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Deadly Wilderness: Norwegian Horror Cinema in the New Millennium

The horror genre was nearly non-existent in the Norwegian cinema before 2000. The sole exception was the 1958 thriller *Lake of the Dead* (Kåre Bergstrøm). However, at the turn of the millennium, certain developments in Norway's film culture and politics prepared the ground for a wave of horror movies that currently counts about 20 feature films with a general cinema release. Some of these movies have attracted attention outside their home country's borders as well, and some of the directors of Norwegian horror have gone on to work in Hollywood. Indeed, the dynamic between the national traits of the Norwegian cinema and the global domination of American cinema seems to have fuelled much of what may now be described as the first Norwegian horror cycle.

In this text, I will sketch out the fundamental conditions that made horror cinema a reality in Norway after 2000. I will then trace the development of this cycle of films and how they have predominantly taken the form of two particular subgenres, before concluding with some observations about the most important hallmarks of Norwegian horror cinema.

Ripples in the Water: Deep Origins of Norwegian Horror

"We should have stayed away from that lake." The promotion tagline and opening monologue of director Pål Øie's debut feature, the horror movie *Dark Woods* from 2003, highlights the core of Norwegian horror cinema in several ways. *Dark Woods* uses the woods and lakes of western Norway as the setting for its tale of a teambuilding excursion gone horribly wrong, and the line tips a hat to the only Norwegian horror film before that point, Kåre Bergstrøm's classic *Lake of the Dead*. Also, Øie's film builds a bridge between the woodland setting of the 1958

thriller and what would become the most common trait of Norway's horror cycle: the use of the country's nature and wilderness as the place of dread and death. The Norwegian horror films of the new millennium would transform the national romanticism of mythical landscapes into a source of horror (Iversen, 2016, p. 337).

Lake of the Dead was based on a popular novel by Norwegian author Bernhard Borge (a pseudonym of André Bjerke) and did very well with critics and at the box office. One prominent critic in the daily newspaper *VG* described the movie as "a Norwegian top thriller," a movie that put the viewer in a state of "perpetual tension and chills" (Varen, 1958, p. 5). The film told the story of a group of friends that ventured into the woods to spend some relaxing summer days in a remote cabin. A nearby lake held a terrible secret, the story of a ghost that lured people into the bottomless waters so that they would disappear forever. Needless to say, not all of the friends would survive this journey into the wilderness of Norway.

With this successful attempt at a psychological horror movie, one might think that Norwegian filmmakers saw the horror genre as a way of securing good ticket sales in the years that followed. After all, horror has been one of the most consistently popular genres in film history. However, the fact is that Norway did not offer up another horror movie until the turn of the millennium, more than four decades later. The deep waters of *Lake of the Dead* would eventually resonate in the post-2000 Norwegian horror movies, but the success of Bergstrøm's movie did not occasion a genre wave in its time. The obvious questions are why not then, and why now? Answers can be found in the structure of Norwegian film production, the cultural conditions for moviemaking in Norway in the latter half of the twentieth century, and how these conditions changed around 2000.

Turning Point: Norwegian Horror in the New Millennium

The early 1980s saw a devastating decline in ticket sales for Norwegian films. The issue peaked when film critics tore the Norwegian entries apart at the Skien film festival in what has become known as the "September Massacre" of 1980. As a consequence, the film culture of the country got into a big and sometimes tense debate about the purpose of Norwegian film politics. The country's movie production was highly dependent on public funding and the result was a politically and artistically directed turn towards more commercial films, with the Hollywood cinema as the central inspiration. For a while, this turn to commercialism and genre aesthetics improved and sustained the box office numbers and critical acceptance of the Norwegian cinema, but the 1990s brought a similar downturn and another debate about what to do about it (Solum, 1997, p. 190; Iversen, 2011, p. 250-253).

The labour government of Jens Stoltenberg implemented a new film policy in 2001 that aimed to increase the number of film productions and thereby the number of tickets sold for Norwegian movies in cinemas. This policy was

further developed by Stoltenberg's second government in 2007. Among the tools utilised was the 50/50 arrangement, where the government guaranteed half the budget if the first half was secured from other sources. An important part of the shift was also that the government consultants were tasked with considering the commercial potential of development and production applications, not solely the artistic merit. The result of this was that filmmakers were encouraged to aim their films at wide and large audiences in order to secure financing, and genre aesthetics thus became important. Genres, after all, have been a relatively safe way of communicating with large audiences throughout film history (Iversen, 2011, p. 294-295).

The initiative worked according to its purpose as the output of the Norwegian cinema features nearly tripled from 2002 to 2003, from six to sixteen films, and the audience support grew considerably (Film & Kino, 2010, p. 53-54; Iversen, 2011, p. 346-347). At about the same time, the country's censorship laws were under review and ultimately came to be significantly liberalised. The government could no longer ban films from being screened, and a new rating system was implemented in place of this rather archaic public censorship. In practice, this enabled filmmakers to expose audiences to much more severe and graphic scenes of sex and violence than it had been previously accepted. Society's perceptions of genre movies had changed, as had its attitudes to censorship, and the practice of government changed accordingly (Smith-Isaksen, 2013, p. 211-2013).

