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Double Allegiance: Digital Natives as Filmmakers

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English abstract

This article is based on close examination of more than 300 films screened at the Amandus film festival for young filmmakers, in the 25 year period between 1987 and 2012. The aim of the article is to highlight some of the most striking developments in this data material – aesthetically as well as thematically. The overall argument is that the Amandus films display a double allegiance to commercial movies, both in terms of their semi-professional cinematic form and in terms of the themes and moral attitudes expressed.

Keywords: Amandus film festival (Norway), digital natives, teen-pics, surface play.

Media representations are no doubt important for the ways in which we conceptualize the world. Audiovisual media, such as television and film, are in particular thought of as powerful means of shaping public beliefs, creating role models, or challenging dominant ways of thinking. Therefore, it is not surprising that a large body of educational and media research has been concerned with media's influence on, and the pleasures it offers to, children and young people. Yet, this demographic has until recently been one of a very few social groups unable to represent itself by means of media technology, at least not in forms that attract a broader audience than peers, parents or teachers. In other words, the lifestyles and psychological characteristics attributed to tweens and teenagers by mass media output, have traditionally been imagined through the eyes of adult media professionals. During the last few decades, however, advances in technology (e.g. digital cameras, computers, the Internet, and editing software) have allowed youth to engage in media production to a greater degree. The 'multiliterate', 'digital natives' of the convergent media age are said to have an unprecedented ability to reach out with their self-expression and to create new ways of representing the world (Buckingham & Willett, 2006; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008).

This article focuses on a large corpus of short films made by young Norwegians over a time-span of 25 years. The study comprises nominated films at the annual Norwegian Amandus Youth Film Festival, made by young people in the age group 10 to 20. Our aim here is to highlight some key tendencies in the material – cinematically as well as thematically. Though interrelated, our research question is two-fold. First, what kind of

developments are to be found in terms of the films' cinematic and aesthetic qualities, and in which ways are these improvements connected to the rise of digital technologies? Secondly, if these movies represent the life world of the younger generation, does this imply that the films focus on other subject matter and themes than the commercial movies directed at teens? We will argue here that the Amandus films are characterized by a double allegiance to professional filmmaking: due to digital technology, young Norwegian filmmakers have become increasingly able to reproduce the aesthetic conventions of commercial movies, to the extent that they look semi-professional. Also, the films copy in large part adult society's view of young people's interests and beliefs, as presented in teen-oriented media content.

Digital literacy and filmmaking

Much research in the field of adolescents' media production has concerned the relationship between young people's knowledge of media technologies and media content, and their abilities to utilize and enhance these skills while creating and designing media products (i.e. the production of short films at home or in classroom contexts). In addition, this strand of research has often been informed by cultural studies' notions of adolescence, giving priority to teenagers' meaning-making and participation, or the identity processes at work while consuming and producing media (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 2003; Prøitz, 2007). Regarding the aesthetic dimensions of texts that young people produce, research has tended to privilege new media expressions found on computers and smart phones, etc. Studies of the stylistic conventions and rules at work when teenagers produce films, have in contrast been few and far between. Moreover, to our knowledge no Nordic academic attempt to analyse and comparatively discuss the connections between adolescents' films and the professional movies that specifically target teenagers, exists. For film studies, this omission seems to stem from the idea that young peoples' media-making has traditionally taken place in educational settings, and is thus set apart from both the artistic and 'amateurist' models which have generally guided aesthetic inquiries in the discipline (Bordwell & Thompson, 2010; Buckingham & Willett, 2009; Salt, 1992; Sconce, 1995). Nevertheless, the lack of academic interest in the formal qualities of films created by young people seems odd, as adolescents growing up during the last twenty years are claimed to belong to a media literate, digital generation.

In researching the aesthetics and social representations of Amandus films, we find it useful to activate the concepts of media literacy and digital literacy. Although we do not intend to engage in an extended discussion of these much-debated terms, we need to

