

Norwave: Norwegian Cinema 1997-2006

ELLEN REES

ABSTRACT: This article will examine Norwegian cinema from 1997 to 2006, a period marked by a growing awareness of both the international film market and the demands of an increasingly sophisticated domestic market on the part of Norwegian filmmakers. This period has come to be known as “Norwave.” It will be argued that the films of the Norwave attempt a two-fold task—on the one hand they seek to gain international acclaim of the kind associated with the likes of the Danish Dogma 95 directors and Finnish director Aki Kaurismäki, while on the other hand they attempt to create a public forum for the working out of specific issues in contemporary Norwegian identity and ideology. By analyzing eight of the most successful Norwegian films from the decade, the study maps out this tension between these global and local aspirations.

RÉSUMÉ: Cet article se penche sur le cinéma Norvégien de 1997 à 2006, une période marquée par un souci grandissant des cinéastes norvégiens face au marché international du film et aux demandes d'un marché intérieur de plus en plus sophistiqué: une période mieux connue sous le nom de « Norwave ». Il sera soutenu que les films de cette vague entreprennent une double tâche: celle de gagner une reconnaissance internationale semblable à celle associée au Dogma 95 danois et au réalisateur finlandais Aki Kaurismäki, tout en créant un forum public afin de résoudre des questions spécifiques de l'identité et de l'idéologie norvégienne. En analysant huit des plus grands films norvégiens à succès de la décennie, cette étude illustre cette tension entre les identités locales et globales.

Ellen Rees Ph.D. is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Oslo's Department of Linguistics and Nordic Studies.

In 1997 *Variety* magazine announced a new country to watch in the constant quest for the latest trend in world cinema, Norway (Gaydos 24). Despite its proximity to Denmark and Sweden, both revered centres of international art cinema, Norway has always languished in the backwaters, to a large extent producing only low- to medium-quality films for an unenthusiastic domestic audience. Norway's sole international hit from the contemporary era prior to the 1990s, Nils Gaup's Academy Award-nominated *Ofelas* [*Pathfinder*] (1987), represented minority Sámi cultural identity more than mainstream Norwegian society, and thus has never really been embraced in Norway as a specifically Norwegian film.¹ It was the appearance of Pål Sletaune's *Budbringeren* [*Junk Mail*] and Erik Skjoldbjærg's *Insomnia* at Cannes in 1997 that marked the Norwegian arrival on the international scene and the introduction of the term "Norwave." This article will examine the Norwave phenomenon, a period marked by a growing awareness of both the international film market and the demands of an increasingly sophisticated domestic market on the part of Norwegian filmmakers.

Film scholar Andrew Nestingen has coined the term "medium concept" to describe the hybridization of mainstream cinematic traditions (genre film) with international art cinema that he views as a widespread phenomenon in contemporary Scandinavian cinema. According to Nestingen, medium-concept films are

... mainstream, narrative films that are relatively straightforward to market and that at the same time engage the aesthetic and cultural political registers of the art film tradition... Medium-concept can be understood as filmmaking that involves the adaptation of genre models and art-film aesthetics; an engagement with political debates, lending the films cultural significance; and that integrates with these elements a marketing strategy designed to reach a specific audience.
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In the Norwegian films that I will discuss below, this hybridization is essential in marketing them simultaneously to two quite different audiences, one global the other local.

According to film scholar Ove Solum, a successful shift in Norwegian film production toward increasing internationalization and the ability to attract larger domestic audiences occurred in the mid-1980s (189). With hindsight, however, that period has less significance than it appeared to from the perspective of Solum writing in 1997, and in fact the decade following his article marks the true shift, with a really significant jump occurring first in 2003.² Gunnar Iversen asserts that the creation of a New Norwegian Film Policy in 2001 was a major factor in the successes of recent years (2005 263). In the years between the modest cinematic

reorientation of the late 1980s that Solum describes and the rise of Norwave phenomenon starting in 1997, Norwegians became increasingly aware of globalization as a cultural phenomenon that affected them personally, and as citizens of a small but wealthy nation they participated in a collective attempt to recast Norway as an international powerhouse, not militarily or economically, but rather culturally and morally. In her 1992 New Year's speech to the nation of Norway, Labor Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland famously launched a new slogan for the 1990s: "Det er typisk norsk å være god" [It is typically Norwegian to be good] (Brundtland).³ Based on the broader context of the speech, it is clear that Brundtland intended the word "good" be understood in both of its most common connotations: "good" in the sense of being kind and ethical, but also "good" in the sense of demonstrating success and mastery. Coming as it did at the end of the cold war and the rise of globalization, the speech lays out Brundtland's surprisingly ambitious political and economic vision for Norway's future on the international stage.

In Norway as in the rest of the Nordic countries, children's movies remained the top-grossing domestically produced films throughout the 1990s. Only one film, Petter Næss's *Elling* (2001), has ever surpassed the gross earnings of the children's classic, Ivo Caprino's *Flåklypa Grand Prix* [*Pinchcliffe Grand Prix*] (1975), and the ubiquitous "Olsenband" series regularly draw larger audiences than nearly all films produced in Norway for adult audiences. There was, however, a shift in the attitudes of Norwegian adult film audiences during the 1990s toward an increasing desire for culturally relevant cinema produced in Norwegian. Audiences rewarded filmmakers who rejected ponderous and non-entertaining European art cinema conventions and embraced certain (but not all) Hollywood genre conventions. Most of all, audiences demanded that films exhibit a sophisticated construction of Norwegian identity in the face of global entertainment culture. At the same time, the exposure that the Danish Dogma 95 movement brought to what Mette Hjort calls "small nation" cinema primed international audiences beyond the art house and festival circuit to look to other small nations for cinematic innovations, opening the door for Norwegian directors.

By analyzing eight of the most successful Norwegian films from the decade between 1997 and 2006 I will attempt to map out this tension between local and global identities. Although the 153 films produced in the decade from 1997 to 2006 vary widely in quality, genre, and content, certain subsets of them can be grouped according to similarities that give insight into the Norwegian film industry's attempt to realign itself and meet the needs of an increasingly demanding domestic audience as well as aim for success internationally.⁴ Notably, these films do not follow the formula for international success based on either costume dramas or coming-of-age films exploited by other Nordic directors, but rather reflect the influence of American independent filmmaking that Trevor G. Elkington argues has been a force in renewing Nordic cinema (44). The

breakthrough for Norway occurred with two neo-noir films. These are followed by concerted efforts to master the “date movie” genre, as well as two outstandingly successful attempts to capitalize on the tradition of quirkiness associated with European art cinema, merging it with the lessons learned from “feel-good” Hollywood cinema. I will conclude this analysis with a discussion of two of the most critically acclaimed films from the banner year of 2006 that rework many of the issues raised in the earlier films.