Director Pål Øie was planning his first feature film in the early 2000s, and he remembers the moment when the government consultant on the project brought up the notion of genre during script development. "She mentioned the word 'horror', and I remember that I recoiled a little bit. But then we ploughed ahead and sharpened a few scenes" (Øie, 2015). This might not have been directly linked to the ongoing political changes, as *Dark Woods* is not a particularly violent horror film, but the outcome was a turning point in Norwegian film history. *Dark Woods* opened in February 2003 and quickly became a hit. By the end of its theatrical run the movie had sold 155 117 tickets (Film & Kino, 2012, p. 37), which was considered a big success in a country that had about 4,5 million inhabitants at the time. The budgets of Norwegian movies are modest by international standards, and so it also takes less to recoup and profit. Critics and audiences alike were convinced by Øie's genre work in *Dark Woods*, and it became clear that Norwegian horror movies could deliver the commercial success needed to sustain the domestic genre in a very small cinema culture.

Dark Woods tells the story of a group of television technicians who go on a trip into the wilderness of Norway to bond as a team. Their leader, an experienced television producer, intends to put the young group through both mental and physical challenges, in hope that they will prove themselves worthy of becoming the crew behind his new reality show. The excursion obviously ends in tragedy, as most excursions in horror movies do. This is particularly true

in the slasher subgenre, where people often wander into parts of their country that they had better stay away from, and Øie's film meddles in this subtype of horror.

The success of *Dark Woods* laid the groundwork for further slasher movies, but a psychological horror movie came first: acclaimed director Pål Sletaune's *Next Door* in 2005. It draws on inspiration from such unsettling movies as Roman Polanski's *Repulsion* (1965) and *The Tenant* (1976), and tells the story of a young man who finds himself being taunted and confused by two young women next door. They move into the apartment next door and seem to know a lot about him and his doings that they should not know of. The conflicts in Sletaune's first horror film play themselves out entirely in the mind of the main character, except for the very dark and real problem of the violent crime that lies at the heart of the story. This movie has a non-conventional structure in that it revolves around a very disturbing scene of sex and violence at the movie's midpoint and seems to let its plot flow out in both directions from there. *Next Door* got an 18 rating in Norway, which means that no viewers below that age were allowed. Even so, it managed an impressive 113,125 tickets at the box office (Film & Kino, 2013, p. 58). The turn to darkness was confirmed to be paying off.

A perceived audience crisis that threatened the credibility and legitimacy of Norwegian film production set in motion a political readjustment to bring forth more popular movies. This in turn led filmmakers and government consultants in the direction of genre filmmaking. Once the Norwegian cinema culture rediscovered the horror genre, the floodgates opened. In the decade and a half that has passed since then the horror movie has become a permanent fixture in Norway's cinema output. Most prominent in production volume as well as ticket sales are the films of the slasher subgenre.

The Slasher Film

In 2006, director Roar Uthaug made his feature film debut with the stylish and self-conscious slasher movie *Cold Prey*. This is arguably the most memorable film of the entire cycle, even if others might have more artistic merit. It proved that a young director in Norway could make a subgeneric movie that ticked all the boxes, while it intensified and developed the traits of Norwegian horror that set it apart in a transnational context. It also spawned two sequels and thus became the first film in the only Norwegian horror trilogy.

The plot of *Cold Prey* is highly generic, but there are also things about the movie that are not. On the one hand, the film has sometimes been hailed as a groundbreaking departure from the final girl motif of classic slashers. However, as I will return to it, the classic slashers from around 1980 show much more diversity in their portrayal of the surviving character than some might think, and also more diversity in the portrayal of victims. On the other hand, it is definitely

true that Uthaug made a conscious effort to distinguish his slasher movie from the perceived norm (Uthaug, 2015).

Jannicke (Ingrid Bolsø Berdal) is the first final girl in the Norwegian cinema. She enters the mountainous wilderness of Norway with four friends, out for a day of skiing. The Easter holiday holds a particular place in the Norwegian culture, and many people take to the mountains to go skiing as the country is on the threshold of summer. This particular skiing trip goes predictably wrong when one of the group is seriously injured and they have to take refuge in an abandoned mountain lodge for the night. The hotel is obviously not as abandoned as it seems, or *Cold Prey* would not be a slasher film. A homicidal maniac is hiding there, and this is where the Norwegian slasher film truly departs from its generic inspirations. The killer never comes to where you live, you always travel to where he hides. And that is always in a rural Norway, one step away from the wilderness if it is not in the wilderness itself. Sletaune's *Next Door* remains the only Norwegian horror movie that is set in a purely urban environment. Norwegian slashing happens on a site of nature, not culture. The suburb and the college campus, even the summer camp, do not exist in the Norwegian slasher despite being prevalent in the American horror tradition that these films draw extensively from.

The slasher movie, as it has been defined and dissected by scholars like Vera Dika (1990), Carol J. Clover (1992) and Cynthia A. Freeland (2000), tells a simple tale. In Clover's words it is "the immensely generative story of a psychokiller who slashes to death a string of mostly female victims, one by one, until he is subdued or killed, usually by the one girl who has survived" (1992, p. 21). The subgenre's

Cold Prey (Fritt vil, *Roar Uthaug 2006)*

Cold Prey *(*Fritt vil, *Roar Uthaug 2006)*

roots are commonly traced to *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974), and ultimately the catalyst of John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978) that ushered in the first cycle of American slasher movies around 1980. Some films are better known than others, ranging from the classic *Friday the 13th* (Sean S. Cunningham, 1980) to the obscure *My Bloody Valentine* (George Mihalka, 1981), but the slasher became a cultural phenomenon in the 1980s, arguably culminating in the imaginative reinvention of Wes Craven's *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984). The question in these movies is never whether something terrible will happen to the characters, but when, where and how something terrible will happen to them (Dika, 1990, p. 54). The building tension being released in the spectacle of the killing is the main attraction. And the weapon is one of cutting, stabbing and, of course, slashing.

