

Blockbuster Genres in Danish Independent Film

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Abstract

Throughout the past decade, Danish independent cinema has grown from being amateur home productions to more self-aware production companies. What is fascinating about this development, though, is the fact that many of the indie filmmakers do not react against blockbuster marked dominance, but they respond by delving directly into specific international blockbuster genres and styles in the search for what appears to be missing in Danish cinema. This works for some directors, principally, by directly reacting against the institutional and economic dominance of primarily The Danish Film Institute. Indirectly, the filmmakers seem to react against 'what is allowed' in Danish film culture. Thus, they actually define themselves as being non-mainstream by focussing on international mainstream genres. By way of examples from the Danish indie scene and interviews with noteworthy indie filmmakers, this article draws attention to a still fairly anonymous trend in Danish film.

Keywords Independent film, Danish cinema, blockbuster genres, amateur cinema, film culture.

‘When you’re independent in Denmark,
you’re independent *from* the institute.’

Director Shaky González

Framing: indies rising?

Throughout the past decade, Danish independent cinema has grown from being amateur home productions to more self-aware production companies. What is fascinating about this development, though, is the fact that many of the indie filmmakers do not react against blockbuster marked dominance, but they respond by delving directly into specific international blockbuster genres and styles in the search for what appears to be missing in Danish cinema. This works for some directors, principally, by directly reacting against the institutional and economic dominance of primarily The Danish Film Institute. Indirectly, the filmmakers seem to react against ‘what is allowed’ in a Danish film culture. Thus, they actually define themselves as being non-mainstream by focussing on international mainstream genres. By way of examples from the Danish indie scene and interviews with noteworthy indie filmmakers, this article draws attention to a still fairly anonymous trend in Danish film.

One objective of this article is to probe the ground for research into Danish independent cinema; no research has been done so far. This means that I need to frame my analysis with a short historical account of such productions in Denmark. My main focus of the article is, however, to introduce and highlight some of the generic and stylistic processes in the Danish indiefilm culture at present. My empirical material is procured through several e-mail interviews, which is a fairly new qualitative research method with both obvious advantages and drawbacks (Meho, 2006; Opdenakker, 2006). Here, I do not have room to delve deeper into the epistemological framework of such interviews, but I would like to underline the most important benefits. Lokman I. Meho stresses that the lack of in-person contact in online communication may, by virtue of anonymity, result in ‘little accountability’ (Meho, 2006, p. 1289). However, this implies that the opposite may be the case as well when the

participants are clearly named. In my case, the participants have been very interested in providing information about their film background in order to gain a voice in the film culture. The drawback here may be that I could be used as a marketing tool, which is why I must underline that I do not necessarily agree with the filmmakers' contentions. My interest is rather to pose them as an existing 'understanding of social and cultural phenomena' (Meho, 2006, p. 1284): that is, indie filmmakers' reflections on genres and styles Danish cinema in general.

This article is then the first account of a fairly unheard voice in the Danish film culture and as such the aim is to describe what we see and why we see such reactions. In essence, I realised that a number of my interviewees from the indie milieu independently drew attention to structural mechanisms regarding the presence and absence of certain genres in Danish film. 'DFI and the various consultants through the years dislike the support for genre film', says director Sohail A. Hassan. This means that I combine, substantiate and explain my findings through e-mail interviewing with a hypothesis about genre and style developments in Danish film: some genres and styles have had very little room in the established Danish film culture.¹

Independent cinema: a Danish film culture?

Already accentuated in his book title, Michael Z. Newman locates *independent cinema* as 'an American film culture' (Newman, 2011). Of course, the concept in itself has its roots in American cinema and has existed almost as long as film production has been going on. The term 'independent' was allegedly originally used as a description of filmmakers that refused to join The Motion Picture Patent Company, founded 1908 (King, 2005, p. 3). The patent company was declared 'an illegal restraint of trade' (King, 2005, p. 3) in 1915, but was soon replaced by a dominant Hollywood studio system from which to be independent.