Norwegian Noir

Unexpectedly, Pål Sletaune’s *Budbringeren* [*Junk Mail*] and Erik Skjoldbjærg’s *Insomnia* generated interest at the 1997 Cannes film festival (*Budbringeren* won the Mercedes-Benz award), and were seen as signaling a new direction in Norwegian cinema. In fact, they stand out as anomalous, but nonetheless interesting and important contemporary experiments with black comedy and film noir respectively.⁵

What links *Budbringeren* and *Insomnia* thematically is their focus on morally lax protagonists who easily overstep the rules in their respective professions as mail carrier and homicide detective. Further, Audun Engelstad writes: “Begge filmene kan betegnes som postmoderne i måten de anvender og utfordrer sjangerkonvensjoner på” [Both the films can be described as postmodern in the way they utilize and challenge genre conventions] (n.p.). Yet even more important is the conscious effort in both films to represent Norwegian society in a way that fits mainstream cinematic conventions concerning crime and violence. *Budbringeren* and *Insomnia* problematize the very aspects of Norwegian society that are most often praised by outsiders, namely its peacefulness, proximity to nature, and cleanliness.

One of the most strikingly comic aspects of *Budbringeren* is how little the squalid setting of the film and the down-at-heel characters resemble the realities of life in wealthy and upwardly mobile Oslo in the late 1990s. This tension between familiar and strange is entirely intentional. Sletaune and his collaborator on the screenplay, Jonny Halberg, state that they were aiming for “filmens parallellunivers, hvor lovene er både sære og kjente” [the parallel universe of film where laws are both strange and familiar] (143), and further that they wanted to “finne en virkelighet som bare kunne eksistere på lerretet, men som ikke skulle drukne i søkte surrealistiske brudd og påfunn” [find a reality that could only exist on the screen, but that wouldn’t drown in far-fetched surrealist ruptures and invention] (145). By cobbling together disparate locations they were able to create a filmic Oslo that is both concretely identifiable on the macro-level of familiar streets or buildings, yet foreign and fragmented on the micro-level to any viewer who knows the city well: the film looks like Oslo, but in its squalor it certainly

does not feel like Oslo. For viewers unfamiliar with the massive gentrification of eastern Oslo, where *Budbringeren* is set, the filth and dilapidation lose this layer of irony. This refashioning of the urban space of Oslo into a gritty borderland where people living on the fringe can transgress stands in direct contrast to Norway's status as a country with one of the world's highest standards of living and lowest crime rates, yet it is necessary in order to play out the conventions of a black comedy that revolves around petty criminality.

It is important to note that *Budbringeren* is in no way intended as a hard-hitting social realist film; it is pure black comedy. The society that the film depicts does not reflect the social-economic realities of life in Oslo accurately, not least because ethnic minorities are almost entirely erased from the film. Notably there is only one ethnic "other" in Sletaune's film, a character identified only as "a Pole" (Jan Zaborowski). The fact that immigrants are also typically well represented in government jobs such as the postal service is a further indication that Sletaune erases questions of diversity, ethnicity, and assimilation. For anyone familiar with Oslo, the absence of Pakistanis or Turks from the setting is jarring, once one stops to reflect over it. Sletaune performs a kind of sleight of hand with *Budbringeren*, then, connecting the film to global media culture thematically and visually, but erasing the living proof of the impact of globalization that has changed the face of Oslo over the past forty years, namely the voices and bodies of the immigrants and their descendents who today make up approximately a quarter of Oslo's population, according to figures from Statistics Norway.

Skjoldbjærg set out to make what he calls a "film blanc"—that is to say a film that combines the psychological darkness of classic Hollywood film noir with the uncannily bright atmosphere of the arctic summer and its unrelenting daylight. Skjoldbjærg, who grew up in Tromsø where the film is set, consciously resists exoticizing the northern Norwegian landscape. In a statement published on actor Stellan Skarsgård's website, Skjoldbjærg comments:

So many crews had used the landscape in an epic manner, but I had never experienced that when growing up, so I wanted to give the film a sparse, unspectacular look. We tried not to build classical compositions. Instead we wanted the eye to wander, to create a certain discomfort, almost exasperation at the impenetrability of the enigma.
(*Insomnia*, n.p.)

Like Sletaune, Skjoldbjærg is concerned with defamiliarizing the familiar through his presentation of filmic space. Through shots set up at odd angles, Skjoldbjærg emphasizes the uneven terrain of the town and metaphorically the detective's irregular position outside the normal order of things, as well as his voyeurism. Such sequences include the protagonist's pursuit of the murderer (who sits aboard a bus) on foot through the streets of Tromsø, the views from a rooftop parking

space into the murderer's apartment, and shots taken through the rotting floorboards and walls of a wharf-side building.

Skjoldbjærg increases the visual disorientation of the film through editing at certain key points, such as the shooting incident, by employing a rapid series of jump cuts. These make it extremely difficult to follow the protagonist as he runs in pursuit of the suspect through the fog and boulders along the shore. One of the most striking sequences occurs when the protagonist stumbles and falls among the rocks during the pursuit of the suspect: when he falls the camera pans 360 degrees, but the pan is not continuous. The sutures are only visible in a frame-by-frame examination, but when viewed at regular speed they function as subliminal disruptions that both mimic the character's visual disorientation and make it impossible for the viewer to ascertain a definitive truth in the sequence of events that the ostensibly objective camera attempts to capture.

The film cleverly introduces handgun violence as a theme through the figure of the conspicuously Swedish protagonist, Jonas Engström (Stellan Skarsgård), a notorious Swedish homicide detective who has taken a job in Norway in order to escape from his troubled past in Sweden.⁶ This national distinction is key both to the plot of the mystery and to the construction of Norwegian cinematic identity, since Swedish police officers are armed while Norwegian police officers are not (Knutsson and Strype 429). Generations of Norwegian film audiences have grown up with the violence of Hollywood cinema, and although critiques of American gun culture are common in Norway, in some central way the presumed impossibility of logically motivated gun violence in Norwegian cinema may have been experienced as a lack by Norwegian audiences.