Cold Prey is clearly and intentionally a movie in the slasher tradition. Making the first proper Norwegian slasher was the stated aim of the project (Uthaug, 2015). However, director Uthaug also claims that he wanted to imbue the film with something that might be labelled as typically Norwegian, a slippery term to be sure. There is certainly wilderness in American slasher movies, and sublime mountain panoramas in horror films like *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980), but the key to Uthaug's relocation of the slasher is the use of a national pastime and traditional holiday activity as the premise and setting of the horror.

The mountain lodge is a symbol of freedom, relaxation and regeneration in Norway. To disengage from the hustle and bustle of everyday life has often meant

travelling to a cabin or a lodge in the mountains. By turning this symbol into a place of horror, what Clover literally terms "the terrible place" (1992, p. 30), Uthaug continues down the path that Øie pointed out and intensifies the violence and gore. *Cold Prey* opens with a series of television and newspaper headlines about missing tourists through the years, obviously indicating that there might be more than bad luck and bad weather to sudden death in the mountains. As Jannicke and her four friends settle into the cold and empty mountain lodge for the night, they do not realise that they have found the secret hiding place of the non-speaking Mountain Man, the scourge of lost skiers and unsuspecting wildlife enthusiasts.

In a twist on the perceived logic of slaughter in the subgenre, the first victim is the blonde and virginal Ingunn (Viktoria Winge). We learn that she is indeed a virgin, her boyfriend leaves their room in a fit when she refuses to have sex, and the killer emerges out of the shadows of the hotel to stab Ingunn to death with a huge pickaxe. Conventional wisdom, founded in Clover's exceptional work on the subgenre and popularised for the masses in Wes Craven's post-modern slasher hit *Scream* (1996), is that Ingunn would be marked as the one who survives: the final girl. Uthaug himself states that overturning this tradition was his express purpose (Uthaug, 2015). However, the original cycle of American slasher movies around 1980 was not that clear in its depictions. As early as *Friday the 13th* the final girl was frivolous enough to indulge in beer and pot, and the final girl of the sequel, *Friday the 13th Part II* (Steve Miner, 1981), had a steady boyfriend and was clearly sexually active. Throughout the 1980s, there are many examples in the subgenre of virgins dying first or early, final girls or other survivors being much less inhibited, and even of final boys and female killers (Andresen, 2016, p. 97-105). Death in slasher movies can come to all, be they virtuous or not, as in the case of *Cold Prey*.

The morning after the slaughter of poor Ingunn, Jannicke and her remaining friends slowly come to realise that the hotel is not abandoned, that someone is living in the darkness of the basement, and that this someone has been taking the lives of tourists in the desolate area for many years. Indeed, they discover that the hotel has been closed for twenty years since the young son of the owners allegedly disappeared without trace. One by one, the young friends are killed off in gruesome ways, until only Jannicke remains. She must use all her strength and all her wit to escape the nightmare in the mountains.

If *Dark Woods* included certain slasher elements, *Cold Prey* left no questions about its subgenre. Here was a pure slasher film, and Norwegian audiences responded enthusiastically. Uthaug's debut sold 257,001 tickets (Film & Kino, 2013, p. 59) which meant that it was an unqualified commercial success. Even with the Mountain Man apparently dead at the end of the movie, outsmarted and killed by the final girl Jannicke, a sequel was soon in the works.

The last woman standing lives only to face her nightmare again, in Mats Stenberg's *Cold Prey II* (2008). This time the action takes place in the small village of Otta in central Norway, close to the mountain ranges where the first

film was set. Jannicke is brought to the hospital along with the dead bodies of her four friends and their bane, the Mountain Man. Because isolation is of great importance for the staging of the slasher subgenre's conventional stalking and killing (Andresen, 2016, p. 124-127), the hospital is in a state of being shut down, harbouring only two other patients and a staff of three. As Jannicke is fed drugs to subdue her state of shock, the *Cold Prey* franchise takes a leap into the supernatural. The Mountain Man awakes on the autopsy table and proceeds to hunt down and kill all the people he can find. Once again Jannicke has to conjure impossible courage and face down her nemesis, this time while also trying to save the lives of a nurse and a young boy.

Most of the plot unfolds during one terrible night at the desolate hospital where the Mountain Man seems impossibly strong and agile, in addition to easily finding his way around the dark corridors and basements of a place where he has never been. Meanwhile, the local sheriff starts to suspect that the previous film's tragedy might be tied to the unsolved case of the young boy's disappearance from the mountain lodge two decades earlier. He seeks out the retired doctor that delivered the infant boy and hears the chilling story of how the baby was stillborn. After being declared dead for four hours, he started breathing again. The missing boy is the Mountain Man. At this point the movie anchors its psycho-killer in the tradition of Michael Myers (*Halloween* franchise) and Jason Voorhees (*Friday the 13th* franchise). The Mountain Man shifts from being a somewhat realistic murderer in the original *Cold Prey* to becoming a supernatural creature of mythological origin in the sequel.

