

KNUT HAMSUN AT THE MOVIES IN TRANSNATIONAL CONTEXTS

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This article is a historical overview that examines how the literary works of Knut Hamsun have been adapted into films over the past century. This “Cook’s Tour” of Hamsun at the movies will trace how different national and transnational cinemas have appropriated his novels at different historical moments. This is by no means a complete and exhaustive overview. The present study does not cite, for example, Hamsun films made for television or non-feature length Hamsun films. Thus I apologize in advance for any favorite Hamsun-related films that may have been overlooked. But ideally the article will address most of the high points in the international Hamsun filmography.

On the subject of the cinema, Hamsun is famously quoted as having said in the 1920s: “I don’t understand film and I’m at home in bed with the flu” (Rottem 2). Yet while Hamsun was voluntarily undergoing psychoanalysis in Oslo in 1926, he writes to his wife Marie about wishing to learn to dance and about going to the movies more (Næss 129). Biographer Robert Ferguson reports that in 1926, Hamsun began regularly visiting the cinemas in Oslo “taking great delight in the experience, particularly enjoying adventure films and comedies” (Ferguson 286). So we have the classic Hamsun paradox of conflicting statements on a subject, in this case the movies. Meanwhile, it is also important to remember that the films that Hamsun saw in 1926 would still have been silent movies with intertitles and musical accompaniment, and thus his poor hearing would not have been an impediment to his enjoyment.

According to available sources, three of the earliest Hamsun adaptations that we know of are now considered completely lost. Two of these were Russian and the third was Czech. The Russian films were *Rabi lyubvi* from 1916 (adapted from the short story *Slaves of Love* and directed by Boris Sushkevich). In 1917, Olga Preobrazhenskaya directed *Viktoriya (Victoria)*. Initially an actress, she became Russia's first female film director. From Czechoslovakia in 1922 came *Poslední radost* (adapted from Hamsun's 1912 novel *The Last Joy*) and directed by Václav Binovec. Again, these films are not believed to have survived in any form, and it is difficult to find still photographs from them, except perhaps in national film archives.

Scandinavian film adaptations of Hamsun commenced only in 1921 with the Norwegian production of *Markens grøde* or *Growth of the Soil*. Several factors play into this. First, the Swedish film industry had famously appropriated two Norwegian literary classics. In 1917 came the film that inaugurated the silent Swedish "golden age" - *Terje Vigen*, adapted from Henrik Ibsen's epic poem and directed by Victor Sjöström. Two years later in 1919 there appeared the Swedish version of Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's *Synnøve Solbakken*, directed by John Brunius. The still fledgling Norwegian silent cinema was eager to re-appropriate the nation's own literary heritage. Plus it wished to add legitimacy to this nascent Norwegian film industry that remained in the shadows of the more advanced Swedish and Danish national film cultures.

As Anne Marit Myrstad (among others) has documented, Rasmus Breistein's 1920 film *Fant-Anne* helped launch a decade of Norwegian films within a rural National Romantic genre, and *Growth of the Soil* in 1921 helped bolster that project (Myrstad 181-193). The novel *Markens grøde* had only been published in 1917 and Hamsun had won his Nobel Prize in 1920, so the timing was ripe for this Norwegian film version.

A Dane, Gunnar Sommerfeldt, adapted and directed the film, while also wittily casting himself in the role of Geissler, the

former sheriff who greatly influences events behind the scenes. The film was also shot on location in Hamsun's own Nordland, setting a pattern for most future Hamsun films. *Growth of the Soil* was photographed by another Dane, George Schneevoigt, who was Carl Th. Dreyer's cameraman during the early 1920s. The film was believed lost until 1971 when an American release print with English intertitles was found in New York City. Later a more complete print was found at the Dutch Film Museum, and both prints as source materials made possible the recent restoration and DVD release of the film.

The following year, 1922, Norway released a version of *Pan*. Harald Schwensen was the producer, director, and screenwriter, and he even cast himself as the hunting companion. His brother, Hjalmar Fries Schwensen played Thomas Glahn, Gerd Egede-Nissen was Edvarda, and Lillebil Ibsen played Eva. The film was shot by Johan Ankerstjerne in Melbu in Nordland. Perhaps for budgetary reasons, the "Glahn's Death" epilogue scenes were shot in Algeria instead of India and thus Glahn perishes in North Africa in this film version. In an interesting parallel, just as Hamsun had written and published the "Glahn's Death" epilogue before the main section of *Pan* itself, the filmmakers completed location shooting in Algeria first, before beginning shooting in northern Norway.