This is of course not to say that Norwegian citizens in general longed for an increase in criminality and weapons in their lives, but rather that Norwegians—like everyone else—have come to see gun violence as a central component of cinema as entertainment. The insertion of a specifically Swedish detective into *Insomnia* creates a believable opening for gun violence within the domestic territory of Norway and thus exploits a previously unexploited market demand. Yet *Insomnia* does not present the same raw violence and criminal underworld explicitly connected to the immigrant population represented in Danish director Nicolas Winding Refn's *Pusher* (1996) and *Bleeder* (1999), or later Norwegian films focusing on the relatively new phenomenon of ethnic gang violence in Oslo, such as *Izzat* (Ulrik Imtiaz Rølfsen, 2005) and *Uro* (Stefan Faldbakken, 2006).⁷

In Skjoldbjærg's film Engström's gun is a fetish object that moreover is explicitly marked as Swedish (and thus equally clearly not Norwegian). Engström himself is viewed by his Norwegian colleagues as far more dangerous and morally ambiguous than they are. This corresponds to a stereotypical Norwegian self-perception as a naive and harmless group of people. The notion of the Swede as a violent, dangerous and morally ambiguous threat to the fabric of society, however, is almost laughable when one considers the far more prevalent

constructs of Swedish identity revolving around the notion of “lagom” [balance, virtue in moderation] and the careful calculus that balances the individual and society in Swedish culture (Berggren and Trägårdh 32). Despite the mutual intelligibility of the Swedish and Norwegian languages, there are repeated references to the incomprehensibility of Engström’s language: his colleague Erik Vik (Sverre Anker Ousdal) jokingly confides to a murder suspect that he does not understand a word of what Engström says, and later the young informant Frøya (Marianne O. Ulrichsen) tells him that none of her classmates have understood him. Engström makes a few half-hearted attempts to translate his words into Norwegian, but for the most part his Swedish identity stays intact through unadulterated Swedish language, as well as through his silence and secretiveness. By extension, Engström’s Swedish gun remains a cultural marker as well as a liability, and Skjoldbjærg inserts a number of takes in which Engström is depicted deliberately concealing his weapon from view, even before he accidentally shoots and kills his colleague.

The other murder weapon, the handgun of crime writer Jon Holt (Bjørn Floberg), is presented as clearly illegal within the context of the film: Holt tells Engström “Det har aldri vært registrert noen våpen på meg” [There has never been any weapon registered in my name]. Norway has strict gun laws, and the hapless local police officer Arne Zachariassen (Kristian Figenschow) responds to Engström’s remorse over letting the unarmed officer pursue the murder suspect by saying “Fyren var jo bevæpnet. Kjem som skulle ane det?” [The guy was armed. Who could have known that?]. Their illicit weapons create a direct parallel between Engström and Holt. That the murderer turns out to be a writer of crime fiction adds a metafictional layer to the film, which is further complicated by the fact that one of Norway’s best-selling contemporary crime writers is named Anne Holt. In making a mystery writer the murderer, Skjoldbjærg taps into Scandinavia’s current reputation as an internationally acclaimed source for what has been called existential crime fiction, and to the popularity of crime fiction as entertainment in general.

The Metafilmic Date Movie

The early 2000s saw a move toward romantic comedy from the perspective of young, misfit male characters struggling against adult responsibility and expectations. These young men seek and find all-forgiving, laid-back young female partners who make few if any emotional demands on them, and their intense male friendships are tested but ultimately unharmed by the new romantic attachments. Unlike the classic blockbuster binary, in which violent “action films” are marketed to male audiences and romantic “chick flicks” are marketed to female audiences, these “date movies” attempt literally and figuratively to bridge

the gender gap, addressing themselves to men as well as women. The Norwegian wave of “date movies” might be said to have been launched by Pål Jackmann’s *Detektor* (2000) and reached its pinnacle with Morten Tyldum’s *Buddy* (2003). Others include Jens Lien’s *Jonny Vang* and Magnus Martens’s *United*, both also from 2003. Yet *Buddy* and *Detektor* [Detector] stand out from the rest of these date movies because they implement an element of mediated self-reflection that engages with broader issues at stake in global media culture.

Detektor focuses on the misadventures of two good friends, the psychologist Daniel Jor (Mads Ousdal) and the local early morning radio host Ronny, who is played by Harald Eia, one of Norway’s most popular comedians. In *Detektor* the plot is doubly mediated through Ronny’s radio show and Daniel’s role as a psychologist. In his sessions with the delinquent Jørgen (Kristoffer Joner), Daniel’s role as a therapist is reversed, and Ronny reveals himself to be obsessed with documenting himself through the medium of his morning show on “Radio Illegal.”

The *Detektor* screenplay was written by novelist Erlend Loe, who is one of Norway’s most popular fiction writers, as well as an accomplished screenwriter.⁸ Loe co-founded the collective Screenwriters Oslo in 1997.⁹ A group of roughly seven writers including Loe still participates in the collective, which has changed its name to RoMa (Rosenborggata Manus).¹⁰ In novels such as *Naiv. Super* [Naive, Super] (1996) and *L* (1999), Loe demonstrates an acute awareness of the issues at stake in late modernity and global media culture. He is tapped into the changes in identity construction and cultural practice brought about by these cultural shifts like no other Norwegian writer. Yet he has been accused of superficiality and naïveté throughout his career, particularly regarding his choice of banal themes, his apparent lack of political engagement, and his purposefully unsophisticated prose style.

Beyond his work with Screenwriters Oslo, Loe has played a crucial role in the development of the “Norwave” through his work as a consultant for the state-sponsored Norwegian Film Fund from 2003 through 2005.

Although popular with the public, *Detektor* did not achieve critical acclaim. In an article criticizing what he sees as the recent trend in Norwegian cinema toward sketches rather than narratives as the structural model for film making, Søren Birkvad writes

Jeg tviler på om filmer som *Mongoland* og *Detektor* har overlevd (sam)tidens tann, men omkring 2000 visste disse filmene i hver fall hva de som film ikke ville, nemlig fortelle historier. Dette å ville unngå Det store narrativ og i stedet basere seg på den flegmatisk løse, ironisk uforpliktende sketsjkarakteren var for kule amatørerne som Erlend Loe og Arild Østin Ommundsen det samme som å konfrontere folkefienden: den helnorske patos, som setter problemer under debatt.