clarify how media literacy and digital literacy are understood in this article.¹ By the general term literacy, we mean "(...) gaining competencies involved in effectively learning and using socially constructed forms of communication and representation. Cultivating literacies involves attaining competencies in practices in contexts that are governed by rules and conventions" (Kellner & Share, 2005, p. 369). For our purpose here, we take media literacy to signify how adolescents interpret, understand, copy from and play with different media conventions, i.e. norms for filmmaking. Digital literacy, on the other hand, is conceived in this article as the way in which young people use relevant digital tools and devices to express themselves cinematically. As such, in this article we regard media literacy and digital literacy to be intertwined and dependent concepts. Enhanced technical access and skills affect the practical knowledge of cinematic conventions and film language, which in turn enable playfulness and further experimentation. The creative possibilities of digital technologies have of course transformed the ways in which young people make films. But even if young Norwegians have a high degree of access to digital technologies and engage with digital content at regularly basis (Erstad, 2011), this does not necessarily mean that everybody growing up is a born filmmaker. As John Palfrey and Urs Gasser point out in their book *Born Digital*, it is important to distinguish between creation and creativity (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). Today, many Norwegian teenagers can create, remix and share content digitally, but this does not mean that every creation is a creative one. It is however important to stress that the very nature of a festival like Amandus is likely to attract those segments of the young population that are most interested in filmmaking, and thus familiar with the required skills and production rules of thumb. As aspiring filmmakers selected by an independent jury, it seems fair to label them as technology-savvy, storytelling talents. This still raises questions of allegiance, not only in relation to *how* young people master the norms of filmmaking, but also *what* kind of stories they choose to tell. Adapting semi-professional equipment and storytelling techniques means that adolescent filmmakers approach a language of films that was previously confined to craftspeople. But what Henry Jenkins has termed the appropriation of cultural expressions, seem in this particular context to also involve an allegiance towards the content young people produce for festival competition, as the themes found in the films in general reproduce the views found in professional media directed at youth (Jenkins, 2006).

The history of Amandus: Scarcity, availability and release

When the Amandus Youth Film Festival was established in 1987, it was among other things a response to the fact that new technologies were becoming accessible to larger

parts of the Norwegian population. Also, the steady growth of the festival needs to be seen in relation to political awareness of the general importance of ICT and media competence among citizens, and in particular the 'technology push' within education (Diesen & Svoen, 2011; Erstad & Quale, 2009). Our analysis of the 303 Amandus films from the festival's beginning and onwards, reveals a striking improvement in respect of both cinematic quality and aesthetic richness. Today, it is fair to say that many of the contributions to the festival have reached a semi-professional level. The aesthetic qualities allude to a higher fidelity in terms of image qualities, special effects and sound and production values. Cinematic quality, on the other hand, concerns the understanding and use of rules and standards relating to framing, editing and visual storytelling devices. We will return shortly with a detailed discussion of the audiovisual improvements – what we term the quality leap – of the Amandus festival's history, but first we need to consider *why*: what has prompted this development?

This evolution is naturally connected to the digital revolution and the 'digital natives' it has fostered. Inspired by a classification undertaken by John Ellis in a different context, we propose that the history of the festival can be divided into three quite separate periods (Ellis, 2000). The first endures from the beginning in 1987 until the late 1990s, and can be labeled the period of scarcity. If we take the technological possibilities of that era into consideration, the stylistic qualities of the films are still quite impressive. It is important to stress that our conclusions about this particular period are based on a highly limited number of films, and thus can only be tentative. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to argue that the high standard of the films of the scarcity period is caused by the fact that the volume of production was rather restricted: most of them were put together at a few, government-sponsored media workshops, which were located in or close to the largest cities in Norway. The technological equipment was expensive and required its users to have experience, which explains the presence of professional advisors in the end credits of the films. One example is the post-apocalyptic *Planeten* (1988), which was shot on 8mm film and thus illustrates the relatively high financial investments required.² More generally, however, the tools at hand were clunky and required adult supervision, and since resources were limited, few kids had the opportunity to explore and play with the cinematic conventions in their spare time.

The second phase of the Amandus history can be described as the period of availability, and lasts from the late 1990s until the mid 2000s. The quality of the films from this period varies considerably, and this can be explained by two different circumstances. First, cheaper video technology meant that camcorders and other light-weighted

equipment were made available to many homes. Consequently, young people had the opportunity to explore filmmaking principles in informal settings, without supervision from adults. Still, the technological possibilities of that era were restricted compared to the contemporary situation, which of course affected the quality of the finished product. On the other hand, however, the previous media workshops were replaced by regional initiatives and a state supported website (dvoted.net), where young filmmakers could obtain guidance from professionals. This online aid meant that youth filmmaking was no longer confined to the central parts of the country. Also, the popular study field of Media and Communications was established at high schools during this period, which meant that designing and producing media content on a regular basis became an important part of the curriculum for thousands of Norwegian teenagers. Not surprisingly, many of the award-winning films for the Amandus festival are produced within an educational context. The period of availability, then, characterizes an era of growth of the Amandus festival, and at the same time an era in which distinctions between semi-professional media students and leisure-time amateurs became evident. This divide has more or less vanished in the third, contemporary phase, which we have termed the period of release. This period is characterized by the high quality of the Amandus films, which testify to the image of a young generation that incorporates confident and skilled media producers.

