

The Multicultural Presence in Contemporary Swedish Film

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In the year of 2000 four different films attracted attention and became connected due to their supposed thematic similarities as well as for being directed and/or written by persons with immigrant background. My intention is to follow up what was then said to be a wave of “immigrant films” and to investigate the multicultural presence in films produced in Sweden during the years 2000-2005. By a critical representational perspective film is seen as a medium which not only represents for example existing ethnic relations of a society, but also as a technology by which representation in the form of different kinds of narratives constitutes the multicultural society. Film is thereby seen as one of several practices which organize and give meaning to every day life where phenomenon as ethnic relations and racism is both visualized and happening.

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This paper focuses on some issues dealing with the multicultural presence in films produced in Sweden during the years 2000-2005. The study as a whole deals with a selection of feature full length films made for cinematic release. To begin with I want to say something about the methodological perspective which motivates the research project as such and that guides the way I look at film in terms of its cultural significance.

Like other kinds of popular culture, film is here investigated as one of several practices which, besides from being objects of consumption and enjoyment also at some level may organize and give meaning to every day life. This is mainly done in the sense that the film media reflects and makes use of at the same time as it produces a shared symbolic universe. As for example Norman K. Denzin states about cinematic texts, they interact, in the same way as other fictional and non-fictional texts, with the worlds of lived experience, creating representations of experience that are interpreted and acted upon by cultural members of a society (Denzin 1995: 200). Phenomenon such as ethnic relations and racism, for example, are then visualized or represented through the media of film but the films are at the same time constructing them as phenomenon. The function of film as public arena is also central. Film is thereby seen as a kind of technology by which representation, in the form of different kinds of narratives, constitutes the multicultural society just as well as it reflects it.

When it comes to influential discourses, among which multiculturalism or the multicultural society has been one during the late 20th and the early 21st century, I would say that this function – film as public arena where public as well as private issues are reflected but also constituted – is especially evident. So to trace the multicultural presence in films produced during a special period of time in a nation is a way of tracing expressions as well as formations of a multicultural discourse that is related to many areas outside the film media itself.

How should the multicultural presence be understood in this context, whether such expression aims at the films and the stories or at the filmmakers, the directors and writers? To begin with there is the risk of reinforcing the tendency where the burden of representation falls on the Other. When stories as well as characters, that are not white or Swedish, are seen as cultural representatives more than others they become more generalised and thereby read as representing certain types more than and less than individual characters.

The year of 2000 marked a starting point of a discourse that connected several different films due to their supposed thematic similarities as well as for being directed and written by directors and writers with immigrant background. They were all together said to contribute with a new perspective of the ethnically enriched Swedish culture. For example in a book with the title *Fucking Film: The New Swedish Film* (a title which refers to a highly popular and influential Swedish film with the title *Fucking Åmål* from 1998), one of the texts states: “The generation of story tellers with immigrant background which the world of literature for such a long time had wished for, ended up in the film instead. They brought colourful and humorous stories about the lives in the suburbs and cultural/ethnic collisions in families where young people and adults live in different worlds” (Björkman et al. eds 2002:33). Of course the intended directors and writers have in varying degrees reacted to this categorising label which implies a narrowed perspective of the films as having something in common at the same time as being different from other Swedish films. Risks of biographical encodings or readings are immanent. The films are in simplified ways discussed as just statements about integration, rather than discussing several contemporary discourses by using the presence of the multicultural as a resource that creates an opportunity for this. A couple of years later though the situation is different since the directors intended made other films which were not

as easily categorised as being about ethnical collisions, and other directors made films about similar subjects.

With this in mind it is of course tricky to choose which films to observe as representing the multicultural presence more than others. What has guided me in my selection has been to choose those that are somehow explicitly addressing the issue of ethnical collisions, ethnic otherness and/or racism, not necessarily as the main theme or conflict of the film but in some way evident as being one of the narrative motors. My overarching argument is that the multicultural representation is here being produced and used as a kind of resource for dealing with central issues, significant for the (popular) cultural climate of the historical time period. I would say that these films make use of and produce the multicultural presence as a resource for dealing with contemporary issues of conflicts, for producing emotional representations and fantasies. And the depicted issues as well as the means for visualizing them are concerns not exclusively for those directly involved in their production but are to be analysed as part of a complex web of experiences, ideas and fantasies that need to be located in their historical, political and social contexts (Young 1996: 175).