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[I doubt that films like *Mongoland* and *Detektor* have survived the ravages of (recent) time, but around the year 2000, these films knew at least what they as films didn't want to do, namely to tell stories. This desire to avoid The Grand Narrative and instead ground oneself in the phlegmatically loose, ironically noncommittal characteristics of the sketch was, for cool amateurs like Erlend Loe and Aril Østin Ommundsen, the same thing as confronting the enemy of the people: the 100% Norwegian pathos that sets up problems for debate.]

Setting aside the aspersions cast regarding Loe's credentials (Loe studied screenwriting at the The Danish Film School from 1994 to 1996), Birkvad here misses the point that *Detektor* tries to make regarding the nature of narrative in the postmodern era: with its concentration on forms of narrative the film is in fact a critique of the fallacy of the very notion of the grand narrative.

Nearly all the multiple strands of stories in *Detektor* turn out to be based on lies and deceit, or simply the failure and fear of communication: we see this in Daniel's attempts to help patients through psychoanalysis, Ronny's attempts to connect with people through his radio talk show, the lies and reconstruction of the story of Daniel's missing father, Janne/Silje's attempts to hide her real life from Daniel, and underlying it all the primal story of the crime narrative that drives the subplot that brings Daniel and Ronny in contact with Ante, Hege Drag and her mysteriously disappeared father. In each case the narrative is undermined intelligently by the realization that there is no "grand narrative" to explain existence and superimpose meaning. *Detektor* demonstrates the home truth that we are all ultimately banal, both in our stories of great passion and tragedy, and in our everyday lives. At the same time, Jackmann also manages to reveal this banality with charm and delight, thus fulfilling the viewer expectations of a date movie. Indeed Daniel and Janne/Silje overcome adversity and reconnect as a couple, with Lill Lindfors's humorously retro samba hit from 1978, "Musik skall byggas utav glädje" [Music should be made out of joy] to complete the self-ironic happy ending.

Detektor contains an intertextual reference to earlier Norwegian cinema through the private detective Ante Danielsen, who is played by Sverre Porsanger. In his youth Porsanger also starred in Arvid Skauge's classic 1977 film, *Ante*. Upon meeting him Ronny makes an issue of the similarity in the name and Ante comments dryly that all Sámi are named Ante. This metafilmic reference is typical of the humour in Loe's screenplays and books, one of which, *L* from 1999, is prominently displayed on Daniel's bedside table in *Detektor*. This intertextual reference is important. *L* itself is a self-reflective and intermedial project: Loe received funding to lead a group of male buddies on a bogus research expedition to an uninhabited island in the south Pacific, documented the trip through a blog on the website of a national newspaper, *Dagbladet*, then wrote and published the experiences as a "novel" that features the author "Erlend Loe" as the protagonist.

The ridiculous, pseudo-scientific expedition is motivated by the protagonist's desire to contribute to the "building" of Norway, and his sadness that the building has already been completed by earlier generations. Loe thus expresses a widespread sense of alienation from the seriousness of purpose and meaning experienced by earlier generations. The generations of Norwegians born after World War II have all been raised to view the war generation as extraordinary in their collective resistance to the Nazi occupation of Norway. In the postwar period Norway has witnessed unprecedented prosperity and peace, leading to an increasing individualism and, in the eyes of the older generations, narcissism. Both *Detektor* and *L* argue implicitly that nationalist projects and grand narratives have lost their collective meaning, and that the characters turn instead to the small comforts and amusements of the personal sphere.

The metafilmic project of documenting one's personal life and group of friends becomes the central plot element of *Buddy*, in that protagonists Kristoffer (Nicolai Cleve Broch) and Geir (Aksel Hennie) use a hand-held video camera to film the absurd stunts they use to alleviate the boredom of their slacker lives. They earn incomes by hanging billboards, Kristoffer's girlfriend Elisabeth (Janne Formoe) works in an advertising agency, and their roommate Stig Inge (Anders Baasmo Christiansen) works as a web designer, all of which contributes to the problematic blurring between art and advertising, and high and low culture that the film examines.

The film's conceit lies in the fact that Kristoffer and Geir's videotapes are accidentally discovered by a television executive, who thinks they are just the thing to improve the declining ratings of his network's flagship talk show. *Buddy* is pure wish fulfillment: boring twenty-somethings gain national fame and media attention without lifting a finger, Kristoffer juggles two highly attractive women who in the end both eagerly and unquestioningly want him, and Geir resolves his past mistake of impregnating a girl at a party by connecting with his estranged seven-year-old son, who is declared by Kristoffer to be "kul" [cool]. Geir and Kristoffer unwittingly produce reality television that is so naturally charming and unintentionally entertaining that it surpasses anything that the professionals at the network can create. The film underscores this with takes of various groups of characters gathered around their television sets, palpably entertained by what they see. The sequences that the viewers of *Buddy* itself are privy to (primarily through the lens of Kristoffer's digital video camera) are banal in the extreme: three roommates doing a breakdance wave, Kristoffer and Geir joining a bunch of kids in a pickup soccer game, etc. *Buddy* taps into the same banality and lack of artistic vision that is made explicit in Frode Myhra Skog's 2002 documentary, *Noe med film* [Something in film], about a group of four young men who aspire to become "something" in the film industry. Like the characters in *Buddy* these young men presume that art or entertainment is something that one simply stumbles upon. They film themselves as they attempt to make a film, hoping that

this metafilmic conceit will add layers of interest and irony to the project. This documentary reveals what is glossed over in *Buddy*, namely that both high art and popular entertainment are crafts that require enormous insight, craftsmanship, and dedication.

Metaphorically, the character Stig Inge's unwillingness to leave Tøyen centre, where he and his roommates live in an apartment above the shopping centre, replicates the local versus global dynamic, seen from the perspective of a traditionally isolated and provincial nation such as Norway. Like Stig Inge, Norwegians must dare to set foot outside their own little world in order to create a richer and more meaningful culture for themselves and others. Yet, as anyone familiar with the human geography of Oslo knows, Tøyen is the epicentre of immigrant culture in the city, so that in a very real way the world is in fact encapsulated in miniature there. Tøyen centre is paradoxically both local and global simultaneously, a glocal locus that belies the banality of the characters' antics.

