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Norwegian Cinema at War, 1940-1945

Four-year PhD project (2013-2017) by Thomas V.H. Hagen, as part of the program “Religion, ethics, history and society” at the Faculty of Humanities and Education, University of Agder.

Short project description

From 1940 to 1945 Nazi oppressors attempted to turn Norway, like other “Germanic” societies in Europe (Netherlands, Flanders in Belgium and partly Denmark), into a Nazi society after German model. Brutal methods to crush political, cultural and social diversity was a key part of the Nazi occupation policy in Norway. The challenges that the attempts to nazify the Norwegian civil society (schools, the Church, sports, family and cultural life) created were handled differently by individuals and groups in various parts of society, and the picture changed throughout the occupation years. Uniformity of the state and civil society triggered various forms of, and levels of, resistance and collaboration. One concept is central here, the German *Gleichschaltung*. The term originated in 1933 and was used for the process that would create Nazi societies first in Germany, then in all German-controlled areas. “Ensretting” and “nyordning” were concepts that were related to *Gleichschaltung* and used actively by Norwegian National Socialists, even before 1940. One purpose of this PhD dissertation is to examine how this process developed within the field of cinema in Norway during Nazi occupation.

Research questions

The theme of my monographic dissertation is cinema as an arena for different types of conflicts between Norwegian and German actors during WWII. The main question is this: What were the aims of German and Norwegian cinema politics in Norway 1940-1945, how were these policies implemented and what were the consequences and results?

Key research questions are:

- How was Norwegian cinema reorganized (“nyordnet”) and what were the main drivers?
- What strategies and forms of resistance and collaboration did the audience adopt?
- How did cinema owners and the cinema staff respond?
- Which German institutions had interest in influencing Norwegian cinema policy?
- What was the meaning and significance of the cinema as space?
- Did the cinema industry become nazified?
- Who were the cinema audience and what did they see – and did not see?
- Was there such a thing as a coherent state politics of cinema during the German occupation?

The dissertation should provide new knowledge and greater understanding of both resistance and collaboration as phenomena. The project aims to put the significance of cinema as social, political, economic and cultural institution into a larger context. Furthermore, I assume that a study of people's attitudes towards cinema during World War II will make it possible to say something about certain aspects of what it means to live in an occupied society and under totalitarian rule in general.

Previous research

In general, there has been more research on movies than on movie theaters. The primary interest of film scholars has always been production and distribution, not exhibition itself. This applies to Norway as other countries, and the occupation period is no exception. When it comes to cinema as a fulcrum for various types of conflict during World War II in Norway, there is therefore little to build on. It must however be noted that international perspectives on Third Reich film imperialism has been the subject of increasing attention in recent years, following the lines of the milestone anthology *Cinema and the Swastika* from 2007.¹ This book contains articles from 19 countries with different experiences from the period 1933–1945. The main question this book deals with, is whether Nazi Germany succeeded in trying to influence, infiltrate or acquire film markets in occupied, interconnected and neutral countries. Most of the articles in the book are oriented towards political and economic conditions, and are therefore more concerned with production and distribution than exhibition and reception. However, the editors point out that it would be of great value to gain knowledge of how audiences across Europe (and beyond) reacted to the new cinema programmes. One example: In France, the film poster for the German color film *Münchhausen* (1943) was smeared with swastika and the message: “Film boche, n'allez pas” (“German film, don’t go”).

Another manifestation of the same interest in what happened to the film markets just before and during World War II, is a special issue on Scandinavian cinema 1940-1945 in the *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema* in 2012.² Danish film historian Lars-Martin Sørensen published his monograph on Danish film under Nazism in 2014.³ Here there are some relevant perspectives, even though the focus here too is primarily film, not cinema. The reference work on film and cinema for Norway is Sigurd Evensmo’s book from 1967, in which the occupation period is treated in a separate chapter.⁴ His conclusions have had immense influence on later depictions of this period in Norwegian film and cinema history. One of his main conclusions is that cinema never became a part of the so-called “cultural front”.