The latest developments can be connected to the arrival of cheap, easy-to-handle digital technology. Studies show that the average Norwegian household spends more time using home computers and the Internet every year. Young people are the most eager users. In 2011, the age group 9-15 spent an average of 75 minutes using computers every day, an increase from 1994 when the corresponding figure was 13 minutes. In the same vein, use of the Internet has risen during the same period. In 2011, the age group 9-15 spent an average of 75 minutes using Internet, compared to 10 minutes in 2000. For the age group 16-24, the increase of both computer and Internet use are even higher (Vaage, 2011). By 2009, everyday use of computers, the Internet and cell phones had reached the same level, or even surpassed the popular leisure-time activity of watching television (Erstad, 2010). National surveys of this kind can of course only point to young peoples' involvement with digital media as consumers, but still it indicates the high degree of access to and familiarity with new technology. At the same time, young people increasingly use their digital devices to express themselves in various ways. For example, smart phones with integrated digital cameras are used to create media content and distribute it on networks like Facebook, YouTube, Messenger, Instagram, Flickr and blogs. For participants at the Amandus Youth Film Festival, being digitally literate has naturally affected their media literacy and enabled them to explore and improve both

their technological and artistic proficiency with regards to filmmaking. Born after 1980, these aspiring filmmakers might be labeled 'digital natives', as they are considered to be at the forefront when utilizing digital technologies as both a social tool and as a means of expression. The digital natives are used to digitally create, remix, adapt and share content through digital mediums (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008, pp. 111-129).³

Better and cheaper technology and software for filmmaking, which is easy to handle thanks to quite intuitive interfaces and understandable tutorials found online, has become accessible in almost every Norwegian home, exploding in the late 2000s. What was until recently recognized as knowledge to be learned at film schools, is now available and intelligible to those interested in learning. The growth of the young, digital-savvy generation is evident in the quality-leap of the aesthetic and cinematic level throughout the Amandus festival's history, which also means that the participants' media literacy is heightened.

In the digital environment of today, young people also have access to more narrative-oriented media products like films, TV series, video games and interactive stories than before. The media frame of reference is simply more extensive than that which applied to the adolescents of earlier generations. The understanding of cinematic language has improved as the proliferation of digital equipment has allowed for usage and play both at school and in informal settings – fostering a better technological, practical and analytical understanding of the cinematic conventions. The Amandus nominee *Sikring* (2011) serves as an illustration of the high production values of recent competitors. It tells a story about two old people living in a nursery home. Well-known actors play the characters. The film uses tree-point lighting and a wide variety of camera shots, including Dolly and tracking. The film follows the principles of continuity editing, uses digital color correction, has a self-produced soundtrack, and has been shot at different locations. As such, the film could easily be confused with professional short films made with the support of the Norwegian Film Institute.

Method

As film scholars, our main interest here is the textual qualities of the films. As such, the present study is primarily a qualitative and interpretive one. However, our claims are based on close examination and analysis of a large empirical body. We have been able to collect and document 303 nominated festival films, from the period between 1987 and 2012. The time period between 1987 and 1996 is randomly covered, as we have only

been able to gather 22 films. Our findings connected to that time-span can therefore only be indicative. From 1997 to 2012 the database consists of all the nominated films, which means that this article will generally focus on the last 15 years of the festival. All collected films have been digitalized, analyzed and catalogued into a database consisting of 26 different parameters in order to grasp key trends and differences (see the table in the appendix for a full list).⁴ The most relevant variables for this particular study include cinematography, editing, visual effects, narrative qualities and themes, etc. (parameters 13 to 25 in the table). In the pages that follow, we will present some general findings in the material and highlight them using examples from a wide range of films. This approach is of course governed by the research questions we have raised and our intention to draw some general conclusions from the material. Moreover, the Amandus films are so short (often 1-5 minutes) that close analysis of only a few films would not in itself be sufficient. Put simply, our goal with this article is to offer a discussion of the textual and thematic characteristics of an important, but not much discussed, field of film production.

The study is concentrated around two main sections. The first provides an account of prominent cinematic developments relating to the festival films and includes discussions of primarily stylistic aspects. As we will argue, this development can be related to the rise in digital literacy among young people, and consequently their amplified media knowledge. The second section concerns the thematic contents of the Amandus films. What do young people make films about? In this context, we will explore the relations between young filmmakers' own creations and commercial media contents that are supposed to represent them at the cinema.

