

Blockbusters as Vehicles for Cultural Debate in Cultural Journalism

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Abstract

Taking our point of departure in 'the cultural intermediary' as theoretical concept (Bourdieu, 1984; Maguire and Matthews, 2012) and in the coverage of blockbuster movies on Danish cultural pages from 1960 to 2012, this article analyses the changing role of the cultural journalist and the changing cultural approach in cultural journalism since the mid-20th century. The analysis shows that the negotiation and definition of the blockbuster as cultural phenomenon has changed; whereas it was originally, critically, interpreted as a sign of cultural imperialism, Americanisation, or artistic decline, it is increasingly viewed as a global, omnipresent cultural and industrial phenomenon with its own aesthetic, narrative, and cultural logic. In this manner, the coverage exemplifies that the blockbuster has been and continues to be negotiated as a (relevant) object of cultural journalism; that cultural journalism at different times provides different

reflective spaces for popular culture; and that contemporary cultural journalism continues to be critical and contemplative at the same time as it provides cultural service and infotainment. Consequently, the analysis also illustrates how the role of journalists as cultural intermediaries has changed historically.

Keywords Cultural journalism, Blockbuster movies, PR; Cultural industries, Cultural intermediaries, Press coverage.

Introduction

This article analyses how blockbuster movies have been covered and discussed in Danish newspapers during the past 50 years. When talking pictures were introduced in Denmark in the 1930s and movies became the Danes' favorite kind of entertainment (Dinnesen and Kau, 1983), national and international movies, film directors, and stars also became important subjects on the newspapers' cultural agenda (Kristensen and From, 2011; Kristensen, 2010). Since then, the often extensive coverage of, for example, blockbusters as well as the increasing personalisation and sensationalisation (Gripsrud, 2000) of the reporting on art and culture have been interpreted as a transformation from critical, cultural reflection to publicity-driven journalism, entertainment, and celebrity gossip, that is, as a decline in arts and cultural journalism (for example, Lund, 2005; Bech-Karlsen, 1991). These arguments, voiced in several Western countries both by scholars and in the public debate (see also Hellman and Jaakkola, 2012; Knapskog and Larsen, 2008; NAJP, 2004, 2000; Strahan, 2011), focus first and foremost on the commercial motivations of the cultural industries as well as the news media, and they imply that the commercial and publicist objectives of the press are almost mutually exclusive. Furthermore, the critical arguments often lack qualitative, historical analytical grounding since not much research has taken a detailed look at how *specific* cultural topics or phenomena – such as the blockbuster – have been covered by the press at different historical points in time.

Drawing on 'the cultural intermediary' as theoretical concept (Bourdieu, 1984; Hesmondhalgh, 2006; Maguire and Matthews, 2012) for understanding the changing role of the cultural journalist and the changing cultural approach in cultural journalism since the mid-20th century, this article analyses the blockbuster as a specific

cultural and commercial phenomenon on the Danish cultural pages in the period 1960-2012. The article aims at demonstrating the way in which cultural journalism may stimulate public debate, also when covering a mainstream cultural phenomenon such as the blockbuster, and the way in which this coverage of blockbusters in a historical perspective reflects more overall historical changes of Danish cultural journalism and changes in the media system as such. On the one hand, the analysis confirms the critical voices accusing cultural journalists of running the errands of the movie industry, and it confirms that the coverage of blockbusters in a historical perspective reflects the movie industry's adaptation to the media logic (see also Kristensen and From, 2013). On the other hand, the analysis *also* demonstrates that cultural journalists have redefined their role as 'cultural intermediaries' by providing new frames for understanding and evaluating popular culture, and that these frames have been negotiated in various ways and changed over time.

Blockbusters as cultural news

The double perspective in cultural journalism when covering blockbusters, alluded to in the introduction, is closely linked to the 'nature' of the blockbuster. One may namely argue that the blockbuster as cultural phenomenon represents inevitable cultural news: blockbusters are spectacular due to their mix of economy, stardom, technical novelty, and marketing. As a consequence, blockbusters are characterised by – famously or notoriously for – their (economical) size and risk (for example, Neale, 2003). The movie industry and the recurring discussions of the blockbuster during its production on multiple platforms build up great public awareness and high expectations, and involve the potential of either great success or great failure both at the box office and more generally in the public debate. Both outcomes are newsworthy from the perspective of cultural journalism: A commercially or aesthetically successful blockbuster may be acknowledged for this, but if it fails, it is still newsworthy, precisely because of the disappointing outcome, which may foster cultural debate on the film industry and its production values. Put differently, their production budgets and box office potential make blockbusters unavoidable in the public realm and on the cultural agenda and may from a publicist perspective either way raise essen-

tial discussions on aesthetics, the distinctions and interplay between art and popular culture, culture industrial circuits, and commercial issues. In that sense, one may argue that cultural journalists become 'cultural intermediaries' between industries, producers of culture (in a broad sense), experts, and the public. This indicates that blockbusters are not only *inevitable*, but also represent *important* topics on the cultural agenda.

