

Tonally Teen?

Issues of Audience Appeal in Contemporary Danish Youth Films

Anders Lysne

PhD Research Fellow with the Department of Media and Communication at University of Oslo. His PhD project explores the connection between aesthetics and institutional framework in contemporary Scandinavian youth films.

Abstract

This article investigates the trial and error of audience appeal in contemporary Danish youth films supported through the special children's and youth film commissioner scheme of The Danish Film Institute. Employing the concept of tone to textual analysis, the article focuses on the two films *Triple Dare* (Christina Rosendahl, 2006) and *Skyscraper* (Rune Schjøtt, 2011), which serve as an interesting comparison for being, respectively, the most and the least commercially successful of the publicly funded youth films in the 2000s. With the analysis of these films, I aim to explicate how tonal complexity may affect audience involvement and complicate the fundamental issue of audience appeal.

Keywords youth films, cinematic tone, audience appeal, film support, textual analysis.

Introduction

The tradition of addressing issues of youth is a longstanding one in Danish cinema. Most notably, it dates back to the 1950s when a wave of popular *juvenile delinquency* films swept across cinemas. Charac-

terised by their moralistic tone and suggestive titles such as *Dangerous Youth* (*Farlig Ungdom*, 1953), *The Young Have No Time* (*Ung Leg*, 1956) and *Sin Alley* (*Bundfald*, 1957), these cautionary film tales borrowed heavily from the American subgenre. In the late 1970s and early 80s, however, the youth film reached a creative and commercial peak with a string of *coming of age*-themed films that left behind the explicit pedagogical aim of the 1950s troubled youth-films. Instead, these films sensitively explored the psychological dimensions of adolescence in a more muted dramatic form, while continuously drawing on the realist tradition established in the 1940s.¹ A significant reason for the blooming of these films were related to developments in cultural policy as a number of incentives, including the earmarking of 25 per cent of public film funds and the appointment of a children's and youth film commissioner, was introduced with the new film policy of 1982.

Discussing the notion of youth films in Danish cinema is, however, a tricky endeavour. Firstly, as Anne Jerslev has argued, the vast diversity in style and theme makes it difficult to speak of genres and subgenres in the way that we might be inclined to do with American youth films (Jerslev, 2008, p. 185). Secondly, as Steve Neale points out, films about young people do not necessarily speak to a young audience (Neale, 2000, p. 119). Neale's argument is echoed in Danish film scholar Lene Nordin's work on genres in Danish films, in which she argues how a number of youth-themed films of the 70s and 80s, which historically have often been characterised as 'youth films', such as *The Three of Knowledge* (Malmros, 1981) and *Johnny Larsen* (Arnfred, 1979), are intrinsically aimed at an adult audience, and should therefore be labelled 'adult films' (Nordin, 1984, p. 157).

Thus, what is often generically referred to as 'youth films' should rather be understood as two separate but thematically united groups of films, namely films that target an adult audience and films that target an adolescents audience. As film scholar Jo Sondre Moseng has argued in a Norwegian context, the label 'youth film' is ultimately the most fertile when it is reserved for youth-themed films that clearly target a youth audience (Moseng, 2011, p. 82).²

Contemporary trouble

Throughout the 90s and 2000s the impact of American genre formulas has been increasingly evident in the Danish youth targeting

films due to high concept horror hits such as *Final Hour* (Martin Schmidt, 1995) and *Midsummer* (Carsten Myllerup, 2002). However, despite the commercial success of such genre exercises, and the increasing genre orientation in Danish cinema in general, the Danish youth film remains largely inclined towards the Danish realist tradition (Jerslev, 2008, p. 195). It is an inclination that unfortunately seems to have proven commercially unsuccessful with the average young moviegoer, who typically (and increasingly so) seem to prefer Hollywood's genre efforts (Bondebjerg and Redvall, 2011, p. 11).

This development is reflected at the box office. Looking at ticket sales numbers for selected youth films that have received support through the DFI's children and youth film commissioner scheme since the millennium (albeit with a few exceptions) the contemporary youth film generally has a hard time appealing to its target audience (see Table 1). This negative development has consequently fuelled a prolonged debate in national media questioning, among other things, the further sustainment of the children's and youth film commissioner scheme.³

Table 1

Danish (feature length) youth films supported by the children's and youth film consultant system with theatrical release between 2000 and 2012.

