

## Americanizing the Scandinavian Super Underdog in 18 Film Remakes

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Transcultural film remakes can offer insight into how distinct cultures have different ideals for the heroic. A protagonist who appears admirable in Scandinavia can have values, traits, or skills that are perceived as less appealing, on average, to audiences in other regions of the world. Screenwriters and directors who want to import a story from a different culture must therefore consider how their main character should be adapted in order to maximize a remake's chance of artistic and commercial success (Singh). Such character adjustment, when informed by the expectations of a new film market, is part of the process Linda Hutcheon refers to as transculturation (141–48).

In this article, I examine eighteen American remakes of fifteen Scandinavian films, from the 1930s to the 2010s. These case studies comprise nearly all Norwegian, Danish, and Swedish films that have been remade in America, with the exception of a handful of films I was unable to acquire access to with reasonable effort. Through an analysis of protagonists in these thirty-three films, I illustrate important cultural differences in respect to the heroic in Scandinavia juxtaposed with the United States. By heroic I refer to the range of values, traits, and skills that a culture promotes as worthy of emulation. While both Scandinavia and the US are Western cultures with a predominantly Protestant background, distinct environments and histories inform significant differences with regard to what their current populations consider to be good and bad.

Social psychologist Geert Hofstede's country comparison shows that the most extreme divergence is found along what he terms the *masculinity axis*, which indicates to what extent a society will be driven by competition and let success be defined by its winners. Hofstede's comparison deems America to be a clearly "masculine" country: outcompeting others has been

culturally promoted as more important than liking what you do. Sweden and Norway are the world's most "feminine" countries, a term Hofstede uses for cultures in which dominant values are caring for others and quality of life. In such cultures, it is considered less heroic to stand out for individualistic achievements, and status is not meant to be flaunted. Feeling good is more important than performing well, and consensus, cooperation, and sameness go hand in hand with sympathy for the most disadvantaged of underdogs. The ideal is doing well together (Hofstede Insights).

Other approaches to cultural differences between Protestant nations arrive at similar conclusions (Bendixsen et al.; Nelson; Witoszek and Midttun). These regional values are not only reflected in fiction, but manifest themselves as consequential policy differences. While the US is often ranked as the developed world's most income-unequal country, the Scandinavian nations are mostly ranked among the most income-equal (World Bank). The Nordic egalitarian ethos informs how the region's gender equality is significantly ahead of what American women experience (Bovino and Gold). An emphasis on togetherness instead of individualism allows Scandinavian governments to tax their citizens to a greater extent than what the US has been able to do, in particular after neoliberalism came to dominate politics in the aftermath of the 1970s.

These and other factors contribute to how in the twenty-first century, Scandinavian social democracies have arisen as a Shangri-La for the West's leftist imagination (Rentoul). While American and many other cultures are under threat from social disintegration, Scandinavia remains a relative oasis. Several United Nations rankings herald these countries as facilitating the pinnacle of human wellbeing in the modern world—both in terms of quality of life and happiness (Helliwell; UNDP). What Scandinavians consider to be heroic undergirds this Nordic Model of governance. For those activists and others who would like to emulate Scandinavian success, a

greater understanding of the culture that underpins social democratic policies could be empowering (Larsen, “Lutheran”). When Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez advocate socialism, they emphasize that they mean something akin to social democracy (CBS News; Washington Post). I posit that the Nordic Model would be unlikely to function well in a country with heroics such as the traditional American ones. A greater awareness of the political consequences of what we deem to be good and bad can therefore bring our attention to how new politics originate from new stories.

Studying how Scandinavian filmmakers craft different heroes than what Americans do can illustrate these cultural differences. I chose remakes since they lend themselves to such a comparison. In the following, I will make a case for what I term *the Scandinavian super underdog*. My remake analysis shows that these are heroes who tend to be less capable, less attractive, and less violent—thus, less individualistically superior and more in need of communal cooperation. To my initial surprise, I also discovered that these super underdogs are less moral than the main characters we are used to from Hollywood. Scandinavian protagonists’ moral ambiguity is what most often has been straightened out in these American remakes, even more so than their other shortcomings. I will argue that these looser morals are a key component to the Scandinavians’ egalitarian storytelling, one that informs their social inclusivity.

### **From Sagas to Fairy Tales to Reality TV**

The Scandinavian super underdog did not arise with cinema, but has centuries-long roots. In the region’s medieval world literature—the sagas—the superior individual is still portrayed as heroic, although in both a nostalgic and critical manner (Larsen, “Evolutionary”). Being capable, good-looking, and violent can be a boon to any saga protagonist. Yet already in these thirteenth-

century stories, critics find a negation of Viking heroics in favor of a more communal ethos (Larsen, “Antipolygynous”). The narratives take place centuries earlier, during the Viking Age, when capable, violent individuals could be of great value to their communities and as members of marauding Viking bands. Even earlier, in the highly stratified Late Iron Age, competition was likely so strong that young men had to incur great risk to accumulate wealth and reputation in order to enter the polygynous marriage market (Raffield et al., “Male-Biased”; “Polygyny”). We can therefore reasonably assume that in the earlier oral tradition that the sagas are thought to build on, these stories adhered more closely to what Hofstede would consider to be masculine values.