Through the history of American cinema, independent cinema has been more or less referred to as being in opposition to Hollywood – defined as both 'a literal place and a state of mind' (Holm, 2008, p. 17). I cannot delve deeply into this conceptual discussion here, but a few things seem to be certain if we confer with titles dealing with indie film cultures: a) the idea of independence is by

all means difficult to define; b) independency is a historical variable that evolves in relation to a film culture at a certain time and place; c) approaches to independent cinema need a contextual approach (Holm, 2008; Horsley, 2005; Merritt, 2000; King, 2005; Newman, 2011; Berra 2008). There is, so to speak, certainty about the uncertainty of the concept.

One obvious question may therefore be: Why do I use 'independent cinema' as a term if it is so vague and imprecise? I do so because a range of directors, producers, actors and screenwriters in Danish cinema employ the term as a way of assigning themselves a certain – voluntary or imposed – role in the Danish film culture. The association *IndieFILM Denmark* – founded by producer, actor and director Mustafa Ali in 2010 – underlines the appropriation of the concept in the name of the organisation. Director and actor Kim Sønderholm emphasises the term's usefulness with reference to the fact that a lot of the filmmakers – though they are not necessarily widely known – actually make a living in the overall film industry as such. He objects, hence, to the idea of 'amateur cinema' and shows some reluctance towards a reference to 'underground film', because Danish independent cinema for the most part is involuntarily underground. Sønderholm describes the concept as a way of showing that there are filmmakers who are doing something different from mainstream Danish film production.

D.K Holm refers to the fact that the concept of independent cinema – by way of, for instance, the production company Miramax – may have lost its value because it has become 'a marketing tool' (Holm, 2008, p. 13). Danish independent cinema may have a hint of this, but the appropriation of the term is, in this case, rather an attempt to gain a voice in a film culture dominated by powerful actors. This culture – reply several of my interview respondents – is stylistically and generically marked by *social realism* or *folk comedy*.

Is this, then, something new in Danish film? Not really. Danish film culture has, at least throughout the second half of the twentieth century, given birth to critique of the establishment. Both a reorganisation of institutionalised film subsidies and the Danish Film School was launched in the sixties,² and a voice of protest was inevitable already among the first to be educated in the new system. Director Christian Braad Thomsen is an especially interesting example. Being among the first to be educated at The Danish Film School, he was as

well among the first to turn against the dominance of both the film school and the Danish Film Institute. Both organisations are under management of the Ministry of Culture, which moreover makes his reaction a protest against the major funding institution as well as the overall cinema system of Denmark. The critique of the system was incorporated into his debut feature film *Kære Irene* (1971), which actually was funded by the film institute. However, afterwards he has had a hard time gaining subsidies from the institute.

The film company Zentropa was once as well considered an independent company (Horsley, 2005). Established in 1992 by producer Peter Aalbæk Jensen and director Lars von Trier, the company aimed at a break with traditional ways of production and the established film styles. This was severely voiced through the Dogma95 manifest, which was among other things a direct attack on genre cinema. However, today Nordisk Film – the largest production company in Denmark – holds the bulk of the shares of the company, and in that sense it may be difficult to insist on Zentropa as an independent film company. In some way, it may be considered ‘a Danish industrial variant of Miramax’: at first aesthetically and industrially on the outskirts of the contextual film culture, later turning into a major and leading player on the film market. Jake Horsley, however, does interestingly enough still consider Zentropa – and especially Lars von Trier’s films – indie. Though, in his view Trier’s films now wage war against Hollywood and not major operators on the Danish film market (Horsley, 2005). Indies by way of Horsley’s argument about Zentropa still react against the Hollywood system.

These two examples are historical examples of independent players in Danish film culture that is clearly separable from recent Danish indiefilm with its direct focus on popular genres. However, they never decidedly defined themselves as ‘indies’ in the way that the recent and nascent Danish independent film has been doing as an outward method of gaining public attention. It may, though, be doubtful that all new, small and low-budget Danish production companies should be viewed as reacting in exactly the *same* way towards the system. Production companies such as Lone Tower Visuals, Last Exit Productions and Cetus Productions are in different ways direct reactions towards the establishment, while companies such as Roberta Film and Bullitt Film produces low-scale productions while still considering themselves a part of an overall

Danish film culture. However relevant this discussion is, I now leave it aside in order to describe the appropriation of blockbuster genres and styles in recent Danish indies.