The Quirky Feel-Good

"Quirkiness" has proven to be a successful approach by which Scandinavian films, music, and literature can gain access to an international market. This has most overtly been the case with Finland—notably in the work of Aki Kaurismäki—and Iceland, where cultural exports such as the musician Björk and the films of Friðrik Þór Friðriksson consciously play with the perceived oddity and geographic specificity of Iceland.¹¹ Two films stand out as representative of the quirky but warm-hearted wave of Norwegian cinema, namely Petter Næss's Academy Award-nominated *Elling* (2001) and Knut Erik Jensen's *Heftig og begeistret* [*Cool and Crazy*] (2001). These films were major hits with both audiences and critics, generated an international following, and were followed up with sequels.¹² These are by no means the only important examples of "quirky" Norwegian cinema. Bent Hamer's *Eggs* (1995) and *Salmer fra kjøkkenet* [*Kitchen Stories*] (2003) depict so-called village idiots, and both received modest international recognition. Yet whereas Hamer cultivates oddity for its own sake and remains far more committed to the art film tradition, often creating a sensation of alienation or discomfort, *Elling* and *Heftig og Begeistret* are firmly grounded in an optimistic "feel good" message of integration and acceptance.

Elling is based on Ingvar Ambjørnsen's 1996 novel *Brødrene i blodet* [Blood Brothers], the third in a darkly comic tetralogy (published between 1993 and 1999) about the mentally disturbed Elling. In the film adaptation, both Elling (Per Christian Ellefsen) and his companion Kjell Bjarne (Sven Nordin) are presented as delightfully naive, rather than exhibiting the severe mental illness that they suffer from in the novels. *Elling* has many similarities to Robert Zemeckis's *Forrest*

Gump (1994), which also famously reworks a quite complex and ambivalent novel, Winston Groom's dark masterpiece from 1986, *Forrest Gump*. In both films the viewer is invited to identify intensely with characters who do not function normally in society, and furthermore, to view them as essentially more human than those around them. The unrelenting innocence and charm of Elling and Kjell Bjarne in the film masks their purported psychological pain, and everyone who comes into contact with them in the film—from waiters to retired poets—instantly recognizes their essential goodness in a manner that challenges the viewer's willingness to suspend disbelief. The appeal of the film lies perhaps in the validation of the viewers' own normalcy—the popular drive to cultivate one's own quiriness (one's collections, one's passions) is reinforced by the charming quality of Elling's obsessive-compulsive behaviour—and the belief as they view the film that they too would warmly embrace sufferers of mental illness as valued members of the larger community. The relentlessly trendy Oslo neighborhood of Majorstua is thus recast as a haven of diversity and acceptance, a small community of interconnectedness and mutual esteem. We see the film's idealization most obviously expressed in a café scene during which Kjell Bjarne learns that he has become a father. The entire clientele and staff burst into spontaneous—and utterly unrealistic—expressions of joy. The film thus posits Norway as a much friendlier place than the social anthropological literature suggests (Kiel).

Just as *Forrest Gump* can be interpreted allegorically as a history of the ambiguous role played by the U.S. during the cold war period (like *Forrest* the U.S. was naive and childish, yet in possession of super power that allowed it to triumph over more sophisticated adversaries), so too can *Elling* be interpreted politically. The central role that Elling's adoration of former prime minister Gro Harlem Brundtland plays in the film opens it up to such a political reading of the film. Brundtland was prime minister in Norway during three separate periods (1981, 1986-1989, and 1990-1996) and holds special status for her ability to lead Norway during a time of intense globalization and social change. Whereas Elling's Brundtland-obsession in the Ambjørnsen novels, which were published during Brundtland's time in office, is tinged with irony and can be interpreted as an indication of Elling's lack of contact with reality, in the film adaptation, which was released five years after, this obsession has taken on overtones of nostalgia for the Brundtland era, in which Norway was unambiguously "good." The Brundtland government's aggressive program of privatization and global capitalism went against traditional social democratic ideology, and the left might argue that through the cult of her appealing personality she lulled the Norwegian people into accepting her neo-liberalist policies, even when these went against her own social democratic party's collectivist ideologies.

Like *Elling*, *Heftig og begeistret* examines the limits of inclusion, but in this case the participants are not fictional. Jensen himself describes *Heftig og begeistret*

as a “feel-good docu-musical” and states that it is “about collective memory, a nostalgia for an old reality that we are losing very quickly” (quoted in Iversen 2006 181). Yet at the same time, the surreal visual aesthetics and underlying political commentary in the film give it more depth than the title for international distribution, *Cool and Crazy*, would suggest. Bjørn Sørenssen suggests “Wild and enthusiastic” as a more accurate translation of the title (235). The Norwegian title was taken from the dynamics notation for “Vikingsønner” [Viking Sons], one of the songs that the choir regularly performs according to Jensen (16). The word “heftig” translates as “intense, severe, violent” and “angry, hotheaded, vehement, impetuous, fiery” (Norsk-engelsk 432), while “begeistret” translates as “enthusiastic, excited” (Norsk-engelsk 77). These terms resonate both with the harshness of the Northern Norwegian setting, and with the passion and enthusiasm of the choir members.

Jensen places great emphasis in the film on the paradoxical existence of the village of Berlevåg. It became a boomtown for the fishing industry in the 1860s, with all the growing pains and frontier wildness that entails, yet at the same time it is constantly at risk of being wiped out by the violence of the ocean because of its lack of natural shelter. This is the reason for Jensen’s focus on the breakwater made of tetrapods: the fishing industry would not have existed there without a safe harbor, and the village would not have existed without the fishing industry. The rough sea had simply washed away numerous previous breakwaters, most notably in 1959, after which the tetrapod project was implemented (Jensen 58).

Likewise, the community that gathers around the Berlevåg men’s choir clings precariously to life as its members age. The choir thus functions as a metonym for not only the village, but also for an entire culture based on the fishing industry. Particularly given the fact that *Heftig og begeistret* is a documentary, the film has a distinctly anthropological feel to it. This sense of the formal study of an exotic ethnic group is as much a part of the viewing experience for Norwegians who do not live in the northern part of the country as it is for non-Norwegian audiences. Despite its peripheral location, however, the fate of Berlevåg and its inhabitants is directly linked to the global economy, and as such they exemplify a type of small, primary resource-based community in transition that resonates around the world.