Among thirteenth-century Icelandic farmers, new values were needed to promote prosocial collaboration on their cold, barren island in the North Atlantic, long after European powers had reorganized to deny plundering opportunities to Norsemen. The sagas are now commonly read to engage this moral transition (Andersson). The stories often warn against the communal disruption that the superior individual can cause, although such individuals are still portrayed as worthy of admiration (Larsen, “From Oral”). A dramatic evolution had occurred in respect to the heroic by the time we again can tap into a rich ore of the region’s oral storytelling, with nineteenth-century folklore collection. The quintessential Norwegian fairy tale protagonist, Espen Ashlad, could hardly give a more underwhelming first impression. He spends his days mutely poking ashes, discounted by everyone, even his closest family. When challenged by a king or a troll, this up-until-then entirely unimpressive young man reveals his unknown potential and wins the day. The moral is clear: anyone could have it in them to accomplish the greatest of feats—when push comes to shove. In fact, having previously displayed capabilities and talents—whether physical or social—is often punished in these narratives.

The Ashlad character is found also in the folktales of other regions, but nowhere is he as warmly embraced as in the Norwegian tradition (Brunvand). Similar to the lesson we will be able to draw from this article's film remakes, folklore brings our attention to how when "a story or a story motif . . . moves from one cultural environment to another . . . one of the most common changes is that characters are altered to align with the tradition-dominant characters of the new cultural area" (Tangherlini 181). That Ashlad is still immensely popular suggests that also today's Scandinavians are drawn to less innately driven, aggressive, and competitive heroes. The ash-poking protagonist brings our attention to how Nordic hearts are especially open to characters who at first are perceived to be exceptionally incapable. Many Nordic films feature similar protagonists. In the Oscar-nominated and widely beloved *Elling* (2001), the eponymous protagonist suffers from mental disability, which at first renders him unable even to leave his apartment. With the help of government aid and a supportive community, Elling finds his heroic place in society as a stunt poet. The film was part of an early-2000s wave of nine Norwegian films that featured men with mental disabilities (Dancus).

In the same decade, *I en annan del av Köping* (2007–2017) became one of Sweden's most popular TV series by chronicling four people with intellectual disabilities. The concept was remade in Norway as *Tangerudbakken Borettslag* (2009–2018). The Norwegian version was meant to last one season, but the series became a TV sensation with additional seasons and spin-offs. At the same time, other documentary or reality shows featured participants with disabilities. These series, which were widely embraced by critics and audiences, featured underdog protagonists who overcame challenges both at home and work. Challenges escalated with dating and demanding sailing trips. When the participants proved capable of mastering even that—with good help—they were sent mountain climbing, and finally, skiing across Greenland and through

the Northwest Passage. Such polar expeditions are as quintessentially Norwegian as heroic endeavors get; these narratives argued that there was nothing super underdogs could not accomplish with honest effort and communal support. Similar concepts were tried elsewhere but without the astounding success they achieved in Scandinavia (Larsen, “Tangerudbakkeneffekten”; Storm and Särholm).

### **Analyzing Agonistic Structure**

The popularity of films and TV series with such Ashlad-like protagonists attests to the continuity of the region’s egalitarian heroics. These values are partially a result of a geography that until the nineteenth century kept nearly everyone cold, poor, and banded together in small-scale societies. Even the most talented of individuals were mostly prevented from accumulating a lasting surplus by a range of challenges, such as a scarcity of arable land, often catastrophic winters, the Black Plague, and foreign merchants from the Hanseatic League (Myhre). In this environment of limited opportunity, viewing people as mostly equal and dependent upon each other for cooperation and resource-pooling was the most adaptive ethos. By the time industrial revolutions fueled growth, Scandinavians were entrenched in a sense of shared destiny (Larsen, “Investigating”).

When Nordic economies took off after World War Two, the political consensus was to share prosperity as they had poverty. This solidarity runs as a thematic line through folklore, nineteenth-century peasant stories, and the social dramas of early cinema. Whether tricking trolls, stealing from the rich, or fighting Nazis, the Scandinavian super underdog thrives throughout this period. Across the Atlantic, underdogs were different (Hart 25). In the United States, the land of opportunity, diversity, and social-climbing individualism, people shared the

Scandinavian view on equality as it relates to political institutions, rights, and economic opportunity. But Swedes, Danes, and Norwegians strive for equity also in social interaction. Such *equality as sameness* is commonly viewed as the foundational goal of their social democratic welfare states (Bruun). To facilitate this particular form of egalitarianism, an ethos of conformity is instrumental. In the fictional “Law of Jante,” such egalitarianism dictates that to be deemed good by their community, Scandinavians must tone down extraordinariness, ambition, or anything else that elevates them from their community (Sandemose).

Research has long confirmed that Norway, in particular, is among the world’s most conformist nations. By holding back the most capable, while lifting those in need, Scandinavians seek to congregate in the middle where equity and sameness live (Gelfand et al.). Such social engineering may sound off-putting to people from more masculine cultures. The outcome of these and other Nordic values and policies is prosperous, well-functioning nations with some of the happiest people on earth (Oxfeldt et al.). This Nordic preference for meeting in the middle, and for helping the most disadvantaged toward sameness, informs the cultural function of the Scandinavian super underdog. The American Dream is fulfilled when films let everyday protagonists play out an exceptional ability. The third-act climax delivers on a promise of extraordinariness. The Scandinavian ideal of togetherness is fulfilled when underdogs achieve sameness—or, when they are able to defeat someone extraordinary with the help of community.