Film title (director, year of release)	Tickets sold	Reviews*
<i>Kick'n Rush</i> (Aage Rais-Nordentoft, 2003)	78.179	3,6
<i>Scratch</i> (Anders Gustafsson, 2003)	90.576	4,3
<i>Count to 100</i> (Line Krogsøe Holmberg, 2004)	23.313	2,4
<i>Triple Dare</i> (Christina Rosendahl, 2006)	106.489	3,6
<i>Fighter</i> (Natasha Arthy, 2007)	52.189	3,5
<i>Hush Little Baby</i> (Hella Joof, 2009)	45.425	4,0
<i>Love and Rage</i> (Morten Giese, 2009)	27.425	4,0
<i>Hold Me Tight</i> (Kaspar Munk, 2010)	45.970	3,2
<i>Rebound</i> (Heidi Maria Faisst, 2011)	29.189	4,6
<i>Bora Bora</i> (Hans Fabian Wullenweber, 2011)	75.428	2,8
<i>Skyscraper</i> (Rune Schjøtt, 2011)	1.095	3,6
<i>Love Is in the Air</i> (Simon Staho, 2011)	2.983	3,3
<i>You and Me Forever</i> (Kaspar Munk, 2012)	39.656	4,0
Average	47.532	3,6

* Average of review stars given in newspapers *Politiken*, *Berlingske*, *Jyllands-Posten*, *BT* and *Ekstra Bladet*. The ranking system is one to six with six being the highest grade.

Investigating the trial and error of the recent Danish youth films as it is reflected in table 1, the million dollar question thus remains: Why do some films manage to appeal to the teen audience while others fail?

Focusing on the textual level, and without attempting to provide an exhaustive answer, I will concentrate on the two films *Skyscraper* (Schjøtt, 2011) and *Triple Dare* (Rosendahl, 2006), which are of particular interest as respectively the least and the most commercially successful of the publicly funded youth films released in the 2000s. When discussing the audience appeal of these two films, I propose the utilisation of the concept of 'tone'. Intrinsic of the film's address to its spectator, tone is an underdeveloped critical concept in film studies that can be explained roughly as 'the ways in which the film addresses its spectator and implicitly invites us to understand its attitude to its material and the stylistic register it employs' (Pye, 2007, p. 7). Focusing on the tonal qualities of *Skyscraper* and *Triple Dare* in order to explore the communication with its audience, I will argue that the tonal qualities of these two films, understood as 'the attitudes they communicate towards their own content and conventions', reveal radical differences in the way they attempt to appeal to their target audience on a textual level. A difference that may possibly contribute to shed light on their commercial fare success. The question of audience appeal is, however, an extremely complex one that touches upon a variety of intra- and extra-diegetic factors. Extending beyond the scope of textual appeal, I will thus end my exploration of the tonal workings of *Skyscraper* and *Triple Dare* on a more general note by discussing to what extent the application of tone is valuable when trying to understand film audience preferences.

Targeting tone

In a scene about one third into Rune Schjøtt's *Skyscraper* (2011), the main character, 17-year-old Jon (played by Lukas Schwarz Thorsteinsson), is having a conversation with his mother (played by Rikke Louise Andersson) in their backyard. But something is off. The mother, a veterinarian with an already established drinking problem, is framed standing next to a cow while putting on plastic gloves. 'So, you want to know if you can do the things other people can without being circumcised', she asks him in a low, worried

voice. Jon, dressed in oversized working clothes and standing opposite in front of a caravan ornamented with antlers, has a discouraged, melancholic look on his face that gradually wrenches into humiliation as the mother continues her detailed explanation. 'You aren't able to have sex. Not if you can't pull back your foreskin', she says in a low, matter of fact tone of voice. The film then cuts to a shot of the two characters standing on each side of the cow with the animal's backside suddenly filling the frame. Cutting back to Jon, the film now frames him in deep focus in front of the antlers on the caravan wall, making it look as if the antlers are coming out of his head. 'So it is definite that I will never be able to...?' he asks almost whispering. His mother who is pervasively shot from a slightly higher angle, making her look smaller than we would assume she really is, replies with an uncertain voice, 'It would mean that we would have to sneak into the city without your father knowing about it, and we cannot do that. Or (*pausing*) what do *you* think?'

