

## **Race, Ethnicity and Gang Violence: Exploring Multicultural Tensions in Contemporary Danish Cinema**

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### **Biography**

Kate Moffat is a PhD candidate at the University of Stirling where her research focuses on race and ethnicity in contemporary Nordic film culture. Her interests also extend to the film practices of the indigenous Sámi people. She has published work on both areas in Finnish and English in journals such as *Lähikuva* and the *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema*.

**Abstract:** One of the most striking genre conventions to emerge in Danish cinema in recent years is the gangster motif. Replete with gritty social realism, urban decay, and tribal warfare between different ethnic groups these films reflect a growing discontent in the Danish welfare state, particularly regarding multiculturalism and inclusion. I follow these trends from the mid-1990s, focusing specifically on the themes of ethnic division in several key texts. These include Michael Noer and Tobias Lindholm's *R [R: Hit First, Hit Hardest]* (2010), Michael Noer's *Nordvest [Northwest]* (2013) and Omar Shargawi's *Gå med fred, Jamil [Go With Peace, Jamil]* (2008). I explore racial division in these films by examining how they reflect or subvert cultural and political approaches towards diversity in Denmark over the last two decades.

**Keywords:** Danish cinema, gangster genre, multiculturalism, immigration, welfare state

## **Introduction: Nordic Genre Cinema and the Medium Concept Film**

Themes of race and ethnicity became increasingly prevalent in Danish cinema from the mid-1990s onwards. Although first and second-generation immigrant characters have appeared across a variety of genres, representations of ethnicity, and in particular ethnic conflict, have chiefly emerged in a particular style of film, specifically one involving conventions associated with gangster cinema. These films share a visual language where gritty urban dilapidation, explorations of the seedy underground side of city life, and marginal down and out characters are fused cinematically with a documentary-realist aesthetic. Most also feature ethnic or immigrant gangsters, typically involved with street-level hustling or the organised narcotics trade. Consequently, as these films mine transnational gangster tropes but largely set them in a recognisably Danish context, they bring up relevant questions about the role of genre cinema as a representative tool for capturing contemporary problems with race and ethnic identity in Denmark. Consequently, we must also consider how these populist genre conventions have emerged in the Nordic countries.

Recent scholarship addressing genre in the small nation film cultures of the Nordic region has blossomed with anthologies like Pietari Kääpä and Tommy Gustafsson's *Nordic Genre Film* (2015) exploring the depth and variation of the subject. Despite the enduring prevalence and popularity of genre cinema throughout Nordic film history, the respective film institutes were traditionally more inclined to invest in a signature style of Nordic film characterised by "existential artistry" (Kääpä and Gustafsson 2015:1) or socially conscious subject matter. The government-backed funding structures of these institutes perceived such qualities to be more valuable and artistically relevant, and this reputation has developed through international festival circuits. However, from the 1980s onwards, structural, and operational transformations in the Nordic film industries have radically altered the relationship between

institutional support and this form of national art cinema. Embracing the commercial potential of genre cinema stems from an emerging generation of filmmakers influenced by Hollywood (Kääpä and Gustafsson 2015: 1-17).

One of the unique permutations of genre film to emerge in this small region and one that is highly adept for discussing the films in this article is what Andrew Nestingen has identified as the medium concept film (2008). Medium concept films represent a merging of imported genre formats with nationally relevant topics, especially social issues, or political debate. Consequently, such films represent a halfway house between commercial and art cinema where:

Medium concept can be understood as filmmaking that involves the adaptation of genre models and art-film aesthetics; an engagement with political debates, lending the film cultural significance; and the integrates with these elements a marketing strategy designed to reach a specific audience (Nesting 2008: 53)

Several chapters in Gustafsson and Kääpä's collection refer to Nestingen's concept when addressing the emergence of the gangster figure, and how many of its associated conventions manifest in different societal contexts. For instance, Björn Norðfjörð explores Iceland's recent forays into gangster territory with the brutal thriller *Borgríki* [City State] (Olaf de Fleur Johannesson, 2011). Additionally, Michael Tapper's insightful piece on the Swedish *Snabba Cash* [Easy Money] (2010) contextualises gangster thematics alongside the neoliberalisation of Sweden, where welfare state priorities have shifted politically and ideologically from public interests to private ones (Tapper 2015: 104-119).