If these cultural desires are strong enough, we would expect Nordic stories to be structured around more communal quests, often with protagonists who achieve at a lower level than their American counterparts. If a Scandinavian film is remade for the American market, cultural difference should in some instances drive changes to a remake’s *agonistic structure*, a term for how stories convey theme through opposing the values of protagonists and antagonists.

In terms of protagonists, their journeys and character arcs, in general, communicate what a culture promotes. Innovative film can negotiate these values, but there are limits that not even antiheroes can cross. There exists a hard-to-define range of acceptable behavior that if transgressed against will make general audiences turn against the main character and reject the narrative. Storytellers who want to reach and impact a wide audience therefore cannot go against their audiences' salience for certain heroics (Boyd et al.; Carroll; Singh).

One benefit of remaking film is that producers gain rights to a fully developed and often commercially proven story. We should therefore expect less cultural difference between an original and a remake than between Scandinavian and American film in general. Some of these films were chosen due to the Nordic feel of their stories, which could also pull American producers in a conservational direction. A third factor that could prevent more comprehensive transculturation is that good story springs from character. If the American filmmakers want to preserve the core story, there are limits to how much they can adjust the hero before the remake's narrative becomes illogical. Considering these factors, if we still find significant and predictable differences between the Scandinavian and American protagonists, this would support that filmmakers must adapt heroic values to cultural specifics. My analysis focuses on how the following four elements relate to the films' protagonists: (1) capabilities, (2) attractiveness, as portrayed and also inferred from how other characters respond to the protagonist, (3) more violent behavior, and (4) morality, based on: (a) the protagonist's own behavior, (b) in relationship to the behavior of others, and (c) story judgment, inferred from the consequences of immoral protagonist behavior.

### **The Incapable Protagonist**



We see changes with all four of the above elements when *En kvinnas ansikte* (1938) is remade into *A Woman's Face* (1941). Ingrid Bergman passes on to Joan Crawford the role of Anna Holm, a woman whose face was scarred by fire when she was young. This disfiguration makes Anna undesirable for men, leading to a life of bitterness and crime. When a cosmetic surgeon operates on Anna so that her beauty returns, she must choose whether to go ahead with murdering a child, an assassination that Anna's old self had promised to undertake. Her new self wants to do the right thing, but this would open her up to punishment for past sins.

The remake changes Anna to make her more appealing and less morally condemnable. She gets to share more sympathetic backstory to garner audience support. Not only is her scar less off-putting, but she presents herself as someone who—despite her disfigurement—masters piano, violin, painting, and poetry. American Anna has also read every love letter that has ever been published. Unlike her Swedish counterpart, when American Anna gets into a conflict, she threatens with a gun. She also punches her opponent. In the climax, she shoots the bad guy who in the Swedish original causes his own death by riding recklessly. Interestingly, American Anna is portrayed as more capable, as we would expect, but Swedish Anna is assigned greater agency. Ingrid Bergman's protagonist may be less moral, but she makes her own choices throughout the film. She chooses to kill, then changes her mind and opposes her former fellow criminals. In the end, Swedish Anna rejects her love interest for principled reasons, telling audiences that she not only acts boldly, but takes responsibility for her own actions.

To make Joan Crawford's Anna more morally acceptable, the filmmakers deprive her of control of her own destiny. The remake's most consequential adaptation is transforming Anna into a mere victim of love. Her antagonist, instead of being an awkward Swede, is a devil-driven Svengali who charms sultry women two at a time. This antagonist is the first man to see Anna as

a woman and the first to bring her flowers. She therefore suffers twelve operations to make herself prettier for him. Since American Anna had never been in love, she claims to be powerless against this man's touch and command—until she finally breaks the spell and murders him to save the child. The remake's construction of this blinded-by-love relationship has the greatest impact on our view of Anna's morals. Other characters are made more sinister to justify Anna's earlier choices. In both versions, the film ends with Anna entering the future with her cosmetic surgeon. In the American version, they leave as a traditional couple after the man has left his wicked wife behind. In the original, Anna accompanies the cosmetic surgeon, but as an independent woman seeking employment abroad.

In *A Woman's Face*, the protagonist is more capable, more attractive, and more violent, but filmmakers felt the greatest need for significant transculturation with regards to morality. We see this pattern with several case studies, also when the protagonist is a man.

### **The Immoral Protagonist**

In *Intermezzo* (1936), world-famous violinist Holger Brandt (Gösta Ekman) strives to feel young again by pursuing his much younger accompanist Anita (Ingrid Bergman). With this remake, too, *Intermezzo: A Love Story* (1939), filmmakers seem to fear that American audiences could be alienated by the Swedes' more morally complex exploration of sexuality and relationships. In both versions, Holger's extramarital affair is portrayed as clearly wrong. His redemption, however, is more conventional in the remake. In director Gustaf Molander's original, the lovers' separation is driven by Anita's pursuit of self-realization. In the remake, they split up primarily because they agree that cheating is wrong since it causes his wife to suffer. Such conventional

morals are made explicit through dialogue and a letter. American Holger initiates the breakup, then returns home, more downtrodden, to earn his forgiveness.