As the Mountain Man flees back to his remote sanctuary in the snow, the abandoned mountain lodge, Jannicke decides to give pursuit and end the nightmare. Back at the spooky hotel of the first film, she has a showdown with the killer in her attempt to emerge as the Cloverian final girl once again. This time, she would not have succeeded without the last minute help of nurse Camilla (Marthe Snorresdotter Rovik), who has also followed the trail into the mountains. Working together they defeat the Mountain Man once and for all, as it would seem.

Cold Prey II is the biggest commercial horror movie success in the Norwegian cinema to date, recording a box office total of 268,427 tickets sold (Film & Kino, 2013, p. 61). It is obvious that this impressive performance owes a lot to the original movie's popularity, as well as to Ingrid Bolsø Berdal's newfound star status at the time, but Stenberg's slasher sequel is stylish and just as sure of itself as Uthaug's original, even if it does not adhere as strictly to the subgenre's conventions. With the popularity level enjoyed by what was now two *Cold Prey* movies, the producers quickly set about developing a third entry. Perhaps sensibly, they decided not to resurrect the Mountain Man from the dead once again.

A massive PR campaign heralded the release of *Cold Prey III* in 2010. There could be no doubt about what was the most popular horror brand in the Norwegian cinema, and Mikkel Sandemose's feature debut was eagerly anticipated on the

back of the first two films' extraordinary commercial success and generic competence. Norwegian audiences had been primed for horror subgenres ever since the VHS revolution of the 1980s, through the consumption of cable and DVD movies in the 1990s, and into the download and streaming reality of the 2000s (Andresen, 2016, p. 52). By 2010, they had facilitated the breakthrough of *Dark Woods* and welcomed further Norwegian horror movies. Producers could now count on their support, and *Cold Prey* became the first Norwegian horror franchise with the release of the third film in the series.

This time Jannicke is nowhere to be seen. *Cold Prey III* is a prequel. Set about a decade before the original film, the story follows a group of six young people on a summer camping trip into the mountains. They are partially drawn there by the legend of an abandoned mountain lodge with a mysterious and tragic history of disappearances. What they cannot know is that one of the victims of the tragedy is now an adolescent man that lives in hiding in the home of a woodsman named Jon (Nils Johnson). This adolescent is the younger Mountain Man, and he is learning the ropes of hunting and slaying by setting illegal animal traps in the woods. He soon ensnares two of the traveling party of the young friends. Jon makes it clear that the authorities can never know that the Mountain Man has been hiding with him for years, and that all six in the company must be got rid of. Thus, the hunt begins.

Cold Prey III is the least impressive of the trilogy, finding it hard to live up to the entertaining juggling of genre conventions that Uthaug's original nearly exhausted. The drop in ticket sales from the high point of *Cold Prey II* was also significant, down to 152,308 (Film & Kino, 2013, p. 62), which is close to the tickets sales for *Dark Woods* at the beginning of the cycle. In an unintentionally symbolic way Sandemose's film depicts the end of the slasher subgenre in Norway. Hedda (Ida Marie Bakkerud) is positioned as the conventional final girl of Clover's analysis, the one who will witness the death and destruction and finally turn into "the image of an angry woman" and defeat the murderer (Clover, 1992, p. 17). However, since *Cold Prey III* is a prequel, the killer can neither be defeated nor revealed to the authorities. The mechanics of the films conception dictate that he has to pass into the shadows of the mountains without any survivor knowing that he exists. Thus Hedda is killed by the sheriff in a tragic misunderstanding at the film's climax, and the final girl dies.

Less commercially successful slasher films in the Norwegian cinema includes *Manhunt* (Patrik Syversen, 2008) and *Detour* (Severin Eskeland, 2009). The former is notable for being the most brutally violent of any Norwegian film on general cinema release in history. Inspired by the American classics *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and *Deliverance* (John Boorman, 1972), it follows a group of urban friends into the woods of backwater Norway, a kind of mythical space that Gunnar Iversen has labelled as "Texas, Norway" (2009). Here the urban young people are hunted by a vicious band of sadistic men and tortured and slaughtered one by one. Not only is the violence graphically gory, but the general atmosphere of the movie

is cold and dark. There is no hope of escape from this hell of rural Norway, no glimmer of light that would make you believe there was a way to defeat the killers.

Although the original *Dark Woods* is arguably a slasher movie, its sequel *Dark Woods 2: Asylum* (Pål Øie, 2015) opts to explore a different territory of horror. It does return to the area close to the woodland lake of the predecessor, but this time the action is removed to an abandoned asylum that is being prepared for demolition. Øie's most recent feature film is hard to classify by means of subgenres, as it combines certain slasher elements with aspects of what Freeland would term "uncanny horror" (2000: 215). The titular asylum will not go silently into the night, and the dark water that flows through its immense system of pipes brings death to all the characters that make up the demolition team.

Indeed, the main trait of Norwegian slasher movies that might be called particular, especially in comparison with the American counterparts, is the very specific use of nature as a source of horror. Nature has traditionally been a positive force in the Norwegian cinema, but it is no longer so in the slasher movies. The positive symbols are turned to death and destruction, and as it turns out this is also true outside the confines of the slasher subgenre.

The Psychological Horror Film

The obvious difference between the slasher movie and the psychological horror film is that the former is chiefly concerned with the threat of violence and the dreadful opening of the body, while the latter deals with the landscape of the mind and the experience of subjective psychological states. James Kendrick has described the evolution of the horror genre as a constant dynamic between "the visceral and the suggestive, the graphic and the contemplative, the material and the spiritual" (2010, p. 144).