We can use the medium concept label to describe the Danish examples in this article precisely because their stark depictions of gangster-themed violence squarely challenge any

harmonious or utopian conceptualization of multiculturalism. These conventions have developed simultaneously with Denmark's especially hard-line on immigration and its approach to cultural integration. Although these issues are of course contested in the neighbouring Nordic countries and beyond, I claim that conflicting ideas about multiculturalism have contributed to the prevalence of this genre in Denmark. To emphasise the impact of changing social and political attitudes towards immigration and multiculturalism, I focus on three case studies. Michael Noer and Tobias Lindholm's *R [R: Hit First, Hit Hardest]* (2010), Michael Noer's *Nordvest [Northwest]* (2013) and Omar Shargawi's *Gå med fred, Jamil [Go With Peace, Jamil]* (2008) were all released during or just after the liberal-conservative coalition government of 2001-2011. I examine how, thematically, they play around with Denmark's contradictory policies on diversity management by appropriating tropes from the Hollywood gangster canon. Consequently, I explore the gangster genre and its prevalence in Denmark as a reaction to this coalition's fragmented and contradictory approach to multi-ethnic realities. To understand this, we must explore both the developments in Denmark's recent immigration policies and examine the changes in its film history.

### **New Danish Cinema**

To understand how and why the gangster figure has developed in Denmark, we must view the ethnic gangster film as part of the New Danish Cinema movement, where multiculturalism has emerged simultaneously as a contested point of public and political debate. According to Mette Hjort (2005), the concept of New Danish Cinema has arisen in response to the increasingly global flows of cultural exchange and hybridization brought about by technological transformations and associated forms of globalisation. These transformations have also profoundly affected the visual style and thematic content of Danish films as well as

the structure of this small nation's film industry. Expanding on these visual changes, Mette Hjort states:

A key tendency within the New Danish Cinema is action film centred around questions of ethnicity and belonging. What is apparent here is the appropriation of genre formulas that are very much part of a Hollywood-driven global cinema for the purposes of exploring the very issues of ethnicity and citizenship made urgent and compelling by the multicultural transformation of a previously ethnically and culturally homogenous nation-state (Hjort 2005: 237)

Although Hjort uses the term action cinema to describe a wide range of texts, I focus specifically on those involving gangsters. There are several reasons for the emphasis on gang-related themes, especially when considering the wider context of ethnic identity and multiculturalism. Most strikingly, gangsters invoke the theme of tribalism, where two or more rival groups or factions clash. Here, it would be easy to associate how the tribal politics of the gangster film function as a metaphor for contested views on the ethnic Other in the Danish welfare state. The gangster genre also helps us understand, challenge and subvert the concepts of "Danish-ness" and the "Danish values" of togetherness upheld by the dominant national rhetoric. Firstly, however, we must examine the history of multicultural politics both on and off-screen.

### **Danish Multiculturalism and Emerging Cinematic Tribalism**

Although Denmark has a long history of immigration, particularly from neighbouring Sweden, the Netherlands and through its Jewish population (Schmidt 2013: 199-203), its transition from a largely ethnically and culturally homogenous nation to a multi-ethnic one roughly began in the 1960s and '70s. During this period, the mass migration of refugees and immigrants, largely from the Middle East, parts of Northern Africa and Eastern Europe, happened under the so-called guest worker (*gæstearbejdere*) programs, where foreign labour was imported to sustain post-war economic growth. This workforce was critical to the development of Denmark's welfare state model. When the guest worker programs ended, there was an expectation that foreign workers would return to their original nation-states (Walter 2016: 31-32). However, many made the Nordic countries their permanent home, moving their families over or marrying into the host nation.

Consequently, in Denmark, the arrival of newcomers has given rise to a new vocabulary. Terms like ethnic Danes and new Danes are now employed in political and public discourse to distinguish between those born in Denmark and those whose ethnic ancestry typically lies outside the Nordic region. Despite this emerging multicultural reality, ethnicity in Danish cinema largely remained absent during this period. Despite their actively positive role during the guest worker phase, attitudes towards immigrants began to shift in the late 1970s. Fears over rising unemployment apparently fuelled division between ethnic groups. The other barrier between ethnic Danes and new Danes was the perception that some cultures and religions were less susceptible to integration. The far-right embraced this mantra and seized the opportunity to paint a picture, particularly of Muslim immigrants, as inherently less willing to adapt to Danish cultural and social "values" (Hjort 2005: 240-241). This particular development remains central to the immigration debate, something I shall explore in more depth later. With such impressions of immigrants, particularly those from the Middle East,

circulating in the Danish media, the concept of multiculturalism clearly faced opposition early on in its development as a political tool for negotiating ethnic and cultural difference.