The American protagonist is also alleviated more from culpability. Anita expresses that she has been obsessed with him since childhood, portraying the much older man as slightly less responsible for their transgression. His American wife is assigned more influence over his immoral choice. Holger offers to retire and travel the world with her—like when they were young—and he only pursues Anita after his wife has rejected his offer. These changes turn Ingrid Bergman's Hollywood debut (she plays Anita in both) into a more clear-cut condemnation of extramarital romance. The remade protagonist is a man who merely made a mistake instead of someone who in a culturally subversive manner explores options to life-long monogamy.

This American interwar morality is updated four decades later. In *Honeysuckle Rose* (1980), Willie Nelson embodies a protagonist who plays country music instead of the violin. The story structure is retained, but put in service of exploring infidelity as a necessary evil that most people partake in. Morality is assigned to cheaters who restrict harm to others and stop sleeping around before they get too old. In the film's first act, band members and their rural community live out drunken lust at a big party, before all is forgiven as they sing "Amazing Grace."

As we saw with the previous remakes, if protagonist misbehavior threatens audience alignment, surrounding characters can be made more unsympathetic to lend morality by comparison. In this second remake, too, the love interest has been obsessed with the protagonist since childhood. Before they meet, the touring family man has been faithful for a long time. To make the protagonist more heroic by America's more violent standards, he also gets to punch a man who insults his woman. Evocative of the 1939 remake, Willie Nelson's protagonist is

granted more agency and importance in several regards; his young love interest is all but removed from the film's final act.

These examples of American re-moralization supports that Hollywood places great emphasis on crafting heroes with strong cultural appeal. Such adherence is perhaps particularly important in the feature film format. There is no lack of ambiguous antiheroes in today's serialized TV, a format that provides viewers with more time to understand and sympathize with main characters (McFarlane 34; Vaage). This is partially why remakes of Scandinavian TV are not my focus. The feature's limited length and its protagonist-centered structure push filmmakers to lean into cultural assumptions to elicit sympathy and mobilize antipathy. *Honeysuckle Rose* exemplifies how American heroics include more violence than what more peaceful Scandinavians prefer, a cultural particularity that is even clearer in the next remakes.

### **The Less Violent Protagonist**

Ingmar Bergman's *Jungfrukällan* (1960) features a protagonist who is familiar with violence. The medieval warrior Töre (Max von Sydow) tries to obey his Christian God's pacifist tenets, but remains confounded by them. When his daughter is raped and killed, Töre cannot help but return to his old warrior ways. He stabs one of the guilty herdsman to death and murders the other two with his bare hands. In the resolution, Töre begs God's forgiveness and promises to build a church in memory of his daughter. Water then springs from where her body lies, and everyone present seems redeemed by this miracle.

You would think the rape-revenge plot could be remade with a similar level of violence in the US, and it probably could. But in horror legend Wes Craven's directorial feature debut, *The Last House on the Left* (1972), Bergman's story is turned into an exploitation horror with

torture and gore throughout. Villains are made much eviler and heroes more transgressive. In the climax, the grieving husband and wife resort not only to knife and hand combat, but to penis biting and chainsaw massacring, dramatically increasing the film's body count. In Craven's immoral post-Vietnam world, there is no hope of redemption. Evil surrounds us. But within this dystopian universe, the actions of the protagonist(s) remain morally justifiable (Brashinsky).

Such adaptations fit the pattern of more violence in US film and American society in general. Perhaps Craven's drastic changes to genre, plot, character, and theme make his remake less suitable for cultural comparison. It may not even be reasonable to view *The Last House on the Left* as a remake of *Jungfrukällan*. Taxonomies of varying complexity are available for remake studies. For my purposes, we need not complicate more than by labelling Craven's film "inspired by" as opposed to the previous "based-on" remakes. There exist both academic and legal remake disputes, but none that are relevant to this article (Eberwein 28–30; Leitch).

Bergman's classic, too, was turned into a second, much later remake. *The Last House on the Left* (2009) restores a more conventional universe with less cartoonishly evil antagonists. A happier ending is offered in which the daughter survives. Interestingly, from a moral perspective, in the 2009 resolution scene the victim's father returns to torture a perpetrator to death. The father does so without attracting any condemnation from the narrative. Neither is he burdened by the doubt that *Jungfrukällan* explored in its violent protagonist. American film often and in different contexts craft less morally dubious protagonists than what Scandinavian film does. This 2009 remake is an example of how there are culturally informed exceptions, perhaps especially relating to violence and emotionally driven revenge.

*Nattevagten* (1994) also gets its morals and theme somewhat adjusted before it becomes *Nightwatch* (1997). Still, the protagonist Martin (Nikolaj Coster-Waldau/Ewan McGregor)

remains roughly the same. This is one of the few transnational remakes that reuses the original director. Ole Bornedal's Americanization consists mostly of replacing the original's opening sequence, which was dominated by Danish *hygge* (communal coziness), with something more dramatic. The director also adds violence (Desser). In the manning-up montage in which the protagonist readies himself for action, only American Martin practices fighting. On American soil, Bornedal does not only cut the communal opening. He omits the mischievous double-wedding ending in which all characters are happy and together. This opposition between individual and communal pursuit plays out to an even greater extent with the next remake.