The most important director in this subgenre is Pål Sletaune, who made international waves with his feature film debut in 1997, the comedy drama *Junk Mail*. It won a Cannes Film Festival award, and Sletaune was offered the director position on Dreamworks', then in development, *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999). He declined the offer and continued to make films in his native Norway, crossing over to the horror genre with the aforementioned *Next Door* in 2005. His subsequent feature film would continue to explore the same thematic territory and add a distinctly Gothic sensibility to the modern Norwegian cinema.

The Monitor (2011) tells the story of the troubled Anna (Noomi Rapace) who moves into an anonymous apartment in suburban Oslo with her son Anders (Vetle Qvenild Werring) as part of a relocation program. Anna claims that her ex-husband has attempted to kill Anders but there is a chance that the custody case will be reopened. Two child care workers are tasked with monitoring Anna, while Anna herself monitors her sleeping son with the aid of a baby alarm that she purchases from the shy but friendly Helge (Kristoffer Joner) in a nearby electronics store. Her

state of mind is questioned by the child care workers and things get worse when the baby alarm picks up the sound of a young boy's screams in the night. When Helge tells her that the device is capable of picking up another alarm signal, Anna becomes convinced that something criminal and life-threatening is happening to a child in her apartment block. Meanwhile, Anders befriends a mysterious boy with whom he seems to share a secret sense of the spiritual, as well as a history of being mistreated.

Next Door was set almost entirely within two apartments in downtown Oslo, sites that the audience came to learn were not quite real and not at all objective. They would change from scene to scene and seemed riddled with narrow corridors, impossible angles, and endless amounts of doors and rooms. As the mystery of the film unravelled, it became clear that the protagonist, John (Kristoffer Joner), was not merely taunted by the girls next door and their uncanny knowledge of his life, but also haunted by a terrible deed of his own doing. The walls closed in on him, he was unable to unlock doors to escape, and the corridors became labyrinths. His mind was closed off to the reality that in his own bed, the one he had shared with the love of his life, her body lay dead. The girls that moved in next door were voices in his head and aspects of his image of Ingrid (Anna Bache-Wiig), the girlfriend he murdered.

The Monitor utilises a much more realistic and neutral style. The cold daylight of late winter gives everything in the suburb a grey and dull tone. Buildings become impersonal places, both on the outside and on the inside. Anna is also trapped, but not in an ever changing apartment. Wherever she goes, to Helge's electronics store or Anders's school, she is watched by endless arrays of TV monitors on the wall or hundreds of empty windows on the façade of a building. Eyes that do not really see.

Sletaune generally owes much of his inspiration to a European art film tradition, like the aforementioned works of Roman Polanski, but also to legendary American director Stanley Kubrick, whose horror classic, *The Shining,* the Norwegian artist is not shy to label "the world's best ever film" (Sletaune, 2016). If the morphing apartment of *Next Door* is an echo of Polanski's *Repulsion*, the studied coolness of *The Monitor* is certainly of the Kubrick school. As in *The Shining*, mother and son in *The Monitor* find a temporary sanctuary just outside their prison-like place of residence. In Kubrick's film it is a maze of bushes, while Anna and Anders find a lake in a wood. When Anna keeps investigating the horrible nightly sounds on the baby alarm she is drawn back into the wood and back to the lake, where she becomes sure that she is witnessing the drowning of a young boy.

The Monitor explores the painful situation of a single mother who fights to protect her only son while others do not trust her mental stability. Sletaune's subtle use of elliptical editing underscores the unease of neither Anna nor viewer being certain of whether she is imagining events or not: In one instance the child care

workers are in her apartment to tell her of the reopening of the custody case, and then they are gone in the next shot with Anna still being frozen in the spot where they talked to her. The overall effect of Sletaune's style is one of disorientation. In *Next Door* his manipulation of sets and props created a disorientation of space, while his techniques in *The Monitor* yields a disorientation of time (Andresen, 2016, p. 151, 169-170).

The resolution to the story is somewhat complicated. Anna did not imagine the mistreatment and murder of the kid in her apartment block, a kid that looks disturbingly like Anders' mysterious friend. However, it turns out that Anders has been dead for two years at the time of the story, killed by his own father. It might be tempting to dismiss him as simply being a character in Anna's head, a product of a troubled mind, but the fact that Helge also sees and interacts with Anders' friend makes this argument difficult. Indeed, solving the case of the murder next door seems to have been impossible without clues that Anders has left from beyond the grave. As such, *The Monitor* enters the territory of the supernatural, the ghost story, akin to M. Night Shyamalan's modern classic *The Sixth Sense* (1999). The supernatural ghost story was one of the hallmarks of the early Gothic fiction, while later periods like the New American Gothic tended to focus on the kind of psychological breakdowns and obsessions that can also be said to characterise *The Monitor* (Punter, 1980, p. 1-3). One Norwegian critic in particular, Tonje Skar Reiersen, has indeed emphasised how Sletaune's *Next Door* and *The Monitor* can be compared to Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), respectively. Sletaune's two horror movies are essential entries in the canon of Norwegian horror cinema, but another director has been even more prolific.

Pål Øie started the post-millennium horror cycle in Norway with the slasher film *Dark Woods* in 2003, and he delivered one of the most recent films by making a sequel, *Dark Woods 2: Asylum*. In between these he transitioned to psychological horror with his second feature, *Hidden* (2009). If Polanski and Kubrick were guiding lights for Sletaune's psychological horror movies, David Lynch is the unavoidable reference point for Øie's *Hidden*. The film follows KK (Kristoffer Joner) as he returns to his rural hometown to bury his mother and take over her house as his inheritance. It quickly becomes clear that KK has very bad memories of both the mother and the house. He was apparently kept prisoner in a room in the basement as a little boy, and he believes that his mother kept another boy trapped there after he himself escaped, without anyone knowing.