The cultural journalist as 'cultural intermediary'

Bourdieu's concept 'the cultural intermediary' (1984) has been discussed and applied widely in academic literature – in fact to such an extent that Maguire and Matthews (2012) ask: 'Are we all cultural intermediaries?' Also Hesmondhalgh (2007) criticises academia for, faultily, having applied the concept in so many contexts and to so many types of cultural or creative labourers that it has become confusing and unproductive. In this article we apply the term to the media professionals or occupations, to which it seems to have originally been designated; the cultural critics or cultural journalists in the news media.¹ But we also apply Maguire and Matthews's (2012) distinction of three dimensions characterising what the cultural intermediary does in contemporary society – *frame goods*, *claim expertise*, and *have impact* – by exemplifying how these dimensions become visible in the work of cultural journalists; in this case, when they cover blockbusters, but also how they take different shapes at different historical points in time. That is, dimensions which make cultural intermediaries – and cultural journalists more specifically – distinctive, and imply that not everybody are cultural intermediaries.

In the case of blockbusters, the *framing of goods* involves cultural journalists framing the evaluation of specific cultural phenomenon or products – movies – and in this manner constructing and/or ascribing value to these movies. This evaluation is not only addressed to the cultural consumers (the movie audiences) but also to the circuit or network of cultural production and distribution which cultural journalists and the news media are themselves part of. That is, the network of peers in the cultural industry (ranging from public institutions to private companies), in academia, and in the cultural press across platforms (magazines, online, broadcast and so forth). Thus, the framing and evaluation of goods is conditioned

by a variety of media internal and media external factors and agents. This framing, to which we will return in the analysis, has changed historically and is, in a current perspective, closely linked to movie generic or genre-specific evaluation criteria, media institutional profiles, and the subjective positions / tastes of journalists / reviewers. Accordingly, cultural journalists as cultural intermediaries are characterised and distinguished by their *expertise* and *cultural capital*. As we will discuss further below, our analysis indicates that the expertise of the cultural journalist covering blockbusters is increasingly anchored in media professional criteria (reader / media profiles, the news paradigm and so on) rather than in aesthetic ideals (expertise on arts, aesthetics and so on), as also demonstrated by Hellman and Jaakkola (2012) and Vik (2008). As indicated by Maguire and Matthews (2012), the cultural intermediary's claim to expertise is, however, also anchored in personal or subjective tastes or preferences. Finally, the cultural journalist as cultural intermediary influences the way in which 'quality' is negotiated in culture and society. That is, s/he ascribes legitimacy to cultural artefacts or trends and, in this manner, has *impact*. Journalistic evaluations and journalistic genres construct, negotiate, and circulate definitions of legitimate culture, for example, blockbusters, and may in this process challenge and change these same definitions (Maguire and Matthews, 2012).

By means of our analysis of the newspaper coverage of blockbusters, we aim at demonstrating how cultural journalists in a historical perspective perform the role of cultural intermediaries between cultural commodities, artists / producers, and the cultural consumers or citizens and, in this manner, both frame and impact 'upon notions of *what*, and thereby *who*, is legitimate, desirable and worthy, and thus by definition what and who is not' (Maguire and Matthews, 2012, p 552), but also the ways in which their grounds for or terms of framing and unfolding expertise and cultural influence have changed over time.

Methodology

A recurring argument in the vast academic literature on blockbusters is that defining what constitutes a blockbuster is challenging (for example, Schatz, 2003; Neale 2003). Scholars disagree on *when* the blockbuster is 'introduced' or 'conceptualised' and on its geographical spreading, but they agree that it is, first and foremost, an

American post Second World War phenomenon (Schatz, 2003; Neale 2003). For that reason, we have chosen to analyse the coverage of *American* blockbusters since the middle of the 20th century. That is, an epoch closely connected to the professionalisation of the movie industry's PR efforts (for example, Durie, 1993; Marshall, 2006; Thompson, 2007), a broadening cultural concept with dissolving boundaries between high brow and low brow (for example, Gans, 1999), and the development of a double contract in cultural journalism, addressing the public as cultural citizens, individual cultural consumers as well as media users (From, 2010; Kristensen and From, 2011).