What kind of emotional representations then? What fantasies? I intend to point out some of them by using examples from three movies: Josef Fares *Jalla! Jalla!* (2000), Reza Baghers *Wings of Glass/Vingar av glas* (2000), and Susan Taslimis *All Hell Breaks Loose/Hus i helvete* (2002). The themes I want to discuss in relation to this are: gender identities and their supposed state of crisis, especially the male one and the crusade of the unattached individual and the pure relationships.

In the three movies, *Jalla! Jalla!*, *Wings of Glass* and *All Hell Breaks Loose*, a similar conflict is depicted, namely family arranged marriages and young people's resistance to this. This is a classic romantic theme which, in Swedish films during this period, finds a kind of new resonance in the multicultural milieu. The individual's right to choose how to live and who to love are contrasted with the collectivist, traditional, patriarchal but also economist qualities. These qualities are dramatized as unavoidable and "natural" but when challenged, finally conquered in the immigrant families. Whilst this evidently is a non issue for the Swedish characters who in these movies are clearly free individuals with no family attachments at all. Here the multicultural provides an exciting mixture and only in relation to this may conflicts between generations and traditions be credible. This theme I think can be analysed by using Anthony Giddens concept of *pure relations*, which is about the Western individuals supposed state of independency and thereby ability to form intimate relations that are, in using Anthony Giddens concept, pure, which means a social relation that is internally referential and fundamentally dependent only by the satisfaction or benefit which is gained by the relationship in itself (Giddens 1991). These are the kind of relationships that the young people in the films strive for and which their parents' generation is depicted as unfamiliar with but finally must learn to accept. The pureness of the desirable relation is also clarified by contrasting it to the economic dependencies and transactions that take place between the immigrant families as part of the marriage arrangements. What we see then is a celebration of this normatively pure relationship consisting of two unattached individuals kept together by nothing more than the strength of their emotions for each other. In this way the pureness becomes mystified, in the sense of naturalized, at the same time as being the unquestionable reasonable norm. This is, as already mentioned a classic more than a new theme, but what is central here is that the multicultural resource is being used for this classic romantic conflict to be retold by offering a credible context for the unattached individual to fight its unquestionable righteous crusades. These crusades are only possible as such when credible as well as serious resistance is provided, challenged and finally over won and here is where the multicultural resource is made useful.

The three mentioned films have similarities in depicting this theme and in their usage of the multicultural resource but they also differ in significant ways. Whilst the multicultural context and mixture provides a comic resource in *Jalla! Jalla!* it is mainly a melodramatic or even tragic resource in *Wings of Glass*, whilst both of these potentials are used in *All Hell Breaks Loose*, which is something of a mixture of a melodrama and a dark comedy. The differences between the movies also concern the gender aspects.

In the comedy *Jalla Jalla* the two male characters have different problems at the private/personal level. Roro, with a Lebanese background, is about to activate the just mentioned crusade for the pure relationship since he has a secret Swedish girlfriend. This becomes a problem when his father wants him to marry the daughter of a fellow countryman and after meeting this girl, Jasmine, he finds out that if he does not accept to marry her she will by force be sent to her relatives and married to some other unknown and supposedly traditionalist man in Lebanon. The film's other main character, the Swedish guy Måns, has a problem which stems more from within, within himself and within his relationship to his girlfriend. He is experiencing impotence and his trouble with this state, which at the end of the film is resolved when he falls in love with Jasmine, is one of the narrative motors of the film. Måns' masculinity is obviously in crisis and his different ways of trying to cure his impotence is the comic focus of the film. The problem is introduced in the in a scene where Måns and his girlfriend are acting out a sexual role play where they pretend to be strangers, as a way of arousing Måns' sexual ability, something which does not succeed. This Swedish couple is obviously living in a pure relation with no constraining attachments to their parent generation, ethnic collectives or economic dependencies. There is no outer resistance to their relation and they are both obviously sexually liberated. This state seems to have resulted in a loss of romantic and sexual excitement, depicted in uninspired and unsuccessful efforts to spice up their sex life. But if the Swedish young man meets no resistance and therefore no possibility to fight for his status as an unattached individual able to enter a pure relation, the pureness of that relation risks to become demystified and the active masculinity seems to weaken. This loss of masculinity of the Swedish man is depicted as tragicomic and also as frustrating for Måns' girlfriend who is outspoken and pushy in her sexual claims. The Swedish man may however regain his active role in relation to the immigrant young woman who is more innocent but clearly in need of someone to fight the crusade for her. Jasmine has no means to fight this crusade for her self since she is economically dependent on her male relatives and under threat of being sent to Lebanon against her will. The Swedish man is obviously independent not only of family attachments but also of economic transactions, depicted as alien and unnatural parts of the intimate sphere.