Several things are at play in this scene, both in regards to narrative and style. Focusing on style, we note a certain ambiguity in decisions made in the mise-en-scene. Colours and lightning give the scene a somber blue look, but the framing of the cow, of Jon's head against the antler, and the high angle shots of his mother somehow seem to deflate the apparent seriousness of the scene, making the characters come across as at once identifiable, sympathetic and mockingly humorous. Put differently, there seems to be something jarring in the *tone* in which the film is speaking to us.

Originating in literary studies, tone is an elusive and perhaps therefore somewhat overlooked concept in film studies.⁴ The most immediate way to understand the concept is to liken it to the tone of voice in conversation as in 'the way that how something is said indicates to the listener how it is to be understood' (Gibbs, 2002, p. 112). Encompassing 'the kinds of attitudes and feelings we interpret to be embodied in the film's stance towards its narrative subject matter', as film scholar Susan Smith has put it (Smith, 2000, p. vii), tone in film relates to the film's mode of address and how we are invited to experience it. The evasiveness of the concept is derived from the fact that tone in film is rarely a singular matter. Rather, it is a unitary term for complex narrative effects. One of the few scholars within film studies to engage with tone as a critical concept is Douglas Pye. Echoing Gibbs, Pye argues in his extended essay

Movies and Tone from 2007 that tone in film is 'one of the central ways in which a film can signal how we are to take what we see and hear' (Pye, 2000, p. 17). According to Pye, the tone of a film is something that is 'implied scene by scene and even moment by moment by the network of decisions that creates the fictional world, its characters and events, and present them to the spectator' (Pye, 2007, p. 30). As a result, tone is, as film scholar James MacDowell has put it, 'affected by every aspect of a film and yet reducible to none' (MacDowell, 2012, p. 14). Thus, if we are to unpick the tone of a film, Pye argues, we need to unpick the network of stylistic and narrative decisions that creates our experience of the film's mode of address.

Stressing the affective dimension of tone, Pye then goes on to argue for a distinction of tone between a global and a local level. The global level, which he equates with 'mood', we may understand as our preparatory state of expectation as we begin to engage with a work. Paraphrasing cognitivist film scholar Greg M. Smith, Pye argues how a film through crucial initial apprehension will encourage its viewer to establish a consistent emotional orientation (a 'mood') to which the viewer will then progress to pick up cues laid out by the film.⁵ As such, mood is a 'prevailing feeling or frame of mind, incorporating the apprehension of a mode or a genre and the kind of experience we are about to have' (Pye, 2007, p. 20). Conversely, a film's tone is perhaps best thought of as 'tonal qualities'; qualities that are implied locally from scene to scene, or even moment to moment in the film by the network of decisions that create the film's fictional world, its characters and events, and presents them to the spectator.

Growing pains: *Skyscraper* (Schjøtt, 2011)

With the critical distinction between tone as the film's moment to moment modulation of our experience of the fictional world, its characters and events, and mood as the film's pervasive and consistent emotional orientation in mind, we are now able to understand the aesthetic ambiguity of the scene from *Skyscraper* a little better. On one hand, we have the sombreness and dreariness that is cued by the stylistic elements in the mise-en-scene, such as the blue and grey colours of the lighting, the costumes and the setting. These elements seem first and foremost to be conveying the emotional state of Jon and his mother and must therefore relate to the mood of the film. On the other hand, we have the subtle but carefully situ-

ated humorous elements that are evident especially in the framing and blocking of the characters and props, such as the cow's backside, the antlers coming out of Jon's head, as well as in the cinematography, such as the high angle shots of the mother. All these aesthetic decisions made by the film subtly but continuously work to deflate our sympathy by inducing a subtle mockery in the attitude we are encouraged to take towards the characters. The decisions made by the film in this scene relate to (or rather, they *inform*) the tone of *Skyscraper*.