The cinematic and aesthetic quality leap

In what areas of filmmaking do the improved cinematic and aesthetic skills of the Amandus nominees manifest themselves? To answer this question, we turned to the careful descriptions of the aesthetic and cinematic parameters in the Amandus database (parameters 18 to 23). For example, close considerations about, say, framing, photographic qualities or staging will help us to compare and point out striking developments. One of the most evident tendencies in the database, is the *cinematic growth*, as witnessed in more advanced camera work, for example with respect to compositions and movement. Inexpensive camera equipment and editing software means that young people today can easily play, test and learn the conventions of cinematic framing and movement by trying and failing, and share them online. This can explain

why the Amandus films of the 2000s are teeming with creative and advanced camera angles and compositions. Many extreme sports movies like *Camp Snowfilm Skeikampen* (2009) and *Overskyet Varingskollen* (2010) make innovative use of cameras, for example, head-cams on helmets, handheld cameras on the ski slopes, homemade crane shots, and even helicopter shots. These extreme sports films, which became an independent category in the Amandus competition in the 2000s, exemplify the photographic and compositional skills of young filmmakers. In addition, the fact that these films are usually shot in the makers' spare time while they engage in activities and tricks that they love, seems to proliferate the imagination and innovative commitment of the makers. As supported by an ethnographic study of a similar British circle, these films are still in part informed by and appropriate the conventions of professional productions like the broadcasting of X-games (Buckingham, 2009).

The *editing* of the films has also become more advanced in the 2000s. The young filmmakers better master the editing rules, especially continuity editing. The films also use other editing-effects like fades, dissolves, time-lapses, split-screen and jump cuts. For example, *Rhythm of Life* (2005) uses editing to create a beat following the music and voice-over. Some films also play with the editing's temporal, spatial and causal qualities to create an effect or experiment (e.g. *Tidløs tid* (2004)). For young moviemakers, the use of these editing effects has become second nature.

Also, the rise of *special effects* is prominent in contemporary Amandus films. Digital effects like color correction, digital animation, text posters and blood and muzzle flashes are now common. *Snøkulen* (2011) is a typical example of an Amandus film that shows off surprisingly impressive special effects. In the film, we see an atomic bomb going off and the ruins of a city, all of which are created digitally.

Film sound has also become more professional, with multiple audio tracks and the rich use of sound effects. In addition, the norm in recent Amandus films is that most of the music is self-composed and recorded. Music videos have become a popular genre at the festival. Digital technology has made it easy to process and record sound. Once again, the proliferation of digital technology implies that young people can learn and play more easily, on their own terms, with cinematic sound conventions.

Only in the category of animation have the Amandus films failed to experience a boost in aesthetic and cinematic qualities. This category has been dominated by stop-motion animation, and the animation style is rough and amateur-like. When digital drawing

programs like *Photoshop*, and 3D animation programs like *3D Studio Max* and *Maya* became more common and accessible, one would expect to see an increase in the quality of Amandus' animated films as well. Yet, this has not happened and stop-motion plasticine and cut-outs are still the norm. While there are examples of digitally drawn animations as in *En ganske alminnelig dag* (2000), rotoscoping in *Unaturlig* (2008) and 3D animation in *Jif wars* (1999) and *Meteorstrike* (1999), these films are more exceptions than the rule. 3D animation technology requires a lot of technical expertise, sets higher requirements for personal artistic imagination, and the programs are time-consuming and difficult to learn. The digital literacy of young people is still not good enough to master these techniques.

Poetic expression and surface play

Several of the Amandus films play with the language of film. The narrative is downplayed in order to show off effects, editing and camera angles, etc. This playfulness has two implications; first, it is a way of showing that the creators have mastered digital filmmaking technology. Secondly, it exhibits the creators' understanding of media conventions. For example, *Music:Response* (2000) is a film that uses a lot of special effects in order to create a playful feel. It is film about aliens and humans chasing each other, and consists of post-produced special effects like cartoon captions, lasers, digitally drawn pictures, and a homemade funky soundtrack. Also, on-location effects like smoke, light effects and creative camera movements are used. Another example is *Super-Ari* (2003), a parody of the Norwegian royal family in which the video game aesthetic of *Super Mario Bros.* creates intertextual play (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Production still from *Super-Ari* (2003). (Used by permission of the filmmakers.)