KK's attempt to burn the old house down is foiled by the sheriff (Cecilie Mosli), and KK checks in at a local hotel. This hotel and a beautiful waterfall nearby are obvious pointers to Lynch's classic TV series *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991), and KK seems to be the sole guest there. The mysterious receptionist Miriam (Karin Park) tells him that the place is under reconstruction, that "everything is chaos, complete chaos".

Babycall *(*The Monitor*, Pål Sletaune, 2011)*

Further mystery ensues when KK discovers that the telephone in his hotel room is automatically connected to a telephone in his mother's house. It is also revealed that an unknown man in a red hooded sweater lurks in the darkness of the house and the shadows of the forest. The man kills two camping teenagers, and KK warns that this must be the man who grew up in his mother's basement. The sheriff, however, disbelieves him, and the town's suspicions are soon directed towards KK himself. The theme of dual identities is strong in *Twin Peaks*, and *Hidden* certainly lends itself to that interpretation. Is there really an unknown man wandering the forest, or is KK a pathological schizophrenic?

Hidden is aesthetically close to the Norwegian slasher films in the sense that Øie triggers scares at a very high rate. The old house in particular is a place of constant markers designed to elicit the audience's startle response. At the same time, it can be inferred that the house is a living entity, a sublime presence that actually possesses KK on his arrival, much like the Overlook Hotel in *The Shining*. The man in the hooded sweater can be taken as a sign that KK never actually left the house, even when he fled the town. Like Jack Torrance (Jack Nicholson) was always the caretaker of the Overlook, KK has always wandered in the shadows of the old house, hidden from the world.

Øie ends the film on a slightly ambiguous note that leaves room for several interpretations. Ambiguity is certainly a hallmark of psychological horror movies, as is the fluid and overlapping transition between different worlds. The narrative of such movies is not meant to be obvious, the story does not necessarily make sense. The subjective mind filters events and recollections for the audience, and

the plot becomes impossible. Sletaune and Øie both have other intentions than the conventional plot in mind, hence the inspiration drawn from Kubrick, Polanski and Lynch. This is also why Øie's subsequent film, *Dark Woods 2: Asylum*, makes less narrative sense than the original. Øie seems more comfortable in the realm of the psychological mystery than in the cold and hard material world of the slasher.

The psychological horror films have somewhat predictably attracted a smaller audience than the more adolescent-oriented slasher movies. The most successful has been the previously discussed *Next Door* with its 113,125 tickets sold. Øie's *Hidden* managed a respectable 83,822, while it is slightly surprising to note that *The Monitor*, directed by an acclaimed Norwegian auteur and starring Noomi Rapace at the height of her fame, ended at just 78,901 tickets (Film & Kino, 2013, p. 61-63). To look for reasons can only lead to speculation, but it might be noted that *The Monitor* got a cooler reception from Norwegian critics than what is common for Sletaune's films (Reiersen, 2011).

In addition to these three high profile pictures, the subgenre of psychological horror films with a general cinema release has also seen an unlikely addition. *Utburd* (Astrid Thorvaldsen, 2014) was the master's degree project of students at the Department of Art and Media Studies at NTNU in Trondheim, but despite being a low budget amateur production it secured national distribution. Such films can probably not hope to reach more than somewhere between 1,000 and 2,000 viewers, even with fairly wide distribution to the biggest cities. Nevertheless, they point towards a current trend in Norwegian horror movie production. Public funding for this type of genre picture seems to have dried up, probably because it is no longer impressive to argue that your movie has the potential to reach 250,000 viewers. Thus, producers like the prosperous company Fantefilm that created the *Cold Prey* series have shifted their sights to projects like Roar Uthaug's disaster movie *The Wave* (2015), which have a much broader audience projection. Fantefilm producer Martin Sundland states that he does not believe they would have been successful in securing funds for *Cold Prey* in the era post 2010 (Sundland 2015). Thus, the output of recent horror films with wide cinema distribution has been in large part independent amateur projects, like *Skjærgården* (Frode Nordås, 2016) and *Huset* (Reinert Kiil, 2016). However, the publicly funded remnants of horror can also be found in more commercially oriented genre hybrids.

On the Edge of the Genre: Horror Hybrids

Two of the Norwegian directors that have made the transition to Hollywood quite successfully are Tommy Wirkola and André Øvredal. Wirkola directed the American movie *Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunters* in 2013 and looks likely to make more, while Øvredal recently made a noteworthy American debut with *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* (2016). While only Øvredal's entry is a clear-cut horror film, both directors got their ticket to Hollywood by making Norwegian movies on the edge of the genre.

Dead Snow *(*Død snø*, Tommy Wirkola, 2009)*

The film that truly got Wirkola noticed abroad was the dark splatter comedy *Dead Snow* (2009), a broadside of unsubtle parody and gallons of gore, which depicts how a group of young friends awaken Nazi zombies from the snows of Arctic Norway. The blending of irreverent humour with torn limbs and crushed heads would surely be familiar to zombie and splatter movie acolytes around the world. *Dead Snow* was the first Norwegian horror film that fused horror elements with comedy and parody. As such it showed that established features of generic horror moviemaking had by then become acceptable and useful in the Norwegian cinema. Its commercial success, 139,797 tickets for what is in fact a quite narrow genre picture (Film & Kino, 2014, p. 55), proved that the audience was competent in reading transnational genres the way they are intended, also when they are seamlessly removed to Norway.