Meanwhile in 1923, the Swedes, not to be outdone, again decided to adapt another Norwegian author, this time using Hamsun's *Sværmere* (or *Dreamers*). Directed by John Brunius and titled *Hårda viljor: En norlandskomedi* (or *Strong Wills: A Comedy of the Northern Districts*), the film was shot in Brønnøy in Nordland and at the Svensk Filmindustri studios in Råsunda outside Stockholm.

This was the last Hamsun film made during the silent period (which essentially ended in Europe by about 1930-31). The first Hamsun "talking pictures" (i.e., films with recorded sound and dialogue) emerged not from Scandinavia but from Germany during

the Third Reich. Dr. Joseph Goebbels was a failed novelist long before becoming Adolph Hitler's Minister of Propaganda and Enlightenment. Goebbels had often said that Hamsun was his favorite author, and not coincidentally, Third Reich cinema of the 1930s appropriated two of Hamsun's most beloved novels for screen adaptation, *Victoria* in 1935 and *Pan* in 1937. Goebbels's diaries reveal that he took an unusually keen interest in both film productions (Moeller 68). *Victoria* was partly shot on location in Bergen, the Barony of Rosendal, and other west coast Norwegian sites. Directed by Carl Hoffman, it starred Luise Ullrich as Victoria, Mathias Wieman as Johannes, and Alfred Abel as Victoria's father. In another Nazi cinema adaptation of a Norwegian author, actress Luise Ullrich later played Nora Helmer in the 1944 German film *Nora*, based of course on Ibsen's *A Doll House*.

Reportedly, Goebbels attempted negotiations with MGM to bring Greta Garbo from Hollywood to Germany for an adaptation of *Pan* (Kreimeier 290), but that obviously never came to be. Even so, in 1937, Germany released this film version as *Pan: The Fate of Lieutenant Thomas Glahn* (*Das Schicksal des Leutnant Thomas Glahn*). Directed by the Austrian actor Olaf Fjord, this was the first and last film Fjord ever directed and there may be a reason for that. While Goebbels had made the *Pan* production one of his pet projects, the film minister was greatly disappointed by the final product. In his diary entry for April 4, 1937 Goebbels writes: "A bad film. Drawn out to epic proportions. There is no dialogue, but no plot either. Is it possible to film Hamsun at all?" (Moeller 75). The German-made *Pan* was released in Norway in a dubbed version that fully attempted to "Norwegianize" it. The advertising campaign in Norway stressed that it was the first foreign film to be dubbed into Norwegian and one poster crowed: "Norwegian novel! Norwegian theme! Norwegian speech!"

No further film adaptations of Hamsun's novels emerged again until nearly a quarter of a century later. Perhaps in the

immediate wake of the Second World War, a Hamsun film might have proved too controversial or commercially risky. But, in 1961, the West Germans disinterred Hamsun on screen with a version of the author's 1923 novel *Siste kapitel* or *The Last Chapter*. *Das letzte Kapitel* was directed by Wolfgang Liebeneiner and location shooting in color took place in Geiranger, Lom, and Gudbrandsdalen.

In 1962 the Swedish studio Sandrews released a color-film adaptation of *Pan* that was titled *Kort är sommaren* or *Short is the Summer*. The story was updated to contemporary Scandinavia and the use of 1960s-era modern dress seems a little incongruous for Hamsun's 1894 novel. The film was a Swedish-Danish co-production artistically, in that it was directed by the Danish filmmaker Bjarne Henning-Jensen, who collaborated on the screenplay with his wife, Astrid Henning-Jensen. Meanwhile, *Kort är sommaren* includes much of the Ingmar Bergman stock company of that period, if not the great Swedish director himself. It was shot by Bergman's principle cinematographer of the 1950s, Gunnar Fischer, and features Bergman regular Jarl Kulle in the lead role as Glahn. Strikingly, four years before Bergman's *Persona* famously joined them together, Bibi Andersson and Liv Ullmann were cast as Edvarda and Eva respectively. Norwegian actor and modernist poet Claes Gill was cast as Herr Mack and the young Britt Ekland had a small role as well.