When analysing the stylistic decisions of this short scene, it becomes evident that the film is addressing its audience in a more complex manner than we might expect from a film targeting an adolescent audience. We experience how the film establishes a pensive, almost melancholic, mood cued by the soft timbered acoustic soundtrack music, a child's voice over, gloomy weather in the exterior scenes, and frequent shots of the main character pursuing solitude by walking along train tracks or sitting by a meadow. These elements, emphasizing psychological realism, strike an important resemblance to the sensitive characterisations of the young protagonists characteristic of the youth films of the 70s and 80s.⁶ However, the invitation to emotional immersion and involvement of the audience that is triggered by the establishment of this specific mood, appears to be continuously countered by stylistic decisions especially related to the film's *mise-en-scene* that seems to function merely as a strategy for punctuating the emotional involvement.

This strategy of undercutting involvement is perhaps particularly evident in the deliberately caricatured performances by the actors who portray the film's adult characters. Most notably Jon's mother, his father (played by Morten Suurballe) and Edith's father, the local grocery shop owner (played by Lars Brygmann). The ridicule-inducing appearance of relentless optimism by Brygmann's character, brought about in the performance by a constantly exaggerated smile, marks a tonal clash with the seriousness of the narrative and induces an element of grotesqueness in tone that arguably results in a sort of ironic detachment rather than involvement for the audience. This distancing is also fuelled by brief but sudden eruptions of explicit sex and violence, as seen in the opening scene, in which the sentimental mood created by the lush backlight and sentimental guitar score is abruptly deflated as Jon, in an over the

shoulder shot, walks in on his unknowing father masturbating while spying on a female neighbor.

The result of this aesthetic decision-making in *Skyscraper* is a distinct tonal ambiguity, in which the invitation to audience involvement is continuously countered by tonal shifts with distancing effects. Undercutting audience involvement in this manner ultimately points *Skyscraper* less in the direction of sensitive psychological realism we were initially led to expect and more in the direction of contemporary genre hybrids such as *Adam's Apples* (Anders Thomas Jensen, 2005) and *Terribly Happy* (Henrik Ruben Genz, 2008) that favor the grotesque⁷ and, perhaps most importantly, clearly target an adult audience.

Unequivocal emancipation: *Triple Dare* (Rosendahl, 2006)

In contrast to the poor box office performance of *Skyscraper*, Christina Rosendahl's youth film *Triple Dare*, released in Danish cinemas in 2006, managed sell 107.000 tickets during its theatrical run, making it the most successful of the films funded through the children's and youth film commissioner scheme in the 2000s so far. Why the film managed to connect so successfully with its target audience can, I will argue, at least in part be explained by studying the tone of the film. Compared to the complexity of *Skyscraper*, with its pervasive tonal alteration between distancing and involvement, *Triple Dare* offers a decisively different take on audience appeal by aiming for unambiguous audience involvement instead.

Clearly marketed as a 'girly comedy "teen pic"', borrowing the poster iconography of three girls posing on a white background from a film like *Mean Girls* (2004)' (Jerslev, 2008, p. 185), *Triple Dare* is about the three high school girls Rebekka (played by Emma Leth), Claudia (played by Amalie Lindegård) and Sofie (played by Cathrine Bjørn). Longing to be considered adults, the three of them decide to make a rite of passage to quicken the process. They set up challenges for each other, preferably related to sex, and vow to succeed or freely accept public humiliation if they fail.

Aesthetically, *Triple Dare* employs a pervasive use of stylistic excess. On several occasions, the narrative is punctuated only to extend character movement in specific scenes via use of slow motion. This stylistic device is employed in each scene in which a new challenge is given to one of the girls. Putting the narrative on hold, these

scenes see each girl suddenly posing for the camera in slow motion from various angles as a pile of autumn leaves start to whirl up from the ground. The image is accompanied by a rousing musical theme on the soundtrack and the writing of the challenge in letters across the screen.

