue it shows plurality. Perhaps, the five year period in which new perspectives appeared created the need for reassurance and the return to a national master narrative. With regard to this, there is need for further analysis in the future. Nevertheless, it is certain that the exponential growth in the number of Norwegian occupation drama films is opening up debate.

Indeed, the debate started in *Morgenbladet* (Lund 2021) and NRK (Krogh 2021) in 2021, long before the majority of the films discussed in this article were released. At that time, Maria Fosheim Lund and Erik Poppe argued that there were enough films about the war and Norwegian resistance heroes. Moreover, a new wave of debate and criticism emerged at the end of 2023. The Norwegian Film Institute (NFI), was criticised for allocating money to too many war films. In her article “How many times are we going to sink *Blücher*?” (“Hvor mange ganger skal vi senke

Blücher?”), the director Rune Denstad Langlo criticised the financial support given to the films mentioned above, which at that point were yet to be released. The director argued that there were too many World War II films. Moreover, she pointed out that the current occupation drama films created a gender imbalance and neglected new perspectives on the war. As an example, she mentioned *Tyskertøsene*, which is a derogatory term for women in Norway who had intimate relationships with German soldiers (Langlo 2023). The debate in favour and against more Norwegian occupation drama films was sparked. While supporters argued that World War II remained the most dramatic event in Norway from the last century, and that there was a responsibility to tell those stories and pass them on to new generations or that war films constituted a considerable income for the Norwegian film industry, opponents asserted that the films created a false impression of historical events and that they were often uncritically heroic. There was also criticism that they did not give space for other stories to be told or that the genre strengthened the dominance of male actors, directors and producers (Aune 2023).

This article is descriptive, attempting to depict and analyse modern Norwegian occupation drama films. Nevertheless, a broader perspective is of interest. Compared to Central Europe where World War II broke out, the number of war films in Norway is indeed high and the films focus more on the stories of heroes (traditional ones as well as “new”, children or female hero stories). The intention here is not to provide a thorough comparative analysis; however, a brief comparison to modern World War II films in the Czech Republic is informative. In the Czech context, there have been far fewer films of this genre, especially in recent years. When it comes to the thematic focus, for example, there was only one definite hero film – *Anthropoid* (2016) about the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich by exiled Czechoslovak soldiers. On the contrary, the Czech film industry appears to concentrate on controversial topics from the war such as the expulsion of Germans from Czechoslovakia (*Habermann*, 2010), war crimes connected with the Lidice massacre (*The Fall of the Innocent*, 2011) or the intimate relationship of a film actress with a Nazi officer (*Lída Baarová*, 2016). Czech film production also deals with controversial stories and protagonists beyond World War II, for instance, the film *Brothers* about the resistance group of the Mašín brothers released in 2023.

Furthermore, there is a difference between Norwegian film and literature in relation to World War II. I would argue that literature is more progressive than film. Since the war, literature has depicted various points of view (such as history of Jews in Norway, forbidden love between Norwegians and Germans, Norwegian collaboration, etc.), while these topics are only starting to emerge in film. In spite of current developments, however, the focus predominantly remains on hero stories. Examples of early literature on the topic might be *Bak skapet står øksen* by Torborg Nedreaas (1945) or *Møte ved milepelen* by Sigurd Hoel (1947), while contemporary Norwegian literature is even more diverse: there are true stories, such as *Ruth Maiers dagbok* (ed. Jan Erik Vold 2007) or *Frida* by Nina F. Grünfeld (2020), stories across

various genres, for instance, *Leksikon om lys og mørke* (Simon Stranger 2018), and fiction, for example *Den hjelpsomme okkupanten* (Kjersti Ericsson 2017). Here, I would like to refer the reader to the book *Krigsminner i samtidslitteraturen* by Norwegian literature researcher Unni Langås (2022) who deals the contemporary literature focused on World War II.

In this article, I analysed modern Norwegian occupation drama. In total, eleven films about World War II have been presented to the Norwegian public since 2016. Moreover, a number of miniseries have also been released, which shows an increasing interest in World War II in Norwegian cinematography. The article builds on Iversen's theory on the thematic phase division of the genre occupation drama and I suggested that by the year 2019, Norwegian occupation drama was entering a new phase, focusing on telling stories different to the prevailing monolithic master narrative in the form of national hero stories. The new wave presents alternative war narratives represented by stories where women, children, civilian sailors and Jews can be the main protagonists. Nevertheless, upcoming World War II films indicate that while a new phase can be witnessed, traditional hero stories, collective or of extraordinary individuals, still remain popular. This may be because it is a topic that can be identified with by the public and which they comfort in or it is simply a corrective to alternative storytelling.

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