Ulf Hedetoft notes that “‘Danish multiculturalism’ is an oxymoronic notion” (2010:111). Although immigration is a key issue across the societal spectrum, in policy terms, multiculturalism does not exist in Denmark (Lægaard 2013: 170). Moreover, the rhetoric maintained by successive governments, particularly the right-wing coalition (2001-2011) who are said to have clinched their electoral success on their tough immigration stance, was that Denmark would work to remain a mono-cultural society, and one generally opposed to globalisation (Hedetoft 2010: 117). For the first time, the Danish People’s Party (DPP), Denmark’s anti-immigrant populists held sway over the political and ideological direction of the country. This attitude has created many contradictions and disparities between what multiculturalism means at social and political levels. There are other added complications because of the relative autonomy granted to municipalities, who have the power to implement their own agenda on how ethnic relations are managed. In policy and political rhetoric, multiculturalism is best understood as a series of fragmented terms and conflicting ideas in Denmark. Discussions about the ethnic Other contrast with prevailing notions of Danish values built around the collective community-orientated welfare ideology of the Nordic model. Significantly, debates about race tend to emerge as matters of culture in Denmark which is another important factor when considering the appropriation of gangster conventions in Danish cinema. However, we must qualify the situation. Despite the resistance to describing itself as multicultural on a national level, in large cities like Copenhagen, there is a drive to attract skilled immigrant workers and promote ethnic diversity. This fact is also contradicted by many of the texts discussed in this article, not least because they are set in urban areas like Copenhagen. Hedetoft describes how Denmark has essentially used assimilationist strategies in their approach to integration. Perhaps most interestingly of all in

the context of the Danish gangster trend is how attitudes towards newcomers were based on a very specific set of expectations; that immigrants were expected to demonstrate self-sufficiency before they had access to the same welfare provisions as ethnic Danes (Jöhncke 2011: 48). As we shall see, this is also reflected in the themes of individualism associated with the gangster genre.

The opposition to multiculturalism is also complex. The concept has also come under attack from critics who cite its reliance on similar hegemonic relationships to the ones it purportedly denounces. One such critic, Slavoj Žižek, claims that multiculturalism is dependent on the Other behaving in ways that conform to Western expectations. Without this conformity, any sense of equality quickly disintegrates. Although multiculturalism has risen out of the dominant ideology as a way of tackling cultural exclusion, according to Žižek, these expectations are based on a sanitised and homogeneous image of the Other, free from antagonisms and complexities (Žižek 1997). For Žižek, the oppressive dimension of multiculturalism also lies in its reliance on tolerance, a concept undermined by the very universality of multiculturalism. In other words, to tolerate something implies endurance rather than understanding or equivalence.

In cinematic terms, some of the earliest explorations of Danish multiculturalism in crisis can be found in Erik Clausen's *Rami og Julie* [Rami and Julie] (1988) and Brita Wielopolska's *17 Op* [17 Up] (also called *Sally's Bizniz*, 1989). Although they do not conform to the same gritty gangster formats seen in following decades, they are nonetheless both early examples of ethnic conflict in Denmark's contemporary urban spaces. *Rami and Julie* is a modern re-working of the Montague-Capulet motif, where the conflict and division between the two families represents a cultural and political split between ethnic Danes and new Danes. When a young Palestinian immigrant, Rami (Saleh Malek) falls in love with Danish girl Julie (Sofie Gråbøl), dire consequences ensue when he is forced to confront her

racist family. Rather than ending in a mutual suicide, however, Clausen's film takes an even darker turn when Julie's family resort to murder as a way of keeping the young lovers apart.

In Wielopolska's film, teenager Sally (Jane Eggertsen) befriends Zuhail (Mia El Mousti), a Turkish girl who moves into her social housing block. Initially, Sally is prone to racist views, but amongst the poverty and social delinquency, the two girls form an unlikely friendship. As well as exploring both girls' contrasting cultural backgrounds, the film paints a sobering picture of Denmark in the 1980s. Both *17 Up* and *Rami and Julie* are sympathetic explorations of immigrant experiences. They expose racial hatred, and the kind of universal suffering brought about by poverty. The wider political and economic circumstances mitigate ethnic clashes, where opportunities, especially for those on the economic and cultural margins, are limited. These narratives usefully consolidate ethnic tensions, social deprivation, and confinement resulting from a move away from the collectivist values of the Danish welfare system. This theme has also become another defining feature of the gangster trend across the Nordic region.