The playfulness can also offer meta-play, which is either explicit or indirectly displayed. For example, *Til slutt - så rablet det for meg* (2004) is an experimental film in which a poetic voice-over tells the audience about its cinematic means as the film unfolds, while *Tidløs tid* (2004) plays indirectly by altering the principles of continuity editing. The self-confident, digital natives also play with narrative conventions. Some of the films have stories and storytelling devices that appear as simply surreal and funny. An example is *Papir* (2003), a pixilation film about a man working in an office eating paper [sic!] who ends up getting killed by a thumbtack which has been placed in the paper by his boss.

The growing poetic nature of many Amandus films is also striking, for example via their voice-overs and images. *Oskar* (2004) is a simple story about friendship and childhood, but the images, music, voice-over and editing create a strong poetic feel. This is not to imply that kids in the 2000s have become more poetic and pretentious than earlier, but that it is easier to focus on these elements because of growing digital literacy and the proliferation of digital technology. A film which showcases both the playfulness and an overt experimental approach, fuelled by the digital revolution, is *Livet i revy* (2009). This film uses several cinematic means and special effects to show a subjective and dreamlike state in the mind of a dying man. The film uses a handheld camera in chase sequences,

dissolves to white, and uses washed-out colors, out-of-focus and superimposed imagery, dreamlike sound effects, and digital effects like an energy beam from the mouth of the protagonist.

While the number of films that play with the aesthetic surface and strive for artistic qualities has risen, there is however little evidence of narrative diversity across the festival's history. The storytelling qualities do not seem to have evolved in the same manner as the cinematic qualities. This means that many of the films have challenges involved in telling a coherent, well-formed story in the classical Hollywood style that most young people are familiar with. Pacing, dramaturgy, causality and character development are storytelling devices that Amandus films, new and old, struggle to master. As today's teenagers have access to far more and wider media services with a narrative focus, it is compelling to realize that this has not affected greater sophistication in terms of more complex narratives. Apart from the obvious differences relating to genre and topics, these films are still surprisingly similar in terms of story premises, structures, progression and character depth. It appears that the narrative structures are harder to master than the cinematic language.

The relations between Amandus films and teen-pics

What we have pointed out so far, is that the body of Amandus films has undergone an eye-catching cinematic evolution since the festival's first days. The look of today's festival films can be termed as being semi-professional, partly because of the advances in digital technology and digital literacy, and partly because interaction with movies – as both consumers and producers – has expanded the framework of the media literacy of young people. In our view, this finding is an interesting excuse for exploring thematic relations between the Amandus films and Norwegian teen-pics, which are feature-length movies made by adults, but targeted at tweens and teenagers. As the Amandus films are moving closer to the aesthetics of commercial movies, does that mean that narrative motifs and themes are also similar?

Since 1987, a total of 26 Norwegian teen-pics have been produced (Moseng, 2011a). A short presentation of the general characteristics of the genre is required. Adolescence is regarded as a turbulent period of life that almost everyone has intense memories about, and hence it is appealing to turn to young people when story ideas are fashioned. Globally, the genre is characterized by its immanent ambivalence due to the fact that the films are made by adults and are thus supposed to carry some educational or fostering

value, while *at the same time* they are meant to offer appealing entertainment in competition with the (American) blockbusters marketed at the same target group (Hay, 1990; Neale, 2007; Shary, 2002). Overall, the Norwegian teen-pic genre focuses on the teenager's search for an adult identity, and the films are said to display *rites of passage* in the form of so called threshold moments (Hedges, 1991). Storylines are centered around difficult situations or conflicts that are assumed to be normal when approaching maturity, and which the young protagonists need to experience and solve in order to mature. Examples of such conflicts include peer pressure, the sexual debut, fragile friendships, juvenile delinquency, bullying, failure of parental care, the exploration of gender roles, first encounters with alcohol, and changing behavior caused by a desire for popularity (Moseng, 2011a). Whereas Norwegian teen-pics always have been preoccupied with matters of personal identity, the 1990s marked a change of direction as the genre more exclusively targeted the tween segment of the audience. Making the films more attractive and saleable for that particular demographic, the figure of the alienated and lonely teenager has more or less disappeared from the surface of the teen-pic. Instead, the action takes place in environments in which teenagers are brought together, such as school yards, locker rooms, home-alone parties or downtown areas. This shift of settings implies that the conflict structure of the genre has changed as well, to one in which finding one's rightfully deserved place in the social hierarchy of youth culture has become the center of attention (op.cit.). Still, what the message of the teen-pic genre imparts is that a healthy transition into adulthood is achieved by distancing, or rather outgrowing, oneself from the antagonism inherent in the narcissistic and destructive youth culture. Without exception, Norwegian teen-pics of the 1990s and the 2000s embrace the conception of late modern identities and in particular the ideals of self-realization (Giddens, 1991; Moseng, 2011b). This means that the protagonists of the movies eventually learn that in order to grow up and achieve one's true potential, they are required to trust their intuition and listen to their inner self, to resist the conformity pressure of peers and to make independent choices about *who* they want to be.