I want to make films that are larger than life

Through the last decade or so, we have seen a wide range of new and small Danish production companies show up. D.K. Holm writes that independent cinema throughout film history generally 'mirrors advances in light-weight and inexpensive filmmaking technology' (Holm, 2008, p. 22). If that is the case, and it very much seems so, the recent *digital* development of recording equipment may be viewed as the sounding board underneath indies in the 21st century. This goes for international independent film as well with prevalent examples such as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) and *Paranormal Activity* (2007). A specific horror genre or style such as 'found-footage-film' may have developed out of cheaper digital equipment. This development has influenced Danish indies as well: What IndieFILM Denmark does for upcoming filmmakers is for instance, among other things, to put recording and editing equipment at the producers' disposal. Anything goes, it seems, if the digital devices are used in a noteworthy stylistic manor. Your smartphone may even be a tool for film aesthetics, cf. Patrick Gilles and Hooman Khalili's American indie *Olive* (2011).

Newman focuses on what he calls 'indie realism', which is a way of describing American independent cinema in terms of character based drama, social engagement of the narrative and naturalistic stylistics and themes (Newman, 2011, p. 87-140). This does, of course, not apply to all productions in an indie culture that shows significant inclinations towards several popular genres. However, this special attention to realistic styles and narratives in American independent film (as a reaction towards Hollywood's so-called 'dream factory') suggests a different approach to a dissociation from the establishment than in Danish cinema where character drama, social engagement and naturalism have been a mainstream, institutionalised trend. The Irish-Danish director David Noel Bourke says about the scope of the Danish Film Institute: 'It seems there is a trend for more "socio-realistic" films, light comedies, children's films'. Bourke's off-hand hunch seems to apply to the history of Danish cinema where realism has had a strong position (cf. Hansen, 2013a;

Langkjær, 2012). Several of my respondents claim that it is especially hard to receive attention from the film institute if the project is considered a piece of genre cinema. 'For a long time', says director Svend Ploug Johansen, 'it has been a joke in the horror environment that the film institute only supports social realism or folk comedy' (Lindberg, 2012, p. 26). What we see in Danish indiefilm, according to among others director Sohail A. Hassan, is a prevalent attention towards the genres and styles that receive very little overall attention in the established Danish film culture.

Regarding horror, Kim Sønderholm is a leading figure on the Danish indie scene. However, he has recently been pursuing an international career, but he is frequently used as an actor in Danish indies. His focus has, from the start, been horror seasoned with elements from thrillers and slashers. His debut film *Craig* (2008) is a lengthy study into the mind of a serial killer – a theme he reuses from his short film 'Mental Distortion' (2008). His two next movies, *Tour de Force* (2010) and *Little Big Boy* (2012), follow similar trends. Sønderholm's interest in horror is not only an aesthetic practice, but he employs horror as a special indie strategy: 'Luckily, especially the horror genre has so incredibly many fans who, at any price, want see whatever they can find', he says. 'Principally, it is a question of supply and demand'. This strategy has lead Sønderholm – and his films – into the English speaking market where his films have received some critical attention.

Several other directors in the indie environment focus on horror. The above mentioned Ploug Johansen calls his films 'indie-horror' and has, until now, directed short horror films such as 'Skizo' (2008) and 'Ansigtet' (2012) as well as a conspicuous horror stylised version of the H.C. Andersen story 'Historien om en mor' (2005). 'Ansigtet' was included in the compilation DVD *Supernatural Tales* (2012) that includes sixteen Danish indie short horror films.³ Nicolas Russel Bennetzon's *Glimt* (2006) is another noteworthy example: it is the first attempt to direct a Danish j-horror (Japanese horror) film. Casper Haugegaard's *Opstandelsen* (2010) is among the very few officially released Danish zombie-films. Slasher horror, besides Sønderholm's films, takes up some space as well: David Noel Bourke's *Last Exit* (2003) and Emil Ishii's *Rovdrift* (2009) are in this case good examples. In all, this special attention to horror on

the indie scene is in some way a reaction towards a genre that receives little attention in the overall Danish production culture.