The Danish welfare state developed along the same lines as what is referred to as the Nordic model. This mix of high taxation levels and public expenditure with free-market economic practices idealised as a utopian balance between socialism and capitalism. However, the model has also faced criticism for increasing privatisation, especially during the neoliberal era of the 1980s. There is also an ideological aspect to the welfare model. It is also used to represent Danish values and identity. The politics of immigration in Denmark have politicised the welfare state; it has become a proverbial ideal that must be protected from outsiders who are perceived to abuse or exploit its limited resource base and employment market. Consequently, the welfare state has become a political-economic tool in the immigration debate. However, it is problematic to view the contemporary resistance to multiculturalism entirely along economic lines, where rising unemployment has been known

to exacerbate ethnic tensions in the past, as noted by Hjort. Denmark largely avoided the global economic downturn in the 1990s and unemployment levels were at a record-breaking low (Appelbaum and Schmit 2013: 121). Rather, from the 1990s onwards, during which time the gangster genre took hold, the right-wing anti-immigrant Danish People's Party began an ideological campaign against immigration in the wake of emerging socio-cultural transformation.

### ***Pusher* (Nicolas Refn Winding 1996)**

During the 1990s, debates over immigration intensified in Denmark. Thousands of refugees fleeing war in Bosnia entered the country, and the crisis provoked questions about Danish values and identity in the face of mounting xenophobia and the rising popularity of the right-wing Danish People's Party (Juul 2012:70). The 1990s were also a defining decade for race and ethnicity on Danish screens. Given the context of Yugoslavia's collapse, it is perhaps unsurprising that one of the first violent gangster-orientated films to emerge in Denmark features an Eastern European immigrant. Nicolas Refn Winding's *Pusher* (1996), now widely regarded as a cult film, helped to establish the ethnic-themed gangster film. It also set the stylistic template for the genre, accentuating the gritty atmosphere of Copenhagen using handheld cameras to give it a raw documentary-like feel. *Pusher* is also notable for its pulsating soundtrack, claustrophobic subterranean club sequences, and brutal violence. Its narrative themes are built on a medium concept format, mixing the fractured identity politics of Copenhagen (Nestingen 2008: 90) with the terrifying brutality of organized crime. In this world of insipid grey tower blocks, small-time heroin dealer Frank (Kim Bodnia) and his sidekick Tonny (Mads Mikkelsen) become involved with powerful Serbian drug lord Milo (Zlatko Burić). Frank aspires to rise above street-level crime and establish his own narcotics network. However, when a deal goes wrong, Frank finds himself at Milo's mercy. Milo's

fascinatingly shifty persona and reptilian charm helped to establish Zlatko Burić as a key figure in New Danish Cinema. He has also frequently collaborated with Winding, most notably in *Pusher*'s two sequels, *Pusher II* [Pusher II: With Blood on My Hands] (2004) and *Pusher 3* [Pusher III: I'm the Angel of Death] (2005), which both involve a focus on Milo's character development. Milo's subtle cordiality thinly masks his capacity for extreme violence. He even treats Frank with a false sense of familial inclusion, almost like a fellow brother, but one who is ultimately one wrong move away from a sticky end. This kind of treatment subversively plays with the rhetorical inclusiveness that multiculturalism purports to establish. Its sense of togetherness or equal-footing is a false one or at the very least, based on an unspoken conformity to a set of rules, behaviours, or actions.

In line with the medium concept notion, the legacy of *Goodfellas* (Martin Scorsese 1990) and *Scarface* (Brian De Palma 1983) are also notable (Nestingen 2008: 91-94). One significant difference identified by Nestingen (2008:96) between American gangsters and the Nordic variations is how “they lack the dialectical connection to a myth of progress that is part of their status” and how “the ambivalence towards individualism captures seminal features of the discourse in the Nordic countries about the new values of competitiveness, entrepreneurialism and self-interest” (Nestingen 2008: 96). I propose we can add multiculturalism to this list. I also claim that we must develop a more forceful connection between the gangster motif and immigration, particularly in Denmark, where this ambivalence towards both individualism and specific cultural and religious practices is palpable on many social and political lines. The relationship between Frank and Milo is also a curious role-reversal of Denmark's assimilationist strategies, where Frank's unquestioning compliance to Milo is non-negotiable. This resonates in a Danish context because, as Hedetoft highlights, the Danish approach to ethnic diversity was less about integration and more about assimilation (Hedetoft 2010: 119).

Mette Hjort (2005) claims that *Pusher* presents an ironic take on the ethnic criminal gangster. In her analysis, the hyper-exaggerated Eastern European immigrant stereotypes are designed to mock ethnic Danes and their often baseless misconceptions about immigrants (2005:267). She reinforces her argument by exploring the ethnifiction of Milo's character and his domestic surroundings, which rely heavily on stereotyped aspects of Eastern European kitsch culture. This observation harks back to the exaggerated or distorted images that began circulating in Denmark in the late 1970s when negative press about specific cultural and religious practices began to emerge.