After making his Hollywood debut, Wirkola returned to Norway to film the sequel, *Dead Snow 2*. This time the movie is obviously geared towards an international audience, a consequence of the predecessor's success, and the main language spoken is English. Wirkola assumes, probably correctly, that a Norwegian twist on zombies might resonate beyond his own country's borders. But the madness and snowscapes that made the original unique are lost in the attempt to cross over more clearly to an international audience.

There has been one more zombie movie made in Norway with general cinema distribution: *Dark Souls* (2011) by Mathieu Peteul and Cesar Ducasse. This film is very different from Wirkola's gorefests, and it might deserve a category of its own since it is not a genre hybrid but a serious zombie movie. Oslo is plagued by a mys-

terious assailant that attacks young people and drills a hole in their heads. The victims are not killed, but filled with a black liquid that turns them into apathetic and unspeaking zombies. It turns out that the black liquid was found on the bottom of the North Sea during an oil drilling operation. The message is clear: Finding a country's fortune in oil can come with terrible consequences if the wealth of the sea turns the inhabitants into mindless and soulless drones that are happy to just stare into their computer screens.

Dead Snow *(*Død snø, *Tommy Wirkola, 2009)*

André Øvredal's debut feature film was the 2010 mockumentary and horror comedy *The Troll Hunter*, which managed 279 090 ticket sales on account of its broad entertainment appeal (ibid: 56). It takes its cue from found-footage movies like *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, 1999) and *Cloverfield* (Matt Reeves, 2008) by framing the action as the lost videotapes, or video files, of a group of people that are documenting unbelievable events. In the case of Øvredal's film, the documentary work reveals the biggest state secret in Norwegian history: the actual existence of trolls. Three media production students in western Norway set out to get to the bottom of the mystery of recent bear killings in the area. The suspected poacher is a man named Hans (Otto Jespersen) who travels around the region in a beat-up jeep with a caravan. As the students get closer to Hans's nocturnal activities they come face to face with the fact that Hans is a government troll hunter, charged with keeping Norway's dangerous trolls within their habitats and to kill any and all trolls that break out. These trolls will kill you at sight and only Hans can protect you.

The Troll Hunter was the first time that the trolls of Norwegian myth and fairy tales were portrayed in a live action movie. Horror-related films have offered up another instance of such a first: the debut movie appearance of the mythical creature huldra in Alexander Nordaas's *Thale* (2012). Similarly to the trolls in *The Troll Hunter*, the existence of the huldra in *Thale* is discovered and attempted to be kept secret, this time by paramilitary forces. And also similarly, the movie has received a certain amount of interest from abroad, an interest that probably has to do with the use of authentic Norwegian nature and mythology (Williams, 2012). Both these films have been optioned for American remakes or sequels, although no productions have been the result of the options so far (McNary, 2013).

Troll Hunter (Trolljegeren, *André Øvredal, 2010)*

A current trend sees horror elements combined with the action adventure and thriller genres. *Cold Prey III* director Mikkel Sandemose made a bigger budget adventure movie in 2013, *Ragnarok*. As the title suggests, the story has to do with the Viking Age mythology, particularly the part that deals with the ending of the world. Archeologist Sigurd Svendsen (Pål Sverre Hagen) discovers a connection between relics found in the famous Oseberg Viking ship and the Norse myth of Ragnarok. He suggests that Ragnarok is not a myth, but a tale of true historic events. Sigurd takes his colleague Allan (Nicolai Cleve Broch) and his two young children on what they all think is a treasure hunt in the Arctic no man's land on the border of Norway and Russia. What they discover in the lakes of the north is not

treasure, but the existence of a pre-historic creature of truly mythic proportions. 252,375 tickets were sold for Sandemose's genre hybrid (Film & Kino, 2014, p. 59).

Ragnarok could be described as a Norwegian take on *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg, 1993), while Henrik Martin Dahlsbakken's *Cave* (2016) is a Norwegian thriller that infuses horror elements in a similar but not identical way to *The Descent* (Neil Marshall, 2005). The shift to more commercially viable generic filmmaking that took place in Norway at the start of the millennium has persisted, and an often debated question is whether or not the Norwegian cinema contributes something of its own to these transnational genres.

A Field of Tension: The Characteristics of Norwegian Horror Cinema

The slasher film is the most significant subgenre of Norwegian horror cinema, both in terms of output frequency and ticket sales. The *Cold Prey* series alone is responsible for ticket sales that total 677,736, which is in the range of the biggest Norwegian blockbusters of the era. These three films are also the ones that adhere most carefully to the conventional slasher formula that Clover explains in her 1992 book. *Dark Woods*, *Manhunt* and *Detour* are slight deviations from the subgenre, either by incorporating other subgenres or not being quite as violent as slasher audiences might expect from such films.

Troll Hunter (Trolljegeren, *André Øvredal, 2010)*

The strongest hallmark of Norwegian horror cinema in general is the use of countryside and nature as the source of evil and death, at odds with how nature has traditionally been a positive force of national romanticism in Norwegian films. Christopher Sharrett has written that *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* is an apocalyptic tale, a depiction of the end of civilisation. He considers American horror movies in the 1960s and 1970s as a part of the process of exposing "the myths of Utopia" (Sharrett, 2004, p. 301). It is in the nature of horror stories that they revolve around decay and destruction, and the Norwegian version of the genre is no different. *Dark Woods* and *Cold Prey* reveal a natural Utopia which is only a thin veil over the reality of terrible decay and threats of destruction.