### **The Collectivist Protagonist**

If you were to jokingly stereotype the American approach to action film, your pitch for a remake of *Ofelaš* (1987) might sound similar to *Pathfinder* (2007). The first feature ever made in the language of the region's arctic indigenous peoples, the Sami, offers a puny 16-year-old protagonist, Aigin (Mikkel Gaup), who is skilled with bow and arrow (Figure 1). The American remake initiates its cultural masculinization by inserting a bare-chested muscle hunk named Ghost (Karl Urban). He is a Viking killing machine with action skills of the *Mission: Impossible* type. Leaning further into American preferences, Aigin's puppy love is replaced by Ghost's hot cave sex. Sinister Chude antagonists—who kill and torture for furs and information—are replaced by Viking behemoths who burn people alive for the fun of it. The result is two protagonists who are both underdogs, but one relies on shamanistic wit while the other executes hyper-skilled carnage.

<INSERT FIGURE 1 NEAR HERE> These protagonists are different in terms of traits and skills, but also in their approach to collaboration. Aigin wants his tribe to help him fight the

Chudes. Ghost insists on battling their enemies alone, while his people flee. Aigin has no choice but to cunningly defeat the Chudes on his own, but importantly, his community rewards him by embracing him as their new shaman. In the American version, this honor is bestowed upon Ghost's love interest. She becomes the tribe's shaman, while Ghost is hailed as the bravest of them all, before he continues his solitary vigilance against threats from the outside. When the American hero rides alone into the sunset, the Scandinavian hero reunites with his people through communal reinvigoration.

In the remake, also the antagonists have their moral universe refurbished. How this is done has consequences for how audiences perceive the protagonist. In the Norwegian original, Chudes represent people who—according to *Ofelas's* neo-Shamanistic discourse—are bad because they have made the wrong moral choices (DuBois). Such narratives suggest that all of us can be bad if we make bad choices. In the remake, the Vikings' evil resides in their blood. By placing evil inherently inside of others, we craft a universe in which our side is inherently good. This can make acceptable any level of violence that we inflict upon our opposition. The 2007 remake mirrors the traditional superhero movie's moral reductionism into good versus bad, which we see in much of today's political discourse, in particular in the US. In a conformist culture, everyone is pressured into compromising, at times perhaps excessively so—depending on your cultural viewpoint. An individualistic culture entails a greater risk for becoming so divided that those who disagree can no longer meet around the same table. *Pathfinder* is no nuanced exploration of American cultural politics, but the remake does suggest that Americans prefer their heroism served individualistically and against an all-bad opponent.

*Ofelas* depicts a heroic masculinity that Hofstede would refer to as feminine, one that is common in contemporary Scandinavian fiction. The Sami-language film presents itself as being

based on an indigenous legend from a thousand years ago. The opening titles of its inspired-by remake state that its story takes place a hundred years earlier, when a Native American tribe is attacked by Viking explorers. Compared to the Sami feature, the American version's sexualized machismo is significantly greater: the male hero rejects the stereotypically feminine position of shaman, his romantic pursuit is in competition against another warrior, and Ghost's violent esthetics is a dramatic break with the diminutive Aigin. The Sami hero's lack of musky brawn is not surprising. Nordic film has long been perceived to cultivate a quirky, non-erotic differentness, which expresses itself in many film's more feminized men (Rees 148). Although Aigin fails to live up to American ideals for masculinity, he is an active hero throughout the film, aligning with the individualistic action ethos of 1980s Hollywood. Neither must Aigin suffer emasculation, an aspect of Nordic gender dynamics that plays out with the next triple bill.

### **The Emasculated Protagonist**

*Sommarnattens leende* (1955) begins as middle-aged Fredrik Egerman (Gunnar Björnstrand) has been married to nineteen-year-old Anne (Ulla Jacobsson) for two years. The film's dramatic conflict centers around how Anne has still not agreed to have sex with her husband. This sex-less period is reduced to eleven months in the based-on remake *A Little Night Music* (1977) and to 6 months in the inspired-by remake *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* (1982). The Swedish protagonist is also under greater pressure from how he is the butt of everyone's jokes. His wife's infatuation with his son is gossip around town, and his wife flirtingly kisses their female domestic servant. The two American protagonists get off easier.

The 1977 remake retains the ending in which Fredrik's wife runs off with his son. But Fredrik's masculinity gets less tortured along the way. American Anne (Lesley-Anne Down)



does not learn that she is in love with Fredrik's son until they kiss in act three, leaving her husband to feel less emotionally betrayed than what his counterpart does in *Sommarnattens leende*. American Fredrik (Len Cariou) gets to cheat on his wife, creating a gender balance of infidelities. He also gets to ponder his relationship issues in a more gender-stereotypical way by visiting a brothel where he fondles the breasts of a sex worker while he drinks alcohol and smokes. In a big dinner scene near the end, the American Fredrik commands Anne to return to his table—a command she obeys, which would be unthinkable in Bergman's story.

The result is, again, a more complex Swedish exploration of gender and sex, in which the relationship between lust and love changes as people progress through life. The first remake, a musical that premiered twenty-two years later, concludes more conventionally that anything but marriage and childrearing is a mistake. This truth is presented to be so obvious that a child recognizes its inevitability. Even the hilariously promiscuous grandma eventually accepts this conventional moral. Such moralizing is removed from Woody Allen's 1982 remake. *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* promotes the necessity of getting over the needless guilt that follows from cheating. In Allen's version, all characters are horny and weird—and violence readily invoked—but we should be careful with equating this auteur's moral universe with America's.