This is a theme even more dealt with in *Wings of glass*. The main character of this film is Nazli, a young woman with Iranian background, whose fight for independence is depicted in a more dramatic way than in the comic tone of *Jalla! Jalla!* Nazli's father Abbas wants her to marry her cousin Hamid and in the course of arranging this both father and daughter become economically involved with Hamid who has resources to give Abbas a loan and to offer Nazli an employment in his video shop. By referring to these economic relations but also by depicting Hamid as vulgar in his way of showing off his economic capacities, the film creates a character similar to the male relative who is prompting Jasmine into the arranged marriage in *Jalla! Jalla!*. What both of these characters from different films reflect is a kind of personified threat. Threats not only directed at the immigrant young women but also at the Swedish young men and women since these bad guys are portrayed as young male immigrants who have succeeded economically though probably not in an earnest way. In style and masculinity they have no sense of moderation, they are tasteless, vulgar, brutal and morally degenerated, especially in their relation to women and when provoked even violent (Tigervall 2005). In *Wings of Glass* this frightening characters contrast is the young Swedish

modern man. Nazli meets him in Johan who when first introduced in the story is depicted as at loss with himself, without direction in life and in severe economic difficulties. He makes a desperate, unskilled and therefore failed attempt to rob the video shop where Nazli is working. As the story develops though with Nazli and Johan falling in love with each other, Johan quickly transforms to a descent and engaged young man who tries to win Nazli as well as her father's acceptance in his straightforward way of explaining to them that he loves Nazli and cares for nothing but her wellbeing. The pureness of the relationship the young mixed couple is about to enter at the end of the movie is strongly underlined by the young immigrant woman's active choice of loving the young Swedish man no matter what her father thinks of this. And for the Swedish man, the active part in this crusade has provided him a direction which seems to reinforce him as a responsible person who has the right to demand respect from the immigrant father, the conquered traditionalist patriarch.

There is an element of serious risk though in the young immigrant woman's fight for independence. Nazli is constantly depicted as restless and oppositional in words, acts and style. Her way of dressing in short skirts and tight tops are commented both by her father as inappropriate and by Hamid as both inappropriate and attractive. When Nazli rejects Hamid's advances he tears off her clothes and tries to rape her. After that incidence she puts some of the blame on herself for her way of dressing and changes style to a more moderate feminine style. This slight but crucial change of appearance is significant for the reconciliation that Nazli is moving towards at the end of the film.

This feminine risk element which comes with the independence fight, especially for restless and oppositional young women, is one of the main themes in the third film *All hell breaks loose*. The main character of this movie, Minoo is also a young woman with Iranian background. The film begins with her returning to her family in Sweden for her sisters' wedding, after a period of escape in USA where she went after being thrown out from her home by her father as a result of her intimate involvement with a young Swedish man. There are no central Swedish characters in this film but the two who appears are two men who are the objects of desire for Minoo and her mother. These Swedish men are portrayed as offering the women nothing more than romantic and sexual pleasure. And that is what makes them attractive to the immigrant women. Especially when contrasted to the fellow country man Minoo's father wants her to marry and to the father himself, in relation to his wife, who never had the opportunity to choose him since that choice was made by their parents. For Minoo the individualistic crusade and its aftermath has been a partly painful experience. Traumatizing memory sequences from the stay in USA give glimpses of her posing in pornographic photo-sessions and performing at a strip club. Her experiences can be read as an illustration of the consequences a collectivist, traditionalist and patriarchal family and community structure may cause a young women who oppose strongly to this. Minoo and the film takes this to the extreme in the end when she as a way of punishing the hypocrisy of her father crashes her sisters wedding party by performing a strip show. As she undresses in front of the ethnic collective who are attending the party she is also symbolically undressing the authority and honour of the patriarch, her father. As the title of this film suggests, *All Hell Breaks Loose* offers no reconciliation, rather it dramatizes a chaotic state of disintegration which follows the breakdown of patriarchy that is emptied of its entire former means of authority.

To sum up what I want to illustrate by analysing these examples is that the multicultural resource provides means for celebrating the unattached individual and the pureness of intimate relations where individuality as well as the ideal separation of economy and love are secured. The gender aspects of the multicultural resource are being used for fantasies of regaining a threatened white masculinity by conquering both the traditionalist patriarch and the brutal and vulgar young male immigrant, and for depicting the risks of female sexuality.

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Films

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