However, despite their pausing effect on the narrative, these scenes do not function to evoke detachment. Rather, they seem to work as extended idealising presentations of each character to an audience that is explicitly articulated and situated as young females. What is especially noticeable by this employment of stylistic excess, which also includes a pervasive use of colour grading, is how it functions to enhance emotional involvement despite the fact that the excessive moments deliberately halt the progression of the narrative. Thus, if we begin to trace the stylistic pattern of the film throughout the narrative, we will notice that it shifts to a neutral, unobtrusive mode in moments of emotional significance to the three protagonists. This is evident, for example, in the concluding reconciliation scene on the beach between Rebekka and her love interest Adam (played by Cyron Bjørn Melville). The scene is shot in conventional medium two shots and over the shoulder shots, and is accompanied by a slow, sentimental piano music on the soundtrack that seems to subtly inform the scene's poignant character and emphasise an unambiguous emotional involvement with the characters.

By consistently relying on an unambiguously sympathetic attitude towards its characters allowing for serene audience involvement, with *Triple Dare* the tone thus remains in synch with the film and its message of emancipation and self-expression. Compared to the ironic detachment created by the aesthetic decisions in *Skyscraper*, the decision to employ excess as a stylistic device in *Triple Dare* works with the general aim of the film to create and maintain emotional involvement with the characters throughout the film. While *Skyscraper* ambiguously alternates between distancing and involvement and simultaneously tackles heavy emotional themes, *Triple Dare*, in contrast, anchors its glossy aesthetics in an invitation to serene involvement that ultimately renders it the most *tonally teen* of the two.

Conclusion

Inherently intangible as a critical concept but nevertheless a pervasive affective dimension colouring our experience of a film, tone is perhaps best understood as the interplay of attitudes and feelings imbued in a work. As a vital part of understanding a film's mode of address, unpicking what may count as tonal qualities in a film can alert us to the pervasive evaluative and affective orientations that the film implies towards its fictional world, its character and subject matter. Contrary to the concept of mood, which we may understand as the consistent emotional orientation of the film, tone is subject to moment-by-moment modulation that can work either to challenge our emotional experience, as we saw it in *Skyscraper*, or to consolidate it, as appears to be the case in *Triple Dare*.

Employing tonal analysis to these two films, which stand out as respectively the least and the most commercially successful of the films supported by the children's and youth film commissioner scheme of The Danish Film Institute in the 2000s, we are able to explain how they wield consistently different modes of address in appealing to their audience. Unpicking the complex fluctuation between naïve sentimentality and mocking satire that characterises *Skyscraper* and comparing it to the serene audience involvement and unambiguously benign attitude in *Triple Dare*, I have suggested that the former essentially ends up targeting a grown up audience when compared to the teenage audience that seems so explicitly addressed in the latter.

In the end, however, matters of tone and how it works on the spectator invariably relate to the texture of a film. Attempting to explain the appeal of a given film beyond textual level, such as the commercial success of *Triple Dare* and the equal failure of *Skyscraper*, tonal analysis cannot serve as the exclusive analytic focus. Rather, we need to take into account a wider range of diverse contextual aspects of aesthetic, industrial and cultural character, such as genre preferences, media attention and marketing strategies, in order to understand the commercial appeal of a given film. The attitude and relationship designated by tone may be, as Douglas Pye argues, key dimensions of response and interpretation, but they are also inseparable from our wider understanding of the film (Pye, 2007, p. 75). Thus, unpicking tone in film may yield valuable insights about

how a film works once we are inside the cinema, but leaving open the answer to what got us in there in the first place.

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Notes

- 1 For a discussion of realism in Danish cinema, see Langkjær (2012).
- 2 This definition further matches the aesthetic profile of the films supported through the children and youth film commissioner scheme of The Danish Film Institute (see the list in table 1).
- 3 See Schepelern (2009) and Ramskov (2011).
- 4 See Booth (1961).
- 5 See Smith (1999; 2003).

- 6 See Langkjær (2012) for a wider discussion on realism in Danish cinema.
- 7 And with a similar use of the small town village setting to mythologise rural Denmark as a place inhabited by rednecks and oddball prone to violence and other vices.