A newer example of protecting male protagonists from emasculating Scandinavian women is found in *Män som hatar kvinnor* (2009), which became *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011). Daniel Craig's Mikael Blomkvist not only gets to be on top for a brief moment when he has sex with Lisbeth Salander (Rooney Mara), but he gets to sleep in the bed afterward. To convey his sexiness, the American version introduces Blomkvist as someone erotically appreciated by his female colleague. When the American Blomkvist is showered by Lisbeth, he

is without clothes. Swedish Mikael (Michael Nyqvist) is so removed from the American male ideal that he does not even want to drive a car. His strong female partner, Lisbeth (Noomi Rapace), must make him take the wheel (Figure 2).

<INSERT FIGURE 2 NEAR HERE> Craig's protagonist suffers less emasculation. He gets to be the active part in setting up the relationship with Lisbeth. Still, Craig's Blomkvist is a far cry from the actor's James Bond persona. In Stieg Larsson's trilogy, Lisbeth is the more extraordinarily capable character, which can still be seen as egalitarian, as such female characters are often thought to promote gender equality. In the Swedish film, Lisbeth prevails in the climax. In the final scene, she is on her own and empowered. In the American ending, Lisbeth pursues a more traditional relationship with Mikael, although she fails when finding him with another woman. Even in a remake praised for retaining its original's filmic aesthetics and moral ambiguity, filmmakers adjust Scandinavian gender dynamics, apparently fearing that elements of emasculation could make audiences reject the male protagonist (Mazdon 202). In terms of strong and gender-equal female characters, Lisbeth is only the most famous addition to a long tradition. Pippi Longstocking is the proto-Scandinavian tough girl, and she too has been transculturated across the Atlantic.

### **The Tough Girl Protagonist**

The canonical version of *Pippi Långstrump* is the 1969 TV series. It was re-edited to make two features, and additional spin-offs and remakes exist. I compare the first twenty-seven-minute episode to the first half hour of *The New Adventures of Pippi Longstocking* (1988), which despite its title is a remake. No significant changes have been made to the protagonist, perhaps because Pippi (Inger Nilsson) is such a unique character. You could argue that Tami Erin makes for a

softer, less edgy Pippi, but the effect is minimal. We do see a toughening of the dad next door, which perhaps speaks to gender expectations. Pippi's American opponents are more sinister, lending her violence toward them a more righteous sheen.

Stronger support for this article's hypothesis is found when *Klatretøsen* (2002) becomes *Catch That Kid* (2004), in which the Scandinavian tough girl gets a heroic makeover. The Danish twelve-year-old (Julie Zangenberg) is an expert climber who scales an enormous wall to rob a bank, a clearly criminal act that she only commits to save her dying dad. The equally young American girl (Kristen Stewart in her first starring role) must master even more demanding and death-defying tasks to succeed. Her two puppy love interests escape police using their vehicles' nitro boosts and road stars, which are rather adult tools for such young characters. In the American version, the three kids must dress up to infiltrate an elegant party for grownups, which portrays the children both as more attractive in an adult way and more capable.

In this remake, too, a straightening of Scandinavian morals entails the most consequential changes. Villains are made more cartoonishly evil to justify the twelve-year-olds' bank heist. In the original, the bank director is a good ally. In the remake, he is a heartless lackey to capital who rejects the family's loan plea to pay for the dad's operation. The Danish parents condone the heist after the fact. The American parents do not, and all agree that stealing from banks is always wrong. The US mom is willing to accept her part of the blame, as she had been too focused on her own career, neglecting her maternal duties.

An interesting cultural difference is hinted at by how the dad's medical operation is ultimately financed. The change from original to remake illustrates how social democratic Scandinavians view handouts differently than Americans. The Danish government, which normally offers free healthcare, is unwilling to pay because the dad's operation would be an

experimental procedure in America. In the Danish resolution, the bank director decides that his bank should donate the sum. His institutional generosity brings closure in a morally satisfying way. Americans—being less accustomed to healthcare money manifesting itself based solely on need—seek a more community-based solution. The bank gifts one part, individuals in the community contribute what they can, and what remains becomes a personal loan. Such cost sharing may seem more communal, but is perhaps more informed by an individualistic ethos that stresses self-sufficiency.

This preteen adventure comedy illustrates how important morality is for understanding what makes a good American hero versus a good Scandinavian one. When main characters are portrayed as morally fallible, they can be perceived as more relatable, but they also function as complex models for moral exploration that go beyond juxtaposing our own good with our opponents' bad. To further analyze the immorality of the Scandinavian super underdog, my final remakes offer illuminating adaptations.

### **Passive-Aggressive Social Sanctioning**

*Insomnia* (1997) exemplifies how easy it is to end morally astray when one remains outside of a community. A Swedish detective (Stellan Skarsgård) has been exiled to Norway after sleeping with a witness. Under the midnight sun's relentless glare, he tries to solve a murder, but accidentally shoots a colleague. Instead of admitting his mistake, the detective keeps committing new crimes to hide his shooting. The protagonist is uniquely unethical for being Scandinavian fictional police, but he is still not portrayed as intentionally bad (Norðfjörð 64). *Insomnia* has been read as a warning against the perils of not working well with others within consensus-based

communities. Not fitting in socially not only destabilizes important relationships, but undermines one's very identity (Nesting 86).