Faced with these general characteristics of the teen-pic, it is interesting to explore resemblances to and differences from the way in which young people frame and portray the life worlds of the not-yet-mature. Do young filmmakers possess a distinctly different outlook compared to the feature films that are said to represent them in cinemas? Our data suggest a rather complex relationship between the two types. Naturally, the short plots of the Amandus films do not allow for the same elaboration of their themes and characters as commercial full-length movies do. Still, the short format has the advantage of communicating its messages in an apt and straightforward way, which means that the

films, at least in principle, are able to pinpoint their views and attitudes towards whatever content each film concentrate on. In other words, there is no reason to question the idea that films made by young people are as well-equipped to convey the interests, values and insights of youth as their commercial counterparts. Moreover, being selected for the festival's program implies that the films gain a degree of public visibility uncommon to youth-produced media content, and as such we can speak of the Amandus films as being something like a voice for the younger generation in Norway.

Overall observations

First of all, the Amandus films display wider thematic variety than teen-pics. The data reveals a great interest in topics that public opinion does not automatically associate with teenagers. The self-centered image of youth presented in the teen-pic is, in other words, highly contested as Amandus films depict grandparents, adults, racism, drug abuse and environmental protection. Films discussing social problems and adult society are, in line with some of the teen-pics, bleak and negative. For example, *Memento mori* (1993) concerns a female drug addict who experiences an overdose at a subway station, while ordinary people ignore her as they pass by. In *Eliots jul* (2004), an old and lonely man eventually commits suicide on Christmas Eve, while the animated *Aftenfryd* (2009) offers a satire on the health care system in Norway, as robots without human warmth are running nursing homes. *Egotrip* (2004) offers a critique of a narcissistic consumer society, while *Leggetid* (1999) and *Makt i media og meg* (2005) address the negative impact of television on kids.

In cases where Amandus films actually do address teen-related issues and challenges, the data show a striking tendency to avoid fictional story formats. Instead, the majority of such films prefer to frame their objectives through the means of the documentary genre. This might be interpreted as a paradox, since feature-length documentaries made for children and teenagers are virtually non-existent in Norway. What our data show, is that young filmmakers often aim for an observational style when the subject matter is perceived as being serious, intimate and close to their own experiences. Examples of such topics include self-image, eating disorders and bodily complexes, all of which help to explain the inclination of girls to choose the documentary style (e.g. *Pupper* [2000], *Kampen for tilværelsen* [2002]). Getting personal means getting real, it seems, and the documentary genre allows for subjective contemplations and opinions in a different manner to fictional genres. The surprisingly high number of documentaries must also be explained in light of the increased media literacy of young people – that is, their

knowledge of the conventions and storytelling devices of reality TV, broadcasted news stories, and made-for-television documentaries. The personal touch is however not restricted to the documentary genre, and its extensiveness in the material could be seen both as a reflection of the tabloidization of mainstream media and as an indication of the reflexivity of late modern youth.

The wide variety of the Amandus films demonstrates that the interests of tweens and teenagers reach beyond those of boyfriends and peer pressure, a condition that adult filmmakers have more or less ignored. It is tempting to explain this outward focus of the Amandus films as being reversed escapism – that is, as a possibility to avoid the issues, expectations and pressures that surround young people in their everyday life, and which are catered for by commercial media channels. This interpretation is however only partially correct. A number of films do actually address teenage issues, as we will discuss shortly. Moreover, we will argue that many of the Amandus films represent an *extension* of the ideas that constitute the raw material of the teen-pic genre, as many of the festival contestants show an interest in popular leisure-time activities such as music (videos) and extreme sports (e.g. skateboarding, BMX biking, alpine skiing and horse riding).