The analysis includes the coverage of three blockbusters in selected Danish newspapers: The center-right, business-oriented broadsheet *Jyllands-Posten*; the center-left, culturally-oriented broadsheet *Politiken*; and the tabloid *Ekstra Bladet*. The three movies are *Ben-Hur* (1959), the remake of a silent movie from 1925, adapted from the novel 'Ben-Hur: A tale of the Christ by Wallace Lew', which opened in Denmark in 1962, and which has repeatedly been labelled a blockbuster in the academic literature (for example, Cook, 1990; Stringer, 2003); *Batman Forever* (1995), based on the DC comics character Batman; and *Sex and the City* (2008), the movie spin-off of the internationally successful television serial of the same title and also considered a blockbuster at the time of its release.² These movies were not selected because of their specific aesthetic, narrative, or technological characteristics, similarities or differences, or because of their success at the box office (besides the fact that they were all blockbusters) but as typical examples of the press coverage of blockbusters at the given time (1960s, 1990s, 2000s). However, they do illustrate the very wide 'generic' framework of what may be considered a blockbuster, just as all of the movies are part of a cultural circuit that includes adaptations or spin-offs from literary, film and / or television originals.

We mainly but not exclusively analyse the *reviews* of these movies, since this particular genre has a long history of defining cultural journalism as a specific *kind* of journalism based on views rather than news (Hellman and Jaakkola, 2012; Kristensen and From, 2011). The analysis explores the arguments deployed to evaluate the blockbusters and the ways in which this film critical argumenta-

tion has changed significantly during the 50-year time period represented by the selected movies and their critiques in the press.

Analysis

The following analysis³ aims at demonstrating the increasingly multifaceted critical approach to the blockbuster as film cultural phenomenon during the past five decades, involving a spectrum from critical debate to pleasurable entertainment, and displaying the double contract of contemporary cultural journalism. At all times, the cultural journalists facilitate public debate and reflection on film culture when covering blockbuster movies, but they take their point of departure in very dissimilar premises and approaches, closely connected to the cultural and societal circumstances of their time.

***Ben-Hur* – art as critical yardstick**

The coverage of *Ben-Hur* at its opening in Danish cinemas in 1962 – three years after its American opening in 1959 – was characterised by a limited use of genres, a few reviews, limited service information about the movie, no celebrity stories (for instance, interviews with the star actor Charlton Heston or star director William Wyler), and a quite unbalanced discussion of the movie as cultural phenomenon.

No doubt, Danish reviewers and moviegoers had anticipated the opening of *Ben-Hur*. The review of the movie in the broadsheet *Jyllands-Posten*, ‘Rome before and now and an exhausting *Ben-Hur*’ (February 22, 1962), for example, framed *Ben-Hur* as a spectacular ‘phenomenon’ by arguing ‘Finally the huge movie is launched in Denmark. Unfortunately, it was not waiting for’. Even though *Ben-Hur* as blockbuster was recognised as a topic of interest to the readers, the point of departure for its evaluation was art rather than popular or mainstream culture. The same newspaper, for example, argued: ‘Wyler has at no point put his personal mark on the movie – fifty other Hollywood craftsmen could have done the same’. Similarly, the broadsheet *Politiken* (February 20, 1962) explicitly designated *Ben-Hur* in opposition to art: ‘Now former artist William Wyler triumphed as producer of mass entertainment’ and ‘this is all quantity – but not art’. Thus the rhetorical framing of these reviews imply that popular movie genres were (often) perceived to be of low quality and symptomatic of the Americanisation of the film industry of the time (for example, Petersen and Sørensen, 2006), see-

ing art as the relevant point of departure for evaluation. The critics even allude to the ‘insanity’ of audiences enjoying the movie: ‘If you need more entertainment after this movie, you must be ready for admission’ (*Politiken*, February 20, 1962).