**“You’re Either with Us or Against Us”: Michael Noer’s *Nordvest* [Northwest] (2013)**

Produced in a post-coalition era when strict immigration policies and embedded attitudes towards the ethnic, particularly Muslim, Other remain, I argue that Michael Noer’s *Nordvest* [Northwest] is a typical example of the Danish gangster film where the perspective of the white ethnic Dane takes priority. It is set in a gritty urban environment, in this case, the neighbourhood of Nørrebro, which is one of the most ethnically diverse areas in Denmark. It features a young male protagonist caught between individual desires and protecting his vulnerable family against a group of thugs made up of second-generation Arab immigrants. Lastly, although it undoubtedly challenges the efficacy of Danish integration policies, I also argue that Noer’s film reinforces the mantra of us versus them.

Casper (Gustav Dyekjær Giese), the ethnic Danish teenage protagonist, works as a petty thief for a Danish-Arab clique headed by Jamal (Dulfi Al-Jabouri) and his sidekick Ali (Ali Abdul Amir Najei). The gang trade in stolen goods and as an accomplished thief, Casper is an asset to Jamal’s operation. Jamal’s control over Casper and his younger brother Andy (Oscar Dyekjær Giese) is clear from the outset, and he is shown to be an uncompromising bully.

Despite his criminal activity, Casper is committed to his family, investing his profits in his young sister and struggling single mother. However, after struggling under Jamal's controlling thumb, Casper begins working for ethnic Dane Bjørn (Roland Møller), a local drug dealer and pimp. As tensions escalate between the two sides, Casper is dragged further into the criminal underworld. When Jamal launches an attack on Bjørn's property, Casper is ordered to assassinate him. However, when Casper can't face the task, his younger brother takes it upon himself to commit the act. When Bjørn discovers his betrayal over the killing, Caspar flees with both groups in pursuit. The film ends with gunshots ringing out as Casper disappears out of shot, his fate unknown but predictably grim.

Stylistically, the film draws heavily on Refn's *Pusher* series. However, the film lacks the ironic depth identified by Hjort. In contrast to Milo, the ethnic immigrant Other is largely absent. Instead, the film focuses on developing Casper's character and, as we experience each unfolding crisis from his perspective, he is largely the only character with whom we identify. We empathise with his reluctance to use violence and, despite his criminal behaviour; we understand the enormous peer pressure he faces. Nørrebro is presented as a place of few opportunities for Casper, and because we identify with him, it often feels as though these limitations contribute to his participation in gangland activity. By contrast, Jamal and Ali are simply opportunists whose interest in Casper is based on his useful abilities as a thief.

According to Schmidt:

What Danish culture (often encapsulated in the term 'Danishness') actually entails is most frequently defined by stating what Danish culture is not, through the term 'un-Danishness'. Un-Danishness is affiliated with particular aspects of a rather crude understanding of immigrant culture (Schmidt 2013: 205)

To reinforce the contrasts between these apparent Danish values and those from outside, the liberal-conservative coalition of 2001-2011 launched the værdikampen initiative or “value struggle” plan, an agenda outlining the type of desirable Danish-ness allegedly represented by the cohesive togetherness of the welfare model (Schmidt 2013: 206). This cultural offensive was designed to reinforce apparent contrasting cultures and practices and draw attention to those considered undesirable. The coalition’s main targets were the Muslim minorities, who have long been perceived as a threat to these values (Jønsson and Petersen 2012: 134).

Excluding several notable exceptions, including Ole Christian Madsen's *Pizza King* (1999) and Omar Shargawi's *Gå med fred, Jamil* [Go With Peace, Jamil] (2008), this Wave of Danish genre films position us to identify with a white male protagonist. The relationship dynamics between the ethnic Danes and new Danes are also markedly different in *Nordvest*. Although evidently unstable and sometimes cruel, there are flickers of a paternal bond between Casper, Andy, and Bjørn. Although brief, these moments of camaraderie are distinctly different from the boys' experiences with their previous employers. During a violent confrontation between Jamal and Casper, Jamal declares “you're either with us or against us” referring to Casper's new-found loyalty to Bjørn. However, the ‘us’ he is referring to is clearly a false one. Films like *Nordvest* represent the shattering of traditional collectivist welfare logic. Simultaneously, the portrayal of the opportunistic immigrant Other whose own closed off ethnic communities, or organised crime syndicate, in this case, pose the greatest threat to the welfare values of inclusivity, falls in line with the dominant rhetoric of the liberal-conservative era. The gangster motif has, in this example, helped to maintain a clear division between two ethnic groups. To expand and challenge both these images, I now turn to a markedly different example and a unique permutation of the gangster genre in Danish cinema.