Sex, love, and marginalization

Still, many of the Amandus films do appropriate the subject matter common to feature-length movies about teenagers. Not surprisingly, one area of shared interest is love and sex. This topic is treated in more or less the same manner, with a preferred basic storyline (which is usually a variant of the boy-meets-girl scenario) that encourages similar standards concerning romantic and sexual behavior (Abbott, 2009; Hentges, 2006; Shary, 2010). Even though Amandus films present these issues in a wide variety of genres (i.e. fiction, music videos, poetic contemplations, and documentaries), they repeat the quite traditional ideas proposed in teen-pics: good looks do not guarantee a good heart; intellectual connection with a partner is as important as physical attraction; sexuality should be explored within stable, romantic relationships, and so on (Moseng, 2011b). An example is *Rollebytte* (2009), which criticizes superficial romance. It tells the story of a pretty and popular girl who has to work with a dorky boy with nerdy looks on a school assignment. Embarrassed about her partner, she transforms him into a cool kid by getting rid of his glasses and dressing him up in new clothes and a new haircut. This set-up is well known from American high school films in particular, but the moral lesson that young people should look under the surface finds resonance in most Norwegian teen-pics

(e.g. *Bare Bea* (Næss, 2003), *Keeper'n til Liverpool* (Andresen, 2011), *Amors baller* (Metcalf, 2011)).

Both Amandus films and teen-pics question traditional gender roles and also discuss more difficult themes such as homosexuality. For example, *Skuggeprinsen* (2011) is a fairytale film about love with rather innocent sexual undertones. The story is a triangular love drama, in which a young girl is groped and forced to kiss a drunk schoolmate at the prom. A handsome shadow prince appears, and an old-fashioned duel between the boys is initiated. The prince prevails, but the girl has to eventually save the prince for a cowardly backstab. The prince and the girl then end up as a romantic couple, and in the last scene they embrace each other – not with a kiss, but with a prudent hug. While the girl is portrayed as being strong and equal to the boy, the film still ends by repeating traditional morals as romantic ideals win over the more sexual or physical approach.

During the last decade a few films have addressed more difficult sexual themes as well. Like successful feature movies like *Tommys inferno* (Gyldenås, 2005) and *Mannen som elsket Yngve* (Kristiansen, 2008), Amandus films like *Drømmende sexy* (2001) and *Homsemums* (2002) approach the topic of homosexuality by adopting a great dose of humor. In general, the humoristic approach is used to disarm difficult themes concerning sex and gender roles. For example, the bromance *Stig & Åge* (2000) uses excessive acting styles and exaggerated stereotypes in order to tell the story of two losers whose friendship is tested when a femme fatale interferes. A more poetic stance is presented in *Pia mi* (2006) and *Gullfisk* (2005), in which the story of a girl who longs for her girlfriend is told from the point of view of her goldfish.

Much of the public discourse on youth and sexuality has been concerned with the negative effects of media sexualization. The tendency to adopt the porn chic aesthetics has manifested itself even in the Norwegian teen-pic genre, as contemporary films like *Bare Bea*, *Tommys inferno*, *Yatzy* (K. E. Jacobsen, 2009) and *Få meg på, for faen* (J. S. Jacobsen, 2011) are structured around scenes of (female) nudity, sexual pleasure and excessive sexual activities like masturbation, cunnilingus and intercourse (McNair, 1996; Moseng, 2011a). Looking at the Amandus films, however, they are remarkable frigid. As teenagers reportedly create explicit sexual self-performances on websites like Facebook and deiligst.no, the shyness of the films suggests that their creators consciously or unconsciously bring forth self-imposed restrictions in the hope of achieving a nomination (Helseth, 2012; Knudsen, Löfgren-Mårtenson, & Månsson, 2007). The sexual correctness of the Amandus films is obvious. Only two films can be argued to challenge the

standards. *I need a change* (2010) tells the story of a young man who falls in love with his mistress and leaves his girlfriend. This act is however punished by the film's narrative, as the film ends when the mistress breaks up with the young man himself. Thus, traditional moral attitudes are still secured. A more interesting example is to be found in *Date* (2002), which tells the story of a boy and a girl who are dating. With the help of a split-screen, the two characters explain their expectations and different experiences about dating each other. As they talk, juxtaposed scenes from the date reveal in a humoristic tone that gender roles are reversed. While the boy is somewhat insecure and wants to get to know the girl before getting intimate, she is sexually aggressive and eventually dumps him because of his irritating emotionality after sex.

The marginalized teenager is a popular figure in the teen-pic universe. While these films often explore the way in which skid row teens eventually manage to straighten up, the Amandus films seem to be more interested in displaying the problem itself, more often than not with an overt, moralistic tone. *Edle tårer* (2003) is a short film about the fatal consequences of drunk driving, while *Aldri mer fjortiss* (1999) and *Flashback* (2007) warn young spectators not to fall prey to pressure and start drinking alcohol. As bullying is a major problem about which the Norwegian government has launched numerous campaigns in order to prevent, it is not surprising that the theme occurs regularly in both the teen-pics and the Amandus films. What characterizes both types of films is that they present rather simplified and unrealistic solutions to the problem – solutions which do not include the intervention of teachers or the authorities. For example, in both the feature film *Keeper'n til Liverpool* (Andresen, 2011) and Amandus films like *Helt til topps* (2001) and *Martin* (2004) the bullied protagonist suddenly get socially accepted as he wins the heart of the school's most popular girl.