Of course, Danish film history includes some examples of the horror genre. In the 1990's the cooperation between director Martin Schmidt and writer Dennis Jürgensen resulted in two teen horror films. Subsequently, Schmidt made two additional horror films, but started directing television series during the 2000's. However, Schmidt and Jürgensen resumed the collaboration with *Bag det stille ydre* (2005), which was produced by the indie company Wise Guy Productions. In 2007, two horror films were released from larger established companies with institute subsidies: Hans Fabian Wullenweber's *Cecilie* and Martin Barnewitz's *Kollegiet*. One interesting borderline case is Carsten Myllerup. He was among the first director's to be educated at the Danish independent film school Super16. Afterwards, he was granted institute subsidies for his debut film *Midsommer* (2003), which in turn was remade by the American indie director Dan Myrick as *Solstice* (2008) (one of the guys behind *The Blair Witch Project*). Lastly, Ole Bornedal's *Nattevagten* (1994) has a profiled position as a groundbreaking Danish horror film, but these very few titles – only six state subsidized horror films in twenty years – never really established an actual *tradition* for horror in Danish film. The reasons for this may be various, but for indie directors this appears as hesitance from the film institute.

However, internationally there is too a certain drift, mentioned by Sønderholm, towards underground horror within various indie cultures – sometimes referred to as *sleaze cinema*. Indie horror in Denmark seems, then, to be going both ways: There is a search for a indie horror hit, on the one hand, while the producers, on the other hand, never state that they would turn down potential subsidies from the institute. Basically, horror has both its underground tendencies as well as an international blockbuster impact and both aspects are internationally clearly encompassed by the unexpected indie blockbuster phenomenon *The Blair Witch Project*.

The Chilean-Danish director Shaky González has been playing a weighty role in Danish independent cinema for over fifteen years. He debuted with *Nattens engel* (1998) – one of the very few Danish vampire films – and followed up with *One Hell of a Christmas* (2002). However, González is additionally interesting because he introduces genres and styles in Danish cinema that are missing or at least

very rare. His post-apocalyptic short film 'The Last Warrior' (2010) is mainly a spoof of 80's action-adventure films such as the *Mad Max*-series (1979-85) and *Conan the Barbarian* (1982). Underlining the action-adventure spoof, Eric Holmey replays his own role from *Conan the Barbarian*. González's third feature film *Pistoleros* (2007) is, then, an action film and a gangster drama in the style of Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino, which basically means the ironic, humorous, violent exploitation action style sometimes referred to as *grindhouse* or even *tarantinoesque* (Holm, 2004: 139).

Several of my respondents – for instance the actor David Sakurai and horror director Svend Ploug Johansen – not only refer to Rodriguez as a stylistic inspiration, but they also directly place his book *Rebel Without a Crew* (1995) as a programmatic and strategic toolbox: 'If you want to be a filmmaker and you can't afford film school, know that you don't really learn anything in film school anyway' writes Rodriguez (1995, p. xiii). Rodriguez has – for indie directors not only in Denmark – become a voice for a generation of filmmakers focussing on a general 'do it yourself' culture. In many of my interviews, this is underlined by a recurrent reference to the indie filmmaker's love and care for film in itself and the subsidised film as a creativity killer based on a sense of economic bureaucracy.

González's genre interests connect the two most conspicuous genres on the indie scene: horror and gangster action, which are both very prevalent in his debut film with obvious similarities with Robert Rodriguez's *From Dusk till Dawn* (1996).⁴ As a reaction towards the dominance of realism in Danish cinema, González maintains his interests in directing films that – with his own phrase – 'are larger than life' Qualitatively, this means heavy doses of action and the supernatural with a sense of humour. Gangster action is, generally, a conspicuous genre or style among Danish indies. Jonas Kvist Jensen's *Brutal Incasso* (2005) – co-written by Kim Sønderholm – appropriates Rodriguez's aesthetic violence with an evident hint at Quentin Tarantino's early films. David Noel Bourke's *No Right Turn* (2007) employs aesthetic violence in a stylistic blend of tarantinoesque gangster violence and art house pulp. Shaun Rana's *Westbrick Murders* (2010) draws heavily on Rodriguez's *Sin City* (2005). Dennis Bahnsen's *Krokodillerne* has an evident scent of Tarantino while at the same time drawing heavily on Lasse Spang Olsen's Danish gangster action comedies. In two short films, Philip Th. Pedersen picks up the