Theory

Few historians have explicitly discussed what resistance is. In my dissertation I will approach the concept of resistance based on a theory developed by anthropologist James C. Scott. In his book *Weapons of the weak* (1985) Scott develops an understanding of the phenomenon “everyday resistance”.⁵ The perspective is expanded in the next book, *Domination and the arts of resistance* (1990).⁶ According to Scott resistance may be legal or illegal. Lawful resistance is forms of resistance that the ruling accept as legitimately performed. Still, the predominant part of resistance acts in conflict societies will be illegal. This is partly because the right to proffer criticism is severely limited, and partly because an occupied population or a suppressed part of the population sees greater opportunities to influence political processes through local, illegal resistance than through legitimate resistance. The illegal resistance can be overt or covert. The open resistance typically takes the form of stubbornness against

¹ R.Vande Winkel and D. Welch (eds.), *Cinema and the Swastika: the international expansion of Third Reich cinema*, Basingstoke 2007.

² *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema* 2 (3), 2012.

³ L.-M. Sørensen, *Dansk film under nazismen*, 2014.

⁴ S. Evensmo, *Det store tivoli: film og kino i Norge*, new ed., Oslo 1992.

⁵ J.C. Scott, *Weapons of the weak: everyday forms of peasant resistance*, New Haven and London 1985.

⁶ J.C. Scott, *Domination and the arts of resistance: hidden transcripts*, New Haven and London 1990.

decrees, rules and laws, and is often organized. Organized actions can be described as an expression of sabotage strategies. Of particular importance is the hidden resistance, which takes the form of an “everyday resistance”. Everyday resistance is a strategy to reduce the disadvantages of oppression or foreign domination, rather than a strategy to overthrow the system or regime. Everyday resistance has the advantage, suggests Scott, that it requires little organization. But apparently individual acts of resistance is often performed on the basis of consensus. To describe such a common pre-understanding among the oppressed, Scott uses the term “hidden transcript”. This hidden conversation is a discourse that eludes the control of the authorities. The hidden conversation contains much symbolic resistance as slander and character assassination to undermine the authority of dignitaries. The oppressed perceive everyday resistance as fair and legitimate.

The counterpart to the hidden conversation is the open conversation (“public transcript”), which is a common public arena for the dominant and the oppressed. What I find particularly interesting to explore in my thesis is how various oppressed groups’ hidden transcripts on the one hand, and various dominant groups’ hidden transcripts on the other, were related both to each other and to the public, open conversation.

Scott has, as far as I know, never occupied himself with the theme World War II. *Weapons of the weak* was based on field studies of peasant resistance in the Malaysian countryside in the late 1970s. In *Domination and the arts of resistance*, he draws heavily on knowledge of domination and oppression from various historical periods and regions of the world, such as the caste system in India and slavery in North America. When I still choose to engage his theory of resistance in my thesis, it has to do with the importance of looking at forms of resistance during World War II as part of a larger phenomenon. Whether the concepts have been developed in the meeting with very different societies and periods, is of less importance. Rather, it may be an advantage, because one can more easily see that one’s own findings can be correlated with historical processes elsewhere at other times. Scott’s theory is thus, firstly, selected for its general character. Secondly, I assume that Scott’s notion of everyday resistance in particular, can be used to understand aspects of the resistance against the German-Norwegian occupation regime which until now has been little explored.

Source material and dissertation outline

The source material I will exploit to answer the research questions are wide-ranging. By presenting the primary source material at the same time as I present the structure of the thesis, it should be clear how the theoretical framework is thought in relation to the thesis as a whole and its parts.

An introduction will present the dissertation, the historical context, problem and research questions, theory, research status and thesis structure. **Part 1: Cinema dark, cinema lights** consists of chapters 1 and 2. In Chapter 1 I will provide an overview of certain basic aspects of film and cinema conditions in Norway in the period. First, I look at the development of the Norwegian municipal cinema system. Then I turn to discuss what a cinema really was and how a cinema programme was like at the time. Finally, I shall describe the situation in 1940 when the war came to Norway. Here, I will mainly base the presentation on earlier research and literature on film and cinema in Norway. In Chapter 2 I will discuss what kind of new knowledge and insights my dissertation on cinema in Norway during World War II can illuminate in a larger context. First, I will address the concepts of culture policy, media policy and cinema policy. Then I set out to explain how cinema can be seen as a venue for various

types of conflict, confrontation lines and “fronts”. Finally, I will show how the cinema lights, metaphorically, can be used to provide greater understanding of the phenomenon of resistance.