The source of horror in Pål Øie's *Dark Woods* movies is water. Not any kind of water, but what Gaston Bachelard has referred to as the dead water of Edgar Allan Poe's Gothic classics, a water that is like "blood accursed, like blood which bears death" (Bachelard, 1942 [1983]: 59). The wild forest is a place of suffering in many of the Norwegian horror movies, like *Manhunt* and *Hidden*. Likewise, the recreational landscape of the snowy mountain is the terrible site of death in Roar Uthaug's *Cold Prey*. Nature is evil in Norwegian horror. To underline the point, Uthaug creates a scene where the Mountain Man assails one of the unsuspecting young skiers by rising like a grey rock from the white snow, a force of nature and a force of evil in one corporeal form.

Of course, nature is a place of evil in the horror cinema of many countries. What separates Norway from the US or France, for example, is the extent of the

Troll Hunter (Trolljegeren, *André Øvredal, 2010)*

motif's use. Only one of the films in the below chronology of 21 Norwegian horror movies does not apply nature or rural Norway to the story at all, Pål Sletaune's *Next Door*. Even *The Monitor* features a wood and a lake, and the dramatic turning point at the end of the movie's second act sees Anna wading into the lake in an attempt to save what she thinks is a drowning boy.

Genres are clearly transnational. The horror genre is not an American invention, although American cinema has been immeasurably important to its history and development. However, discussions about the commercial situation of the Norwegian cinema has several times ended in practical and political moves that posit conventional genre filmmaking, generally understood as American filmmaking, as the solution to an audience crisis. So, also in the new millennium, in the era of the coming of the Norwegian horror cinema.

Thus, Norway's horror productions exist in a field of tension between transnational genre conventions and the specificity of the Norwegian cinema. This field is where the Norwegian horror film has carved out its existence as both a commercial force and an artistic avenue. The artistic aspect is obvious in the filmmaking ambitions of Pål Sletaune and Pål Øie, while the commercial appeal of the Norwegian horror genre is detectable not only by box office numbers but also by how some of its directors have been invited to Hollywood. As previously mentioned, Tommy Wirkola and André Øvredal have made their debuts in American cinema, while *Manhunt* director Patrik Syversen was hired for the American low budget project *Prowl* (2010). Roar Uthaug is the next of the bunch to transition, directing the high profile *Tomb Raider* reboot which is set for release in 2018. Uthaug concedes that the success of his most recent film, *The Wave*, opened the door for him for this project, but he also remembers that the first call he ever took from an agent in Hollywood was right after the teaser trailer to his debut *Cold Prey* had first been aired (Uthaug, 2015).

In other words, American producers have an eye open for directors that can be trusted with genre pictures, and several Norwegian directors have proven that they are the ones to put trust in by making Norwegian horror movies. These movies have often had a strong domestic appeal, and sometimes crossed over to other countries. Established genres tend to travel easily, but the Norwegian horror cinema is not merely a copy of American genre patterns. The most overwhelming characteristic of the body of films below is the propensity with which they draw terrifying pictures of a deadly wilderness, a national apocalypse that lies waiting in every forest, every lake, and every abandoned mountain lodge.

Chronology of the Norwegian horror cinema, as defined in the author's Ph.D. thesis (Andresen 2016) and complete at the time of writing

Lake of the Dead (Kåre Bergstrøm, 1958)

Dark Woods (Pål Øie, 2003)

Next Door (Pål Sletaune, 2005)

Cold Prey (Roar Uthaug, 2006)

Manhunt (Patrik Syversen, 2008)

Cold Prey II (Mats Stenberg, 2008)

Dead Snow (Tommy Wirkola, 2009)

Hidden (Pål Øie, 2009)

Detour (Severin Eskeland, 2009)

Cold Prey III (Mikkel Sandemose, 2010)

The Troll Hunter (André Øvredal, 2010)

Dark Souls (Mathieu Peteul and Cesar Ducasse, 2011)

The Monitor (Pål Sletaune, 2011)

Thale (Aleksander Nordaas, 2012)

Ragnarok (Mikkel Sandemose, 2013)

Dead Snow 2 (Tommy Wirkola, 2014)

Utburd (Astrid Thorvaldsen, 2014)

Dark Woods 2: Asylum (Pål Øie, 2015)

Skjærgården (Frode Nordås, 2016)

Huset (Reinert Kiil, 2016)

Cave (Henrik Martin Dahlsbakken, 2016)

Inclusion in this discussion presupposes that the movie had a fairly general cinema release in Norway. There are other titles that could be discussed, which have had a more limited cinema release or have been distributed through film festivals, optical media and streaming.

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Deadly Wilderness: Norwegian Horror Cinema in the New Millennium

Nordic horror is a relatively rare and uneven occurrence. Norway had only one horror movie prior to 2000, but since then things have changed. Of all the Nordic countries it is in Norway that the horror genre has become a cinematic staple. Why this happened at this time and not before is discussed in the article, and the subgenres of horror most prominent in Norwegian horror are put in the context of their transnational origins and development. Most importantly, do Norwegian horror movies offer something genuinely unique to the genre?