gangster drama in very different ways: 'The Fro' (2011) is a spoof of a humourous blackspoitation gangster drama while 'Små mænd' is more in tune with socio-realistic gangster films such as Nicholas Winding Refn's *Pusher*-trilogy (1996-2005). 'Små mænd' focuses on the relationship between Danish gangsters and integration, which is also an incorporated component in Kaywan Mohsens low-budget productions *Eye for Eye* (2008) and *Made in Denmark* (2012). Dennis Petersen's *Det perfekte kup* (2008) is more in tune with the mentioned lightweight Danish gangster comedies, a sort of a rough version of *Olsen Banden* (1968-2008), while Stefan Kjær Olsen's 'Blodbødre' (2013) is perhaps the indie production that comes the closest to a realistic portrait of Danish criminals.

In general, the gangster drama in Danish indiefilm points in different directions, but the films that are both feature length and widely distributed on a video format (*Westbrick Murders*, *Brutal Incasso*, *Krokodillerne*, *No Right Turn*, *Nattens engel* and *Pistoleros*) all accentuate a style that has been rarely used in Danish cinema. Gangster drama in Denmark has mostly been articulated through two lines of interests. The first one is a light folk comedy version modelled after *Olsen Banden* and similar examples, and the other one is a serious and aestheticised violent version primarily voiced by Nicholas Winding Refn. Tarantino and Rodriguez combined rough violence with a light humoresque tonality, which – as a result in Danish indiefilm – becomes an interesting blend of humour and violence with an inspiration from the two path-breaking American directors. In Denmark, Lasse Spang Olsen paved the way for this type of film with his blockbuster hits *I Kina spiser de hunde* (1999) and *Gamle mænd i nye biler* (2002), which are mentioned as inspiration by indiedirector Jonas Kvist Jensen – and Jensen's *Brutal Incasso* has obvious thematic and title similarities with Olsen's *Incasso* (2004). Generally, this means that Danish cinema of course has its narrative tradition of various gangster dramas, but besides Olsen's films, the humouresque, aestheticised and violent version of the style has worked its way into films produced without state subsidies. Interestingly enough, two of Olsen's latest films – *Den gode strømmer* (2004) and *Den sidste rejse* (2011) – was made without funding from the film institute.

Indies in Denmark: counterpublics or training camps?

In my interviews, there seems to be a gradual transition from being truly independent (dubbed 'guerrilla style' by David Noel Bourke) towards being a part of the establishment. Hesitance towards the film institute comes directly from a sense of reluctance towards genre cinema, which indirectly means that indie directors fear losing generic control of their projects if they were to do what it takes to be granted subsidies. In some cases, participants express that they seem to play a subordinated role and feel particularly pressured by the establishment; these are the filmmakers I would describe through *institutional independency*. It is within this group we find the voices that are the most critical and to some extent here we, as well, find most of the horror and action productions, which seems to link critique of state subsidies with specific absent styles and genres in Danish cinema. The main reason why they are institutionally independent is the fact that they have either been turned down by the institute or basically expect to be if they apply for funding with a specific genre project.

In other cases, participants highlight that they are in the film business because they feel a need to be and not in opposition to institutions and production companies; I would call this grouping *aspiring independency*. These two groups are not at all clearly separable, and there are developments back and forth from one group into the other. One obvious example is, of course, the director Nicholas Winding Refn, who left the Danish Film School (the establishment) in order to shoot *Pusher*, but today he is granted substantial subsidies for his feature films. The Swedish director Johan Melin made his second feature *Preludium* (2008) in Denmark as an indie director, but he was granted subsidies for his third film *Profetia* (2009). Shaky González too moves back and forth between state funded film and independent productions, but he still insists on being indie, because the most of what he has made has been indie.

This means that the Danish film culture in general seems marked within by what Nancy Fraser has called 'multiple publics', but among these there may be 'interpublic relations' (Fraser, 1990, p. 65-66): Institutionally independent filmmakers, such as David Noel Bourke or Sohail A. Hassan, can then, within the Danish film culture, be described through Fraser's term *subaltern counterpublics*: 'they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated

social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses' (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). The counterdiscourses are, then, the films themselves and ways to finance and produce film. Rather than being countercultural, aspiringly independent filmmakers, such as Charlotte Madsen or David Sakurai, can be explained by what Jostein Gripsrud – drawing on Nancy Fraser – calls *training camps*: 'these counterpublics would often tend to regard themselves as training camps and waiting rooms for aspiring future participants in the "proper", national public sphere' (Gripsrud, 2010, p. 5). Here, the specific national public sphere would be the established, subsidised film culture. However, critique may come from both sides of the matter and even from established and state subsidised filmmakers as well (cf. Vuorola and Hjortshøj, 2013).