2006: Norwave Redux

The directors who achieved critical and popular success in the banner year of 2006 were relatively new. Of the twenty Norwegian films premiered in 2006, fully seven were debut works. Arguably the most important of these films—Joachim Trier’s debut, *Reprise*, and Jens Lien’s *Den brysomme mannen* [The bothersome man]—elaborate upon a number of the major themes of the earlier films discussed

above. *Den bryssomme mannen* was awarded the Prix ACID [Agence du Cinéma Indépendant pour sa Diffusion] at the 2006 Cannes film festival, and Norsk filmkritikerråd awarded Trier and Lien the annual Kritikerprisen jointly in 2007.

Reprise is self-consciously metafilmic on many levels. As the parallel story of two aspiring writers in their early twenties, it focuses thematically on literature and writing, while cinematically it draws attention to the virtuality and fictiveness of film as a medium. The film has been described as “relentlessly innovative” (Felperin, n.p.). Like the American director Wes Anderson, Trier disrupts the linear narrative of the film frequently through flashbacks, imagined flash-forwards, and still images. This narrative play parallels the precocious cleverness of its young writer-protagonists, who worship the Norwegian literary avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s. Trier openly acknowledges his fascination with the French New Wave, but unlike the equally New Wave-inspired Danish Dogma 95 directors, Joachim Trier is steeped in the specifically global youth culture that arose in the late 1980s.¹³ He thus combines the radical cultural position of the French new wave with a post-punk aesthetic.

The first six and a half minutes of *Reprise* is among the most interesting sequences of the entire film visually, cinematically, and ideologically. The conceit is simple: without any introduction the viewer sees Phillip (Anders Danielsen Lie) and Erik (Espen Klouman-Høiner) run into each other at a mail box. Each is about to mail the manuscript of his first novel. Trier cuts to a high speed flash-forward that works through a number of possible scenarios for their future success as novelists before cutting back to the mail box, at which point they actually place their manuscripts in the mail and the linear narrative about what “really” happens to them commences, with Phillip commenting “Du, det er nå det begynner, ikke sant?” [Hey, it all starts now, right?], a remark that comments both on his future literary career and the film itself. At this point, the protagonists notice the Norwegian constitution day celebration that is taking place in the streets of Oslo as they mail their manuscripts. The two young men get caught up in the crowds, and Phillip comments “Vet du hva, vi må ut av det landet her” [You know what, we have to get out of this country].

The opening credits start to roll as the viewer is regaled with what film critic Neil Young has described as a “festive patriotic parade through the city streets [that] is given an ominous (even apocalyptic) feel via the use of slight slow motion and the accompaniment of Joy Division’s *New Dawn Fades*” (n.p.). Joy Division was a British post-punk band that produced music between 1978 and 1980 that has had a lasting impact on subsequent movements such as Goth and Grunge music.¹⁴ The ominous music and fatalistic vocals stand in stark contrast to received expectations about traditional Constitution Day celebrations. Rather than depicting joy and national pride the sequence focuses on the chaotic and frenzied behavior of the revelers and the alienation of many of the people observing the massive parade. Even the children appear unsure and anxious. This sequence culminates

in an image of a young man clad in a Norwegian regional folk costume carrying an upside-down flag who falls to the ground in a drunken stupor as Joachim Trier's credit as director appears on the screen. It is easy to read this sequence—primed as we are by Phillip's negative comment about Norway and the ominous background music—as critique of Norwegian nationalism. Yet, in a 2006 interview, Trier's co-writer Eskil Vogt says

I think we both had this sort of nostalgia for Norway that we hadn't quite understood yet. So we were working on big English language genre projects, but these other ideas kept popping up. After a while we understood that we had a particular Norwegian story that had to be told with Norwegian characters.
(Kumar, n.p.)

In actuality, the plot concerning two aspiring writers and their circle of friends could easily be transposed to any western urban setting, and the cultural referents, the styles, the conversations, and indeed nearly everything about the characters throughout the film belong more to global “youth” culture than to the specific context of Norway. Yet the film still “reads” as utterly and exclusively local to Norwegian audiences.

Even the Constitution Day celebration itself—the most quintessentially Norwegian event of the year—is de-nationalized for many of its youth participants, the drunken graduating secondary school students known as “Russ” who celebrate the end of their schooling as much as they do any sense of national pride. The film thus from the very beginning calls into question the nation as a meaningful category, and this is further demonstrated through the protagonists' orientation away from Norway and toward Paris. As so often before, Paris here signifies modernity and artistic inspiration. The draw of Paris increases the retro feel of the film, particularly since the imagined “flash forward” sequences are filmed in black and white. Further, Phillip and Erik dress in clothing inspired by late 1950s early 1960s Beatnik movement, creating an even stronger link to the French New Wave cinema that Trier claims as a source of inspiration. Trier and his characters both strive for a trans-national art aesthetic, rather than a sense of national belonging.

Ultimately, the nihilistic tone of the Joy Division song does leave room for some hope: the final lines of the lyrics are “It was me, waiting for me, / Hoping for something more, / Me, seeing me this time, hoping for something else,” which can be read metafactively as a comment on the relationship between fiction and the writer's own experience. Throughout the course of the film Phillip and Erik learn how to translate their lives into fiction without psychically damaging themselves. They actively seek experiences that lend themselves to fiction, such as Phillip's failed attempt to recreate in exacting detail an earlier romantic trip

to Paris. The replication fails miserably in real life and he must turn instead to fiction to work out the romantic ideal.

Despite Trier's attempts to affiliate his film aesthetically with the avant-garde, thematically *Reprise* stays close to the less intellectually ambitious films of the "date movie" genre. In an impassioned plea for at least one really good Norwegian film, Fredrik Drevon and Trond Horne write

Mongoland (2000), *Buddy* (2003), *Uno* (2004), *Alt for Egil* (2004) og *Reprise* (2006) er alle konstruert rundt følgende trekantforhold: For å få damen og/eller lykkes, må heltene bevise at han bryr seg om sin mentalt tilbakestående kamerat, en nobel idiot hvis eneste oppgave er å tydeliggjøre heltens valg.
(n.p.)