### **Challenging Parallel Societies in Omar Shargawi's *Gå med fred, Jamil* [Go With Peace, Jamil] (2008)**

While ethnicity is a recurrent theme in contemporary Danish feature films, these films are for the most part made by Danes with ancestral ties to Denmark, and not by 'new' Danes or Danes with a bi-racial heritage (Hjort 2007:40).

In contrast to *Nordvest*, I claim that Omar Shargawi's *Gå med fred, Jamil* [Go With Peace, Jamil] (2008) plays with the rhetoric of the dominant host nation by challenging the so-called parallel society concept. The concept of parallel societies is used to describe ethnic minority communities who self-segregate themselves or refuse to adopt the practices or values of their host nation. Parallel societies are considered deeply damaging in Denmark, and the concept plays a key role in party politics. Mikkel Rytter notes how in 2004, Denmark's Minister of Culture, Brian Mikkelsen of the Conservative People's Party, delivered a speech where he condemned the emergence of so-called parallel societies in Denmark citing their apparent "medieval norms and undemocratic mindsets" (Mikkelsen quoted in Rytter 2013: 45). These societies are viewed in contrast to the perceived Danish cultural values of collective welfare consensus. I argue that Shargawi challenges the parallel society concept by exploring the divisions within them.

The plot condenses the events of a single day into a fast-paced action revenge format. In this respect, and in line with the medium concept theory, Shargawi draws on the conventions of Hollywood action cinema, merging these familiar visual topes with the narrative sensibilities of an alternative Shakespearean tragedy. Before emigrating from Lebanon to Denmark as a child, Sunni Muslim Jamil witnesses the murder of his mother at the hands of Mohammed, a powerful member of the Shia community. As an adult, Jamil discovers

Mohammed is also living in Copenhagen and decides to take revenge by murdering one of his key conspirators. In response, Mohammed sends people after Jamil insisting they bring him back alive. With his son in hiding, Jamil's desperate father tries to neutralise the conflict with Mohammed, pleading with him to not to propagate the cycle of vengeance. Jamil's father tries in vain to encourage his son to embrace the concept of forgiveness and begs him to consider the future of his young son Adam (Elias Samir Al-Sobeih). However, Jamil refuses to let go of the past. When the conflict escalates, Mohammed's accomplices abduct Adam. When Jamil goes on a rampage, Adam is accidentally shot and dies in his father's arms on the pavement.

This time, Nordic prosperity and welfare provision plays no role in the lives of these characters. For Jamil, escaping Copenhagen and returning to his homeland, Lebanon is the focus of desire. Nothing in the film speaks of Denmark's contemporary allure. In fact, Shargawi almost erases Denmark from the film entirely. There are no cultural landmarks; the cast are almost all new Danes, and the film's language is predominantly made up of a variety of Arabic dialects. Traces of Denmark are evident in Jamil's young Danish-born son, Adam as they speak to him predominantly in Danish. *Gå med fred, Jamil* is also one of the few European films to feature an exclusively Arabic-speaking cast. Frustrated by inaccurate and oversimplified portrayals of Muslims and Arabs in Danish culture, Shargawi set out to create a frank and open account of the tensions within small, insular Arab communities, balancing an explosive subject matter with a desire to tell an authentic story. This inside-out perspective offers a unique take on immigrant politics in Danish cinema. Shargawi plays with the values of consensus, conformity, individualism, and solidarity- all used in Danish political rhetoric- but his perspective comes from inside a seemingly ethnically segregated Danish. Erasing Denmark was a strategic move where the film becomes an apparent space for exploring internal ethnic conflict. The explicit use of the gangster motif proves each parallel society is

equally divided. At the centre of each faction, families are searching for stability and suppressing the desire for vengeance or retribution. Jamil is a conflicted character. Like Casper, we identify with him because of his tragic situation, trapped in an endless cycle of violence. We also identify with his elderly father, who simply wants peace and consensus between the two warring families. Like Caspar, Jamil's bond with his family, particularly his young son is the driving force behind his desire for a better life. Amid the violence, there are moments where Shargawi emphasises the bond between Jamil, Adam, and his grandfather. These cohesive family values are not unlike those purported to represent Danish values. Like his ethnic Danish predecessors, Jamil is also divided by individual desire for vengeance and building a life for his family.