In conclusion, Danish independent cinema seems to react, through such genres or styles, against an established film cultural and institutional focus on social realism and light comedy. Reality may not be as obvious as the environment itself makes it seem if we ask the film institute itself, says Rasmus Horskjær (film consultant at DFI), but nevertheless the indies are clearly doing something different than Danish cinema in general has been doing: There *is* no real tradition for horror in Denmark, while the gangster drama – perhaps stemming from films like *Olsen Banden* – still mainly fuses with non-violent satire and comedy. These genres and styles are, then, appropriations of international trends and, thus, introduced in a Danish film culture that seems to have a stylistic void.⁵ Quantitatively, indie filmmakers in Denmark then seem to have a point. To some extent, Horskjær defends his position as a film consultant by underlining that he does not subsidise certain genres, but funds what he terms 'good films' in general. However, he acknowledges the fact that specifically horror has been almost absent in Danish cinema. Claus Ladegaard (DFI head of Production and Development) admits that 'subsidies for horror film historically has been modest', but he assumes that this may change (Lindberg, 2012). Whether or not Danish indiefilm, qualitatively, lives up to the expectation of supplying Danish cinema with an alternative is a study left for later. And if change in Danish cinema is about to come, only time will tell.

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- 'The Last Warrior', 2010. [Short film] Directed by Shaky González. Denmark: First Tribe Films.
- Tour de Force*, 2010. [Film] Directed by Kim Sønderholm. Denmark: Cetus Productions.
- Olive*, 2011. [Film] Directed by Patrick Gilles and Hooman Khalili. USA: Cave Scribe.
- Made in Denmark – The Movie*, 2012. [Film] Directed by Kaywan Mohsen. Denmark: Royal1.
- Little Big Boy*, 2012. [Film] Directed by Kim Sønderholm. Denmark: Apotheosis Film.
- Caroline – den sidste rejse*, 2012. [Film] Directed by Henrik Kolind. Denmark: Roberta Film.
- 'Blodbrødre', 2013. [Short film] Directed by Stefan Olsen. Denmark: Idéfabrikken.

Notes

- 1 This article is part of a larger work in progress about Danish independent cinema and low budget productions in Denmark. I have published various interviews with players in the field – for example, Mustafa Ali, David Noel Bourke, Sohial A. Hassan, Svend Ploug Johansen, David Sakurai, and Jonas Kvist Jensen – in the online magazine *Kulturkapellet*. You may consult these for more information.
- 2 The Danish Film Institute was established in 1972 as a continuation of state-financed film subsidies through Filmfonden (est. 1964). In 1997 Statens Filmcentral and Det Danske Filmmuseum were closed and placed under The Danish Film Institute as an umbrella organisation. The Danish Film School was established in 1966. However, the idea of state subsidies goes back to the establishment of Statens Filmcentral in 1938 with the intention of supporting film without commercial interests.
- 3 In between 'Skizo' and 'Ansigtet' we find the *post-apocalyptic* short film 'Global Alarm' (2009), which was a theme and genre that was taken up by a number of indie directors in the film festival MovieBattle 2010 and released on the compilation DVD *Wasteland Tales* (2010).
- 4 For additional information about González, see Hansen (2013b).
- 5 I should note that Danish independent cinema as well has its component of what Holm calls 'non-conformist films stripped of the predictable or familiar story structures' (Holm, 2008, p. 14). This is sometimes termed

art cinema (King, 2005, p. 102) or *art house*. The Swedish director Johan Melin's feature films *Preludium* (2008) and *Profetia* (2009), produced by the Danish company Bullitt Film, and Henrik Kolind's *Caroline – den sidste rejse* (2012) are in this case interesting examples. David Noel Bourke turned away from horror in his second feature film *No Right Turn* (2010) that may be described – besides obvious references to Tarantino – as a coupling of art house and pulp.