The Swedish protagonist breaks with conformist expectation. The story still lets him off without legal repercussion—even after a female colleague reveals his lies. Having failed oneself and one's community is punishment enough. Such lenient morals could hardly be further from the violent consequences of the even lesser transgressions in Christopher Nolan's *Insomnia* (2002). In the film's climax, the immoral detective (Al Pacino) must sacrifice his own life. His colleague (Hilary Swank) who in the Norwegian version covers for him, gets to remain morally clean. In this American tale, he who strays too far must pay the ultimate price. In Scandinavia, you fall and get up. Similar righteousness informs how the antagonist is defeated. Like with *A Woman's Face*, American audiences—to arrive at moral closure—seem eager for the protagonist to gun down the antagonist. In the original *Insomnia*, the bad guy is simply claimed by the fjord.

A more redemptive ending is found in *Brødre* (2004), which became *Brothers* (2009). A Danish/American soldier gets taken hostage in Afghanistan where he must murder a fellow captive to survive. This he does, but when he is freed, he does not tell anyone. The American remake retains the Scandinavian ending, offering forgiveness once the protagonist tells the truth. In order to justify such a merciful conclusion, the American version makes both brothers (Jake Gyllenhaal and Tobey Maguire) somewhat less morally blemished than their Danish counterparts (Ulrich Thomsen and Nikolaj Lie Kaas). There is less lying, less serious infidelity, and more torture is played out to justify the murder. The American version comes across more as a war movie in which casualties are expected. The Danish original is more of a character study of family interaction in which both brothers are portrayed as darker and more broken before their redemption (Stenport 450). This difference in weighing punishment against sin is informed by

how Scandinavians promote conformism through social sanctioning. While the American system promotes rule adherence by imposing hard prison sentences on transgressive individuals, the Nordics, on average, consider social ramifications to be an even more severe form of punishment (Bondeson 102–06). For Americans, more drawn to an eye for an eye, mere passive-aggressive condemnation makes for poorer movie endings.

Even more culturally specific morals are found in the Swedish *Den osynlige* (2002). An exceptionally sociopathic high school senior (Tuva Novotny) kills her classmate when she suspects him of having snitched on her. Our sympathy with her is meant to grow throughout the film, as she develops a relationship with the dying but not-yet-dead victim's ghost. The story ends with him perishing and her walking away with the police. The story aligns with the Nordic affinity for viewing criminals as also being victims. Mainstream American audiences would perhaps find the puny girl's hyper-violence less realistic. That she merely helps her dying victim get off his life support could also be seen as an underwhelming sacrifice for earning redemption. To be more culturally acceptable, the American *The Invisible* (2007) lets the sociopath (Margarita Levieva) die while her victim survives. Throughout the remake, the female protagonist is more emotional, she cries more and regrets more, and she is more firmly established as someone who cares about her younger brother and her own self-improvement. The morals of other characters, as well, are straightened out in their American incarnations. The remade narrative becomes more of a heartwarming love story.

Similar but smaller adjustments are made with the romantic horrors *Låt den rätte komma in* (2008) and *Let Me In* (2010). The meek twelve-year-old protagonist (Kåre Hedebrant/Kodi Smit-McPhee) falls in love with the new gender-queer vampire child next door (Lina Leandersson/Chloë Grace Moretz). She helps him fight his bullies, leading to intermittent gore

throughout the film and a child massacre in the finale. To add greater moral justification, the American version makes the bullies slightly worse and the victims more deserving than what the Swedish original found necessary. Before concluding what these remakes suggest about the Scandinavian super underdog, let us briefly touch on the remaining case studies.

From *Midsommer* (2003) to *Solstice* (2008) the protagonist changes gender, but this has remarkably few consequences—none along the parameters of my study. *Hodet over vannet* (1993) and *Head Above Water* (1996) also show great fidelity. In both remakes, significant changes seem more attributable to bigger budgets and capable new filmmakers than differences in cultural heroics. I include *Pusher* (1996), which inspired another English-language remake, although a British one. I do so because the remake represents an interesting deviation from the pattern my study establishes—perhaps as a consequence of its Britishness.

The Danish gangster film can be read as an exploration of how too much individualism and isolation can lead to violence (Nestingen 89). The remake, *Pusher* (2012), features a more capable protagonist—like we have seen with many American remakes. Compared to the Danish protagonist (Kim Bodnia), the Brit (Richard Coyle) is superior both in terms of violence and criminal ambition. He is sexier, too; a female character is added simply to covet him. The anomaly is that the British remake straightens no Scandinavian morals. The protagonist transgresses even further into abhorrence. After beating up his best friend, the Brit visits his friend's sickbed and demands money. This action resonates with the tragic ending of both films, but the scene makes the protagonist even less salvageable. The result is an antihero in the capable strain of American cinema, but one who is morally lost beyond his already dark Nordic counterpart. To explore whether such morals align with British heroics, one could perform an

agonistic analysis of the at least three dozen American remakes of British films and the over 20 American films that have travelled in the other direction.

### **Second Chances and Economic Solidarity**

In terms of Scandinavian juxtaposed with American heroics, this remake study shows a clear trend. To cater to American audiences, protagonists are sometimes ascribed more positive skills. They also tend to perform at a more capable level. They can be more attractive—often expressed through the adoration of others—and male protagonists are spared some of the emasculation that Nordic women impose on them in the originals. American characters are more prone to violence, which is often carried out with a gun. Scandinavian audiences may see poetic justice when nature brings death upon antagonists, but Hollywood prefers to let the hero shoot the bad guy.