In 1966 came *Sult (Hunger)*, perhaps the most critically acclaimed adaptation of a Hamsun novel to date. Written and directed by the Danish filmmaker, Henning Carlsen, this was also the first official Danish-Norwegian-Swedish co-production. Carlsen cast the Swedish actor Per Oscarsson to play the lead. Oscarsson gives one of the titanic performances in Nordic film history here, and he well deserved his award for Best Actor at the Cannes Film Festival in 1966. Swedish actress Gunnel Lindblom played "Ylayali," and the rest of the cast was rounded out by Danes and Norwegians. Henning Carlsen used actual street

locations in Oslo to substitute for Kristiania in 1890, and he has claimed that even five years after the filming, the city had changed so much that using many of those same street locations would have been impossible. As it was, Carlsen quickly figured out that using long lenses created a very shallow depth of field in his shots and made the film's ambience feel much more like the 1890s than the 1960s. Unlike the source novel, *Sult* has no first-person narrator. Instead, Carlsen employs experiments in film style (for example, discordant music, erratic editing, and light-saturated dream and hallucination sequences) in order to approximate Hamsun's own radically subjective prose style. The film was clearly inspired by the French New Wave of the early 1960s, and Carlsen has subsequently stated that *Sult*'s style in many ways anticipates the aesthetics of the Danish "Dogme 95" movement of the 1990s.

One of the lesser-known but most fascinating Hamsun adaptations is *Mysteries*, a Dutch-French co-production from 1978. The director-writer was Paul de Lussanet, and the cinematographer was the German-born Robby Müller (perhaps best known for his subsequent work with directors Wim Wenders and Jim Jarmusch). The film was shot on the Isle of Man in the Irish Sea, which already sets it apart visually from most Hamsun adaptations. This is not a Norwegian landscape in the slightest, yet its very unfamiliarity and eerie strangeness are actually a great fit for the unpredictable world of Johan Nilsen Nagel. Dutch actor Rutger Hauer (who most famously later played the Replicant Roy Batty in *Blade Runner*) not only gives an excellent performance as Nagel but in costume and make-up he often seems a dead ringer for Knut Hamsun in the 1890s.

The Dutch-born actress Sylvia Kristel, most remembered now for the European soft-core porn series of *Emmanuelle* movies in the 1970s, plays Dagny Kielland. British actors play the other leads: Rita Tushingham as Martha Gude and David Rappaport as Minutten (and here called the Midget). Although the novel

Mysteries has no first-person narrator, the film provides a voice-over narration by Rappaport's Midget character, which actually works as a very clever narrative strategy. Unfortunately, even though the Dutch actors Rutger Hauer and Sylvia Kristel were clearly speaking their dialogue in English during shooting, at some point the film's producers decided to have their voices dubbed by very stodgy-sounding speakers of upper-class English. Granted, the leads' slight Dutch accents would have been marked and slightly exotic, but the result of the overdubbing of their actual voices gives their lines at moments a kind of arch artificiality. This mars what is otherwise one of the best adaptations of a Hamsun novel on screen. From the original American video release packaging, one can see that the distributors marketed the film in various guises for various audiences. There is a smattering of male and female nudity in some of the fantasy sequences, and thus the "Euro-trash/soft core porn" aspects were emphasized. Amazingly, one alternate release title for the film was *Evil Mysteries*, which makes no sense at all.

Except for the Nordic co-production of *Sult*, a Norwegian film company had not made a Hamsun film adaptation for theaters since *Pan* in 1922. However, a Norwegian television production of *Benoni and Rosa* (co-funded by West Germany) had been well-received in 1975. And with the release of *Landstrykere* (or *Wayfarers*) in 1989, a "mini-golden age" of Hamsun adaptations with Norwegian financing and participation emerges. Adapted from Hamsun's 1927 novel and directed by Ola Solum, this film was partly shot at Hamarøy. It starred Trond Peter Stamsø Munch as Edevart and Helge Jordal as August.

Hamsun's 1904 novel *Sværmere* (*Dreamers*) was made into *The Telegraphist* in 1993. Directed by Erik Gustavson, it had a screenplay by Lars Saabye Christensen, who had also worked on Ola Solum's *Wanderers* script four years earlier. *The Telegraphist* featured Norwegian actor Bjørn Floberg as Ove Rolandsen and brought in Swedish actors Marie Richardson and Jarl Kulle to play

Elise Mack and her father Fredrik Mack. As with the casting of Swedes Per Oscarsson and Gunnel Lindblom in *Hunger* in 1966, this rather unique pan-Nordic practice of hiring the best actor for the role, regardless of nationality and dialect, worked surprisingly well again. The pan-Nordic casting may also have been a legal requirement of the transnational funding.