*Gå med fred*, Jamil grew out of a shorter project that began in 2003. After receiving 10,000 DKK from the Film Workshop, Shargawi pitched a three-minute edit to Danish producers at the Cannes film festival. After generating significant interest, Shargawi negotiated a deal with Zentropa (Jørholt 2010: 237-240). Speaking of his position as one of the few 'minority' directors, Shargawi states:

I live in Denmark and I make films in Denmark, and that's the starting point for the film. But the story could have played out anywhere. That's one of the reasons why Denmark is cut out visually. I'm not trying to hide that it's Denmark, and the characters do sometimes speak Danish, but I'm trying to capture what it feels like to live in those communities, how people who are part of them see the world. I think those immigrant environments are very similar across Europe. They're small, closed societies (Shargawi quoted in Hjort, Jørholt and Redvall 2010:242)

Shargawi defines himself as a Danish director and shuns the 'immigrant filmmaker' label. What is strikingly clear from Shargawi's experiences in the Danish film industry is the way his status as a second-generation immigrant appeared to carry more weight than his status as a filmmaker. Significantly, in his film, Shargawi lets the conflict play out without the interference of authority. He explores the conflict as not just about a clash of ideologies, but of the human condition and the pitfalls of revenge. Those who represent the law and enforce the authority of the state are removed. There are no police, no legal angles or perspectives, no state interventions of any kind. This lack of authority stands to represent the decentralised nature of diversity management. The gangs themselves often lack a collective authority. There is no society to speak of, and this is a deliberate ideological choice designed to foreground the tensions and universal struggles of the protagonist without the arbitrary and often misguided policies of Danish law. However, the Sunni-Shia war is essentially just a framework for Shargawi, who also draws on the universal themes of vengeance and honour that is not specifically attached to any culture or religion. However, by removing the Danishness, he helps us to understand the limitations faced by directors of a non-or partially Nordic background. This is because there is no political or historical depth to the conflict explored in Shargawi's film. As this political edge is also neglected in Western journalistic circles, there is a danger that choosing to use such a framework and then glossing over it with conventional Hollywoodized spectacle helps to maintain ethnic division.

Some film critics attacked Shargawi for failing to address the 2005 Prophet Mohammed cartoon controversy in Denmark (Jørholt 2010: 246). However, Shargawi defended his position, claiming that such criticism exemplified the narrow-mindedness of the Danish film industry. This kind of criticism signifies the institutional problems facing directors from minority backgrounds. Critics clearly expected Shargawi, a Dane of Palestinian heritage, to address topical issues related to Islamic fundamentalism. Not only that, but they expected

him to discuss how these issues have affected Denmark and the West. These expectations also highlight another issue; that a single director from a minority background must represent the views of the entire minority community. This all-encompassing expectation, where minority directors are seen as ‘ambassadors’, reinforces the naïve and reductive views of the industry.

**“There is No Us”: Ethnic Wars and Failed Collectivist Logic in *R* [*R: Hit First, Hit Hardest*] (2010)**

I explore Michael Noer and Tobias Lindholm’s *R* as another more complex example of the tribal politics at work within Danish society. *R* is a gangster film set in a hostile prison environment in contemporary Denmark. After he is jailed for assault, young offender Rune (Pilou Asbæk) is thrown into a cutthroat correctional facility where the rules revolve around racial ‘cliques’ fighting over a hidden narcotics trade. The ethnic Danes and new Danes largely made up of second-generation Muslims, each operates in separate units of the facility, and their drug trading is intertwined with racial hatred and underhanded manoeuvring on both sides. To survive, Rune is forced to align himself with neo-Nazi Carsten (Jacob Gredsted), and his violent sociopathic sidekick, Mureren (Roland Møller). Through his job as a dishwasher, Rune befriends Rashid (Dulfi Al-Jabouri), who finds himself in a similar position on the flipside of the facility where he is a reluctant member of the Arab faction, headed by the equally psychotic Bazhir (Omar Shargawi). When a drug deal between the two gangs turns sour, Rune is implicated and murdered in a horrific assault perpetrated by members of his own ethnic group. The murder is aided reluctantly by Rashid, who helps to lure Rune to his death. The film plays with Rashid’s character, keeping his motivations and loyalties hidden until after the murder. However, during the final act, the

perspective shifts to Rashid, and we learn that he is deeply affected by his role in Rune's murder. When he is shunned by his own clique for conspiring with a rival gang, Rashid's predicament feels grimly familiar. In an act of vengeance, Bazhir throws boiling oil in Rashid's face, a concluding act that indicates the cycle of violence will simply continue.