These adjustments are significant, predictable, and quite common. The clearest expression of the American heroic makeover is found in the remakes' straightening of Scandinavian morals. Protagonists make more moral choices, their immoral actions are condemned and punished more severely, and surrounding characters are sometimes made worse to lend morality by comparison. The American cosmos is more one of good versus bad in which evil can be defeated—while Scandinavians are more likely to offer forgiveness and an invitation to rejoin the fold. These are clear cultural differences in expectations of the heroic.

The Scandinavian super underdog, as defined and explored in this article, is not a character with a specific collection of values, traits, and skills that audiences find in most Nordic films. The term points to a narrative strategy for egalitarian storytelling that results in protagonists who are less extraordinary than what would be likely if a similar story was told within many other cultures. These underdogs are heroes who stand out less—in capability,



attractiveness, aggressiveness, and moral adherence. They too separate from the collective to self-realize, but their success more often entails fitting back into the collective.

The ordinariness of the Scandinavian super underdog confirms cultural expectations of sameness. Yet its looser morals require further scrutiny. We need not assume that bad—or culturally inappropriate—behavior is more condoned in the Nordic countries. Their conformism suggests otherwise. What seems different is their understanding of the relationship between good and bad. In *Nordic Moral Climates*, studies of Norwegians, Swedes, and Danes show that they, in general, do not believe in absolutes (Bondeson 162). What is good or bad depends on context. This pragmatic approach leads a majority of Scandinavians to view human nature as both good and evil, which informs the morally ambiguous protagonists of Nordic cinema. Hollywood's black-hat/white-hat duality points to an us-versus-them mentality that informs America's more divided society.

When the protagonist in *Brødre* lies, or the *Insomnia* detective covers up his accidental shooting, or the violinist in *Intermezzo* cheats, Scandinavians need not place these wrong-doers in an irredeemable out-group. Even the murderous sociopath in *Den osynlige* could come around with the right support from fellow Swedes. To Nordic sensibilities it can be satisfying to see the incapable win. But it can be even more culturally affirming to see the immoral realize the error of their ways and the salvation of returning to consensus.

Such values do not only influence fiction. They are widely represented in Nordic culture and politics. The Scandinavian preference for granting second chances manifests itself in a penal system with few inmates, short sentences, and recidivism rates among the world's lowest. The US recidivism rate is among the world's highest (Benko). Nordic appreciation for sameness expresses itself in a middle class with an exceptional willingness to provide for those who

perform less profitably. Seventy-four percent of Norwegians consider that their high taxes are either fine or too low (ANB). These and other aspects of the Nordic Model suggest that the egalitarian agonistic structure that we find in much Nordic fiction is not just a remnant from a time when solidarity meant surviving the winter or not. With compressed wages and high taxes, also today these countries put their money where their story morals are.

### **Conclusion**

For an America torn by division, inequality, and disillusionment, the Nordic Model can appear attractive. But wanting what the Scandinavian communal ethos produces of wellbeing is not enough. Comparing fiction from different regions shows how different populations have distinct values, which inform which political solutions are likely to appeal to voters. Americans may want free healthcare and education. This can be challenging to fund if they lack the communal heroic ethos that inspires Scandinavians to view high taxes as resource-pooling instead of governmental greed. We may ask, what would be required for protagonists such as the Scandinavian super underdog to be more appealing also to non-Nordics?

Espen Ashlad rose to prominence in a pre-industrialized society with few opportunities for professional betterment and a strong need for prosocial collaboration. The twenty-first century could facilitate a more global embrace of such super underdogs, as the Fourth Industrial Revolution transforms our societies. Automation is predicted to replace millions, then billions of workers (Danaher; Frey and Osborne). When robots, artificial intelligence, and blockchains outcompete or make humans redundant, a growing segment of the population must find new purpose. Predictions for how this will play out vary, but there is indisputably cause for concern, but perhaps also hope (Arntz et al.; Johannessen; Nakamura and Zeira).

The individualistic Hollywood hero may have prescribed functional values for succeeding in the competitive labor markets we now seem to be transitioning out of. But it is perhaps not coincidental that the Nordic Model is gaining in renown at a time like ours. More than half of young Americans express that they would prefer to live in a society more like the Scandinavian (Harris Poll). Perhaps this cultural evolution already influences which stories they prefer. “Feminine culture” may sound unappealing for many. But what the term means, “caring for others and quality of life,” sounds less off-putting. Heroic values of this valor, I predict, will sound increasingly appealing in a world where professional success will be unachievable for increasing numbers. If so, the Scandinavian super underdog may have its greatest days ahead.

### Figures

FIGURE 1. Aigin (Mikkel Gaup), a diminutive 16-year-old, represents the Scandinavian super underdog in *Ofelaš* (1987). Ghost (Karl Urban) embodies American action aesthetics in *Pathfinder* (2007).

FIGURE 2. Mikael Blomkvist (Michael Nyqvist) is reluctant to live up to masculine ideals, such as driving cars. The American Mikael (Daniel Craig) insists on being on top, at least for a moment, when he has sex with Lisbeth (Noomi Rapace), the empowered female.

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