Part 2: Cinema as weapon consists of chapters 3-8. In Chapter 3 I shall examine the open conversation about the new cinema politics carried out by the Norwegian Nasjonal Samling (NS) regime. The primary source is *Norsk Kinoblad*, a magazine distributed by the National Film Directorate to all cinema owners and film companies. It contains all relevant laws, announcements and guidelines that were given in the area of film and cinema during WWII.

In Chapter 4 the Norwegian rulers’ hidden conversation about the new cinema politics is in focus. The research questions are: Were there conflicting interests within the NS state? Did Norwegian authorities have a different agenda than German rulers in Norway? The primary source to say something about this, is the archive of the Film Directorate, which was established on 1 January 1941 to implement the *Neuordnung* of film and cinema in Norway. Another interesting archive is that of the Norwegian state police (Stapo). Also, I will enrich the analysis by bringing in memoirs written after the war by key figures within the NS state, such as film director Leif Sinding and film director and NS propagandist Walter Fyrst. The next chapter, Chapter 5, will examine the German rulers’ hidden conversation about the new cinema politics in occupied Norway. The research questions are: Which German institutions, organizations and individuals had interest in influencing cinema policy in Norway? And what was most important: military strategy, ideology, economics – or something else? To be sure, “Germans” were obviously not one actor, but several. In order to shed light on these questions, I will examine the archive of the German Reichskommissariat and *Meldungen aus Norwegen*, secret German intelligence messages sent from Oslo to Berlin.

Chapters 6-8 will examine how the oppressed population reacted against the new cinema politics. In Chapter 6 I will analyze slogans and devices (“paroler”) about cinema strike which is to be found in the illegal press. I will systematically study the content of cinema messages in about 40 leading illegal newspapers. This material is to be found at the National Library in Oslo. The people behind the illegal newspapers wanted to reach the civilian population in occupied Norway. However, it could also have been a desire to be seen and noticed by the German and Norwegian oppressors. Whether the illegal newspapers thus represented a kind of public sphere, and not a “hidden transcript” after all, will be discussed. In Chapter 7 I am interested in capturing the strategies and forms of resistance that were expressed among the cinema-going public, typically in the form of demonstrations in the movie theaters. The sources that will be examined are the archive of the National Association of Municipal Cinemas (Kommunale kinematografers landsforbund, KKL), illegal newspapers and German intelligence messages. The counterpart to the slogans about cinema strike in the secret press – which of course only existed in writing – is logically the actual strike and boycott actions that took place. This is what I set out to explore in Chapter 8.

Part 3: At the movies consists of chapters 9-12. The conversation about the new cinema politics within the cinema industry itself, was it hidden or public? This should be examined in Chapter 9, which deals with cinema as agency. The research questions are: What strategies and forms of resistance and collaboration emerged among cinema owners and the cinema staff? And were the cinemas nazified? Hopefully I will be able to answer these questions by exploiting the archives of KKL and the Film Directorate.

What significance did the cinemas have as *space* during the occupation? This is the question

raised in the more philosophical Chapter 10. This text will be written at the end of the project period, because it is supposed to summarize findings in previous chapters, and put these into a wider context. Chapters 11 and 12 should answer, respectively, who the cinema audience were and what they actually got to see – and didn't see – at the movies from 1940 to 1945.

One of the goals of this thesis is to explore how fruitful James C. Scott's theory of everyday resistance in conflict societies will be applied to a context in which power relations are defined by an occupation within the framework of a total war. This will be discussed as part of the conclusive chapter. Finally, I will also discuss whether it makes sense to talk about a unified, coherent state cinema politics in Norway during WWII, or if it all fell apart in special interests.

The dissertation will be provided with additional material, including cinema statistics for the period 1940-1945.

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