The collectivist logic of each clique is based on specific codes. Each inmate has a role to play in this hierarchy, and their perceived criminal skillsets define that role. Prisons are the designated area for the people (in this case men) society has failed. This segregated environment symbolically captures the failure of assimilation politics and mocks the perceived inclusivity of a collective value struggle. In his analysis of the prison environment, Pietari Kääpä discusses how "the micro-society of the prison is premised on a similar set of rules concerning individualistic and capitalist exploitation, all in a distinctly multicultural (though segregated) setting" (2014: 134). There is also a contextual significance tied to the environment of a state-run penitentiary institution. This prison is the ultimate embodiment of state intervention, where every aspect of a person's life is managed, policed, and controlled. Not only has state intervention utterly failed to integrate ethnic minorities into the system, but the prison forms a different type of parallel society where both ethnic Danes and new Danes find themselves trapped in parallel positions. Superficially, the ethnic divisions between the two gangs appear to echo the sentiments of *Nordvest*'s divisive racial separation. Here, while the ethnic identities of each clique work under the logic of failed multiculturalist, both ethnic groups are kept separate and pitted against one another. However, unlike *Nordvest*, *R* goes further in framing ethnic division.

The corruption and literal backstabbing is a universal trait inside this brutal anti-society. Both Rune and Rashid are exposed to the full brutality of their own ethnic clique. The cliques exist for the profit of individuals, and the politics of racial segregation represent a secondary component in this ongoing battle over drug debt and superficial codes of honour. There is

virtually nothing separating these fractions or the way they operate. Both groups and the individuals within them are all driven by self-serving greed, using violence to control one another. As the anonymous title suggests, the film could represent either or indeed both characters. Equally, the leaders of each ethnic faction have far more in common with each other than they do with Rune or Rashid. Although Noer and Lindholm again prioritise the perspective of an ethnic Dane; as the narrative develops, a parallel narrative unfolds involving Rashid's character. Both are trapped by the same people whose appetite for violence are not bound by racial identity. Both men are reluctant members of their respective ethnic groups, but they are nonetheless forced to conform and assimilate.

During a crucial scene in the white camp, a documentary on natural selection plays in the background. The narrator espouses the virtues of difference and how it defines us as a species. At this moment, the psychotic Mureren turn to Rune and declares "there is no us". This nihilistic Darwinian reference implies that the survival of the fittest applies to those willing to use violence. However, violence for the likes of Mureren and Bazhir is also about exerting power. In fact, for them, it is more about power than survival. In *R*, we witness the ultimate evolution of individualism; it is no longer just for profit or survival but also for sadistic control.

*R* plays into the conformist agenda of Danish assimilation politics. It also subverts and re-contextualizes the agenda of the welfare model where here any sense of sameness is evident only in the shared level of violence in each unit. In other words, their power-hungry greed makes both gangs one and the same thing. Like *Gå med fred, Jamil*, *R* alludes to the irony of the parallel societies concept in Denmark. With its monocultural agenda and resistance to integration, Denmark's own party politics falls squarely into the definition of a parallel society.

Returning to Schmidt's comments on how Danish-ness and Danish values are defined by what they are perceived not to represent, *R*'s portrayal of two-sided brutality challenges us to question the meaning of any value system. There are no real sides in this prison environment, only individuals.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I have argued the emergence of the gangster genre in Denmark reflects the country's fragmented and contradictory approach to an emerging multicultural reality. The rhetorical focus on monoculturalism in Danish politics also goes some way to explaining the prevalence of the genre in Denmark above its Nordic neighbours. *Nordvest* reinforces the mantra of us versus them where social deprivation and violence are not explored on any meaningful level. Without elaborating on the causes and complexities of such divisions, the film fails to provide any real insight into issues of racial segregation. *Gå med fred, Jamil* comes from a place of exclusion and from a film culture where minority filmmakers are an exception. I suggest Shargawi's film is a subversive take on the parallel society rhetoric peddled by the liberal-conservative coalition. His inside-out perspective is an essential development in the genre's recent history precisely because it highlights the divisions within them. Lastly, although problematically shot once again largely from the perspective of an ethnic Dane, *R* foregrounds the rise of individualism and greed, themes that resonate with the collapse of collectivist social values central to the welfare state model. Through the dynamics of the prison system, the values of both gangs mirror the logic of the welfare system in its current form, based on the competitive values of individualistic neoliberalism. The corruption and backstabbing also complicate the politics of racial division on both sides.

The key to understanding these films lies in acknowledging how the division is framed. While it is clear multiculturalism has failed in these narratives, some present us with more complex ways of understanding why it has failed. As with elsewhere, talk of closing borders, building walls, and perusing legal barriers against perceived threats to cultural ‘values’ is now commonplace in the Danish media. However, as these genre films demonstrate, problems are clearly evident within the system itself. Curiously, most narratives are concerned with second-generation immigrants. Largely, these are not films about cultural clashes between newcomers and the host population. Rather, they highlight how the embedded failings of assimilation politics in Denmark have converged to create tribal manifestations of ethnic division that now occur between an emerging generation of Danes from different ethnic backgrounds. However, although they are growing in sophistication, many examples fail to address the heart of the issue, where the inclusivity of the welfare state is reserved for the few.

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