[*Mongoland* (2000), *Buddy* (2003), *Uno* (2004), *All for Egil* (2004), and *Reprise* (2006) are all constructed upon the following triangle relationship: in order to get the girl and/or succeed, the hero has to prove that he cares about his mentally disabled friend, a noble idiot whose only purpose is to clarify the hero's choice.]

The "humanizing idiot" plot is a well-known thematic structure, familiar from, among many other things, Barry Levinson's *Rain Man* (1988), and more recently Søren Kragh-Jacobsen's Dogma 95 film, *Mifunes sidste sang* [*Mifune*] (1999). *Reprise* also resonates with Næss's *Elling*, another film about personal redemption through close contact with perceived idiocy. Indeed a copy of Ambjørnsen's tetralogy can be seen on Phillip's bookshelf, and to bring the point home Erik affectionately refers to Phillip as "Elling" at one point. Thus, even this most ambitious debut film remains firmly, if perhaps self-ironically, within the domain of the medium-concept.

Like *Reprise*, Jens Lien's *Den bryssomme mannen* also concerns itself with locating Norway (and more specifically Oslo urban culture) on the continuum between local and global identities. Per Schreiner adapted the screenplay from his own radio play from 2003.¹⁵ In *Den bryssomme mannen*, the protagonist Andreas (Trond Fausa Aurvaag) appears at the beginning of the film arriving by bus at a desolate gas station in a desert landscape that is unidentified within the film's diegesis, but that the credits indicate is the Sprengisandur National Desert Reserve, adjacent to the Viking-era "lava field of misdeed" that Kirsten Hastrup argues is the centre of the conceptual wilderness in medieval Iceland, and as such the polar opposite to the Althing, the conceptual centre of the social structure (1985). In an example of extreme visual dislocation, Andreas is taken by car from this desert through a bucolic rural landscape, which is clearly identifiable as the eastern Norwegian countryside, and into Oslo. Oddly this intermediary rural landscape between city and desert—a space that one would typically associate with the country kitchen

that Lien holds up as an ideal later in the film—is never a space that is accessible to the characters in the film.

The film places interiors and the cityscape of Oslo at the centre of Lien's social criticism. Whereas *Budbringeren* makes Oslo visually alien through a focus on squalor, here an opposite but similarly alienating effect is produced through a focus on obsessive aestheticism: Lien presents the audience with a sterile, perfectly composed modernist vision of Oslo. The film has visual and thematic parallels with Swedish director Roy Andersson's *Sånger från andra våningen* [*Songs from the Second Floor*] (2000), discussed in this volume by Ursula Lindqvist, which produces a stylized, dystopian vision of the Swedish "folkhem" [people's home] of Stockholm apartments and public spaces in a critique of global capitalism and the concomitant loss of poetry in everyday life. The presence of a Gro Harlem Brundtland parody (Ellen Horn) in *Den brysomme mannen* suggests an ambivalent critique of both the social engineering (and collectivism) that the Norwegian Labour party was known for in the postwar period, and of Brundtland's neo-liberal reforms in the 1990s, which promoted individualism and global capitalism.

In the perfect world that the bothersome man Andreas disrupts, the prevailing Norwegian obsession with home improvement is taken to a comical extreme.¹⁶ With nothing else to live for (children, for example, are banned from the dystopian world of the film, and religion and sports are entirely absent), furniture catalogs and home renovation create meaning in the characters' self-absorbed lives. In nearly every street scene extras are seen carrying home decorations. Andreas's growing success in this society is reflected visually in the film by the increasingly attractive spaces that he occupies, moving from the clearly un-renovated (or un-reconstructed) 1970s apartment to the ultra modern home that he shares with Britt (Petronella Barker), who works, appropriately enough, in a kitchen design store. As Engelstad comments,

Det hypersterile samfunnet er synliggjort gjennom de evig tilstedeværende gatefeierbilene, søppeltømmerne som rydder unna alt som er uønsket, også mennesker som ikke innordner seg. Visuelt kommer det til uttrykk gjennom den gjennomførte bruken av alle de rene fasadene av glass og slipt stein, designerleiligheten til Andreas og det upersonlige kontoret hans.
(n.p.)

[The hyper sterile society is made visible through the ever-present street sweepers, the garbage collectors who clear away everything that is undesirable, including people who do not comply. Visually this is expressed through the consistent use of all the clean facades of glass and polished stone, Andreas's designer apartment, and his impersonal office.]

This sterility is contrasted with the idealized kitchen that is the source of Andreas's desire for something different. In this kitchen, which he locates by tracking down

an alluring scent and breaking through an apparent rift in space and perhaps time, the light is warm, the fittings and decorations rustic and cozy, with a window opening out on a delightful world filled with the sounds of children playing and birds singing.

The film's protagonist sees only a glimpse of this vision, which he accesses through an equally subversive space, namely the basement room occupied by the mysterious Hugo (Per Schaanning). The room is dominated by a cluster of hundreds of illuminated light bulbs that dangle from the ceiling. These bulbs suggest an art installation of sorts, indicating perhaps that it is through artistic vision that one can gain access to the authentic ideal. Yet in the end art fails and the basement room is stripped bare by the omnipresent clean-up crew.

Den brysomme mannen contains a number of absurd scenarios, such as Andreas being run over by subway trains repeatedly, that call attention to the fictive or virtual nature of film as a medium. In this, the film shares a preoccupation with pushing the limits of realism with a growing Hollywood genre that ranges from David Fincher's now classic *Fight Club* (1999) to Marc Forster's *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006). Together with Trier, Lien thus blends a critique of local issues seamlessly into a much broader, postmodernist questioning of reality and its cinematic representations.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the "Norwave" of 1997 did not produce a "rising tide" that improved the international and domestic reception of Norwegian film to the level that Denmark and Sweden enjoy, since there is still no Norwegian auteur of the caliber of Ingmar Bergman, Aki Kaurismäki, or Lars von Trier. Engelstad asserts that the last decade of Norwegian film is marked by only two "bølgeskulp" [splashes] in 1997 and 2006, rather than a consistent wave (n.p.). I would argue that he is overly polemical in his criticism of the Norwegian film industry's attempts to win over the domestic audience, and he glosses over important "high water marks" in 2001 and 2003. Clearly Norwegian cinema during the Norwave decade has matured, and we can see how the medium of film has been used both as a forum for working out domestic issues and as a concerted attempt at gaining recognition in the global entertainment industry. Norway has increased the level of financial and educational investment in its national film industry significantly. The films that result from this investment display an increased level of awareness in terms of the international film industry and the tensions between global and local identities.