This conception is confirmed by the newspapers’ coverage of the Academy Awards granted to *Ben-Hur* in 1960: while appraising a French actress for outcompeting her American contestants – ‘The sensation at the Academy Awards this year was that a French movie star beat all of her American colleagues’ (*Politiken*, April 6, 1960) – and characterizing her work as splendid, the broadsheet *Politiken* covered *Ben-Hur* in more sceptical tones, implying foul play by the film company: ‘It came as absolutely no surprise in Hollywood, where the Metropol-Company [eds. Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer] has for months pushed the argument that the new adaptation of Lewis Wallace’s biblical novel is the mammoth movie of all times’. Thus, the Danish press sidestepped *Ben-Hur*’s historical achievement at the Oscars.⁴

In other words, both the reviews of *Ben-Hur* and the coverage of the movie when celebrated at the Academy Awards presented a rather sceptical position, exemplifying the cultural journalist as cultural intermediary framing cultural goods and signifying legitimate cultural value in the terms of Maguire and Matthews (2012). That is, framing the evaluation of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ as closely related to art and judging *Ben-Hur* as a movie of poor quality, and discursively determining the American blockbuster as a film category of less cultural value. However, even though the coverage in this manner displays media cultural or institutional consensus on framing *Ben-Hur* as a spectacular ‘phenomenon’ but also on evaluating it on the terms of art despite its Hollywood production features, the various quotes also suggest that *Ben-Hur*, as a blockbuster, after all fostered critical debate on movies as cultural phenomenon and artefact.

Batman Forever – media profiling reviews

The coverage of *Batman Forever* in 1995 included a more extensive and varied debate as well as use of genres compared to *Ben-Hur*, but it also demonstrates that different media institutions applied different approaches and claims when reviewing the movie.

The tabloid *Ekstra Bladet* (August 4, 1995), for example, claimed *Batman Forever* to be a good film, arguing that ‘The movie is excel-

lently made' and emphasising the production and use of technology as fascinating and worthwhile. This implies that technological innovation had become a quality parameter, but also that the movie was reviewed on the terms of mainstream movie genres. Contrary to this positive approach, the broadsheet *Politiken* (August 4, 1995), a newspaper known for its cultural profile (Bredal, 2009), claimed that *Batman Forever* was a bad movie: 'The inventiveness is not huge' and 'you cannot experience it as art for the sake of art'. This indicates that art was still perceived a relevant yardstick for evaluation by this newspaper, regardless of *Batman Forever* being an action-adventure blockbuster movie.

These quite dissimilar interpretations and valuations may be a result of the individual reviewer's tastes and criteria of evaluation – or, in the terms of Maguire and Matthews (2012), a result of the cultural intermediaries' personal or subjective dispositions. However, in a broader media institutional perspective, the displayed differences in newspaper opinions also mirror diverse editorial interpretations of reader interests and thus exemplify that cultural journalism as topic or journalistic field – and opinionated genres such as the review in particular – may differentiate, profile, or segment the individual newspapers (Kristensen and From, 2011; Kristensen, 2010, 2009), similarly to the political leanings of the newspapers voiced in editorial and on the op-ed pages (Hjarvard, 2010). The framing or approach of the cultural journalist as cultural intermediary has changed in accordance with these media institutional transformations, since media professional conceptions of the role or impact of cultural journalism in general have come to the fore: Cultural journalism has to provide entertainment and cultural guidance *as well as* reflection and debate. More broadly, it implies a transformation where the profile or brand of the individual newspapers in an increasingly competitive media market – or, media institutional and professional aspects – has become part of the framing of cultural journalism and cultural reviewing.

Sex and the City – reviewing on movie generic terms

The coverage of *Sex and the City* in 2008 confirms that the newspapers' approach to the blockbuster as film cultural phenomenon may serve as platform for accentuating specific cultural profiles. How-

ever, the reviews of this movie also illustrate that the point of departure when evaluating popular culture had changed further.

More specifically, the reviews of *Sex and the City* indicates that film generic aspects had become an important part of the reviewers' argumentation, because they evaluated the movie in the light of expectations associated with the romantic comedy as genre. *Politiken* (June 6, 2008), for example, stated: 'The most important ingredients are still part of the universe in the movie version [...] the dose has, however, been so radically changed that there – unfortunately – is less sex, less city, and less humour', designating that popular culture have to be assessed with regards to its generic affiliation. *Sex and the City* was in this manner neither compared to fine art, nor discussed as trash or low culture – it was compared to movies of the same genre and, of particular importance, to the extremely popular television series from the early 2000s,⁵ which it originated from. More specifically, all reviews compared the qualities of the television series and the qualities of the movie. The reviewer from *Jyllands-Posten* (June 6, 2008), for example, stated: 'I had so heartily hoped that this movie-continuation of my absolutely favourite pastime could live up to my naïve hopes and be a really good movie and meet all our desires for more genuine escapist entertainment.' Despite the critical and disappointed undertone, this quote confirms that the reviewer applies her critical view from within the generic universe of the movie and television series, and her disappointment is precisely caused by the fact that the movie does not fulfil the generic expectations associated with the romantic comedy.