As this examination suggests, it is hard to argue that young filmmakers present a fresh and different view about teen-oriented themes when compared to commercial teen-pics. Even though the films present a wider spectrum of topics, the bottom line is that they largely repeat and appropriate the values and attitudes of adult society.

Conclusion

Based on a survey of more than 300 nominated films for the Norwegian Amandus Youth Film Festival, this article has presented an overview of cinematic and thematic developments in young people's filmmaking during the past 25 years. Being selected for the festival, these films can be argued to showcase the top filmmaking abilities of

Norwegian tweens and teenagers. Analyzing the films in accordance with different variables such as cinematography and narration, we have divided the festival's stylistic history into three quite distinctive periods. The aesthetic quality-leap witnessed since the festival started in 1987 is no doubt dependent on the steady growth of digital literacy in regards to the high degree of working knowledge of digital technology among the participants, as well as their expanded frame of media reference. In our view, achieving the high standards that characterize many recent Amandus films requires a combination of both digital and media literacy skills. We have pointed out that in meeting these requirements, Amandus filmmakers largely display what we have termed a double allegiance. Access to digital technologies has simplified interaction, mastering and playing with cinematic and storytelling norms. While imitating the aesthetics of commercial movies, the Amandus films also appropriate the subject matter and moral standards of the professional media contents that represent them (e.g. Norwegian teen-pics). If we are to understand the story interests and themes of the films as being self-representations or the voice of a generation, one might even wonder whether young Norwegians are more prudent and socially and politically committed than their parents. Political correctness permeates most of the films. Hopefully, further ethnographic studies will help us to understand why, but one plausible speculation is that the correctness and cleverness of the Amandus nominees are due to the institutional context in which these films are produced, distributed and exhibited. A high percentage of them are produced within educational or other formal settings, in which the presence of a teacher will most likely limit what and how topics are addressed. Also, the context of the Amandus film festival itself creates a framework in which young people are likely to attempt to satisfy the tastes of an adult jury.

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Appendix: Parameters of the Amandus database

Parameter	Headline	Description
1	Year of nomination	
2	Title	
3	Director(s)	Name(s) of filmmakers
4	Age	Age of the filmmakers (if stated)
5	Gender	Gender of the filmmakers
6	Postal code	
7	Postal area	
8	Context of production	The setting in which the film was produced (school/media workshops/sparetime)
9	Original tape	The source of the film – VHS, DV, DVD, Internet
10	Technology of production	8mm, Hi8, etc.
11	Length of film	
12	Festival category	The festival category (program) in which the film was nominated
13	Synopsis	
14	Narration	How the story is told, e.g. linear, chronological, use of flashback, open ending, etc.
15	Theme(s)	Topics addressed
16	Thematic structure	The moral points/attitudes presented in the film
17	Genre	Generic affiliation(s)
18	Aesthetic means	Immediately noticeable use of specific aesthetic means, such as various types of special effects, soundscape, color, lighting, animation techniques, composition, etc.
19	Cinematography	Shot length, angles, zooms, camera mobility
20	Editing	Shot-reverse-shot structure, continuity, editing effects like dissolves, time-lapses
21	Mise-en-scene	Location, staging, production design, props, costume, etc.
22	Sound and music	Soundscape, sound quality, score/soundtrack
23	Visual effects	Special effects like filters and color tonalities, superimpositions, digitally created effects, etc.

24	Influences from other media	Stylistic and/or narrative influences detected from other media like television, computer games, comic books, etc.
25	Intertextuality	References to other texts
26	Play index	Timecoding of the film, in cases when films are filed as part of compilations (Betamax, VHS, DV tapes, etc.)

1 For a detailed discussion of the concept «Digital literacy», see Erstad 2011.

2 Neither the Amandus films nor its creators are referenced in the bibliography of this article. This is due to the sparse information retrieved from the films' credits and other types of documentation.

3 The term digital native is a debated one, which suggests a degree of familiarity with digital technology that certainly not all young people inhabit.

4 We would like to express our gratitude to the Norwegian Research Council and the research project TiDE (Television in Digital Environments – <http://tide.hil.no>) for the opportunity to collect the material and create the database.