I likewise reject Gunnar Iversen's assertion that the Norwegian film industry has largely failed in its attempt to merge genre conventions with culturally relevant material. Iversen concludes his discussion of Norwegian genre film by

stating categorically that “The directors do not rework genre clichés in a local context, extend them as source material, or invest them with greater resonance, except in the rare instance of a film like *Pathfinder*” (2005 276). As this survey of the Norwave decade reveals, a significant number of films achieve just these aims.

What, then, does the term “Norwave” really signify? Is it merely a marketing scheme—an attempt to create a recognizable brand name—or does it have any real value in understanding Norwegian cinema from the last decade? A brief comparison to the Danish Dogma 95 movement may help to clarify. Dogma 95 grew out of a manifesto created by a self-selected group of Danish directors. Although initially a personal vendetta and expression of frustration over mainstream cinema (primarily on the part of Lars von Trier), Dogma 95 tapped into emerging developments in media culture and promoted the appealing impression that anyone could make an internationally popular and critically acclaimed film with only the most rudimentary equipment (we see a resonance with *Buddy* here). Dogma 95 spoke directly to thousands of aspiring filmmakers around the globe, and as a movement it has lived a life of its own well beyond its relevance to the directors who launched it. “Norwave,” on the other hand, denotes a disparate group of directors over a ten-year period, and these directors have little in common other than their nationality. It was a term created by the entertainment news industry and lacks entirely the self-ironic ideological implications that the term “dogma” suggests. The term “Norwave” plays on the French “New Wave,” but very few Norwegian films demonstrate any real awareness of this cinematic tradition, with the notable exception of Trier’s *Reprise*. The term “Norwave” is simply trotted out each time a Norwegian film achieves a modicum of success internationally.

Nonetheless, this pessimism regarding the usefulness of the Norwave “brand” should not overshadow the qualities of the individual films that have been marketed as such. The eight films discussed above have largely achieved the goal of bridging the gap between international and domestic appeal, and they have done so by merging elements from Hollywood genre cinema and international art cinema in an at times quite sophisticated “medium concept” hybridization that allows them to address issues that are culturally relevant to Norwegian identity construction in the face of globalization.

NOTES

1. In paraphrasing a film review published in *Morgenbladet*, Ove Solum writes “I tilleggs slår anmelderen fast at filmen i egentlig forstand ikke er norsk. *Veiviseren* er verdens første *samiske* spillefilm, og samekulturens første bidrag til filmhistorien viser seg også å sette den samlede norske filmproduksjonen gjennom tidene i skygge” [In addition the reviewer states that the film is not really Norwegian. *The Pathfinder* is the world’s first *Sámi* feature film, and *Sámi* culture’s first contribution to film history ends up

overshadowing all of Norwegian film production throughout the ages] (187, Solum's italics).

2. A perusal of ticket sales records covering the period 1975-2006 reveals that the percentage of the market share for Norwegian films between 1985 and 1990 hovered around 10%. In 2003 domestically produced films captured just over 18% of the market share (measured in total theatre visits) in Norwegian theatres. Furthermore, the films of the mid-to-late 1980s have not demonstrated particular staying power. 2003 was the most successful year for domestically produced film in Norway since 1975 and has yet to be surpassed. Moreover, the years 2001, 2004, and 2006 had significantly higher percentages of the market share than in the mid-1980s as well ("Billettinntekter" 30).
3. This and all translations from the Norwegian are my own, unless otherwise indicated.
4. Many other subsets might have been added to this list: for example, the controversial novelist Knut Hamsun inspired an unusually large number of films in the 1990s.
5. Sletaune followed up *Budbringeren* in 2001 with another black comedy using largely the same ensemble cast, *Amatørene* (distributed internationally as *You Really Got Me*), which did not achieve the same level of international attention. *Insomnia* inspired a Hollywood remake, Christopher Nolan's *Insomnia* from 2002, which is set in Alaska and features well-known American actors such as Al Pacino, Hillary Swank, and Robin Williams.
6. In his analysis of *Insomnia* as an example of medium-concept cinema, Nestingen places more emphasis on Engström's status as a representative of the urban centre (in opposition to the rural periphery) than on his nationality (86-87).
7. See Lien.
8. Loe wrote two segments of the portmanteau film *Folk flest bor i Kina* [Most people live in China] (2002), as well as the screenplay for *Nord* [North] (2009).
9. This and other facts concerning Loe's training and career are taken from an e-mail response to the author's inquiry, dated 21 November 2007.
10. Screenwriters Oslo has had a highly successful run since its inception, having produced the screenplays for a number of well-received films, including *Insomnia* (Nicolaj Frobenius collaborated with Erik Skjoldbjærg on the manuscript), *Detektor*, *Folk flest bor i Kina* [Most People Live in China], as well as Marius Holt's *Øyenstikker* [Dragonfly] (2001), Pål Øie's *Villmark* [Dark Woods] (2003), Jens Lien's *Jonny Vang* (2003), and Erik Poppe's *Hawaii, Oslo* (2004).
11. See Thomson.
12. The sequels to Elling are *Mors Elling* [Mother's Elling], directed by Eva Isaksen (2003) and *Elsk meg i morgen* [Love Me Tomorrow], directed by Petter Næss (2005). *Heftig og Begeistret* [Cool and Crazy] was followed up by *Heftig og begeistret – på sangens vinger* [Cool and Crazy on the Road] (2002).
13. Born in 1974, Trier was deeply immersed in post-punk skateboard counter-culture.
14. For two useful analyses of Joy Division's style and lasting influence on popular music see Michael Bibby, and chapter four of Bill Friskics-Warren. Friskics-Warren ascribes to Joy Division "... a vision of the world as a cruel, chaotic place in which isolated individuals entertained scant hope of transcendence" (112).

15. Schreiner also wrote the screenplay for Lien's short film from 1999, "Døren som ikke smakk" (released internationally as "Shut the Door") and the "Høyre" [Right] and "Senterpartiet" [Centre Party] segments of *Folk flest bor i Kina* (2002).
16. In 2006 Norwegians spent 42 million NOK (ca. 7 million USD) on home renovations (<http://www1.vg.no/pub/vgart.php?artid=157486>). The population was just under 5 million.

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