Even though both *Ben-Hur* and *Batman Forever* were also adaptations of other cultural expressions, this legacy was less explicit in the coverage and evaluation of these movies, whereas the opening of a blockbuster at the turn of the 21st century is a more inevitable event from a cultural journalistic perspective than ever before, not least because of the rapidly changing and omnipresent cross-media environment as well as production- and promotional culture (for example, Davis, 2013; Jenkins, 2006; Thompson, 2007). This is emphasised by the fact that the coverage of *Sex and the City* in all the newspapers recurrently linked it to the broader culture industrial circuit, which it, as a spin-off cultural commodity, was part of. That is, a cultural phenomenon or trend touching upon gender issues, sex, fashion, work-life balance, salaries, big-city life and so on. For

the same reason, *Sex and the City* was often included as cultural reference in newspaper articles covering a range of topics concerning contemporary culture and society. In this manner, the opening of the movie and the expectations of the audience – as well as of the reviewers – were shaped by, among other things, encounters with the foregoing television series and by the on-going societal debates on gender, family, and ways of life, which *Sex and the City* was part of, epitomised, and had anticipated as a popular cultural reference. This exemplifies contemporary blockbusters as part of a vast circuit of interconnected popular genres and cultural forms with blurring boundaries between texts, cultural expressions, and society. However, it also indicates that art as well as popular culture has become flexible, because cultural legitimacy is negotiated in the light of everyday values and practices (see also Maguire and Matthews, 2012, p. 558). Last but not least, it implies that the framing of the cultural journalist as cultural intermediary has changed because popular culture has become something that must be evaluated on its own terms, and because cultural journalists may contextualise the interplay of cultural consumers and cultural products, negotiate cultural values, and provide new frames for understanding and valuating popular culture.

Conclusion

The analytical findings presented in this article exemplify an increasing professionalisation of the interplay of the cultural industry and the press, but also an increasing professionalisation of the news media and their logic. On the one hand, the changing approach of cultural journalism when reviewing blockbusters illustrates increasingly close connections between cultural journalism and the movie industry, and that the press continues to play an important role in movie marketing despite the availability of an increasing number of media platforms. On the other hand, it illustrates that upcoming blockbusters provide important content to the cultural pages and are, for that reason, covered with an increasing awareness of genre, attention to reader interests and purposes, and having a broadened and less hierarchical interpretation of culture as point of departure. The press increasingly uses the opening of a blockbuster as an opportunity to address these kinds of movies in more analytical or commenting articles, discussing the blockbuster as film cultural

phenomenon, combining media commercial and publicist purposes. Thus, the analysis shows that the negotiation and definition of the blockbuster as cultural phenomenon has changed: whereas it was originally, critically, interpreted as a sign of cultural imperialism, Americanisation, or artistic decline, it is increasingly viewed as a global, omnipresent cultural and industrial phenomenon (see also Janssen, et al., 2008) with its own aesthetic, narrative and cultural logic. In this manner, the coverage exemplifies that the blockbuster has been and continues to be negotiated as a (relevant) object of cultural journalism; that cultural journalism at different times provides different reflective spaces for popular culture; and that contemporary cultural journalism continues to be critical and contemplative at the same time as it provides cultural service and infotainment. Consequently, the analysis also illustrates how the role of journalists as cultural intermediaries has changed historically.

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- Sex and the City*, 2008. [Film] Directed by Michael Patrick King. USA: New Line Cinema in association with Home Box Office.

Notes

- 1 In *Distinction* (1984, p. 325) Bourdieu argues that the typical new cultural intermediaries include 'the producers of cultural programmes on TV and radio or

the critics of “quality” newspapers and magazines and all the writer-journalists and journalist-writers’. See also Hesmondhalgh (2007, p. 66-67).

- 2 <<http://articles.latimes.com/2008/jun/02/business/ft-boxoffice2/>> [Accessed 27 August 2013], <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sex_and_the_City_\(film\)#cite_note-21](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sex_and_the_City_(film)#cite_note-21)> [Accessed 27 August 2013].
- 3 All quotes have been translated from Danish by the authors.
- 4 Only *Titanic* (1997) and *Lord of The Rings: The Return of the King* (2003) have been awarded a matching number of Academy Awards.
- 5 The television series ran for six seasons from 1998-2004 (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0159206/?ref=tt_ov_inf>, [Accessed 7 June 2013].