In 1995, Danish filmmaker Henning Carlsen returned to Hamsun country, this time with *Pan* (released abroad as *Two Green Feathers*). In this Norwegian-Danish co-production, Norwegian actors Lasse Kolsrud and Bjørn Sundquist played Glahn and Mack respectively, while Danish actress Sofie Grønbøl was Edvarda Mack. In this instance, however, the film script goes out of its way to explain Edvarda's marked Danish speech by indicating that her dead mother was Danish and thus this is why she talks like nobody else in a movie set in northern Norway. The ever-popular Kjerringøy was chosen for the Norwegian location shooting and the "Glahn's Death" epilogue was shot this time in Thailand instead of Algeria. Still not in India as in the novel, but geographically closer, and actually set in the jungle versus the desert.

Also in 1995 came the celebrated film *Hamsun*, based on the elderly Hamsun's actual life from the late 1930s until his death in 1952. A Nordic co-production, it was directed and photographed by Swedish filmmaker Jan Troell. Swedish author Per Olov Enquist adapted the screenplay from the Danish historian Thorkild Hansen's 1978 work *Processen mod Hamsun* on Hamsun's wartime and postwar travails. The film is very successful in bringing to life moments documented earlier in photographs, radio broadcasts, and newsreels. Max Von Sydow as Knut Hamsun and Ghita Nørby as Marie Hamsun are both magnificent in the film, and one cannot imagine any other actors in those roles. Von Sydow however speaks his native Swedish throughout, and Nørby matches him word for word in her native Danish as Marie. Meanwhile the Norwegian actors playing the Hamsun's four

grown children speak Norwegian. A Swedish-speaking Knut Hamsun and a Danish-speaking Marie Hamsun are a bit disconcerting at first (especially since they are based on actual people versus fictional characters) but eventually the spectator simply accepts the multi-lingual smörgåsbord. However, when Adolph Hitler finally showed up in the film, I was grateful that the actor playing him (Ernst Jacobi) actually spoke German and not Polish.

The year 1997 produced two very different Hamsun adaptations from outside the Nordic countries. Canadian cult filmmaker Guy Maddin made the truly bizarre *Twilight of the Ice Nymphs*. Very loosely inspired by *Pan*, the film was shot in a warehouse in Maddin's native Winnipeg, Ontario. It features an eclectic cast that includes the always loopy Shelley Duvall and the stand-up comic Frank Gorshin, who are part of an inane subplot involving murder and mayhem on an ostrich ranch. But at other moments the dream-like art design and colors of *Twilight of the Ice Nymphs* find a stylized visual expression for some of the emotional depths and atmosphere in Hamsun's original *Pan*. The scenes involving the South-African born actress Alice Krige as an Eva-like sylvan siren tempting and being tempted by a French-Canadian Glahn (Pascale Bussieres) are actually very true to the spirit of Hamsun, even filtered through a postmodern pastiche.

Also in 1997 came the French-language Hamsun adaptation, *Un air si pur...* (*An Air So Pure...*) based on the author's 1923 novel *The Last Chapter*, which the Germans had adapted first in 1961. This time it was a French-Polish-Belgian co-production directed by Yves Angelo. The film version is set in Europe in WWI at an old mansion which a doctor and lawyer have converted into a ritzy hotel and health spa. Like the novel, the film focuses on a diverse group of misfits, all with their own secrets, lies and traumas.

In 2001, Maria Giese made an updated version of *Hunger*, set in Los Angeles. It starred Joseph Culp as Charlie Pontus, a struggling screenwriter in Hollywood who has been evicted from

his apartment. He is caught between desperately trying to sell a screenplay to a studio and finding his next meal. Joseph Culp's father, actor Robert Culp, has a cameo in the film as a studio chief, the equivalent of the newspaper editor in Hamsun's *Sult*. The film's budget never exceeded \$10,000, and it was shot guerilla style as a digital feature. The film's website, including a trailer, can be found on the internet at www.hungerthefilm.com.

In conjunction with this year's sesquicentennial celebrations of Hamsun's birth in 1859, a new DVD boxed set of 6 Hamsun films has recently been released here in Norway. The set includes the 1921 *Growth of the Soil*, *Hunger* from 1966, *Wayfarers* from 1989, *The Telegraphist* from 1993, the 1995 *Pan*, and the Jan Troell bio film *Hamsun*.

In conclusion, over the decades, Hamsun on film has shown remarkable elasticity, crossing borders, and appropriated by disparate national cinemas for diverse ends. Again, while not a completely exhaustive study of the subject, this article-overview has explored many of most key pan-Nordic and transnational mutations that Hamsun's literary texts have undergone from early silent cinema to the digital age.

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