

Expressions of a backlash

*Challenging the story of success in
 Norwegian cinema of the 1980s and 1990s*

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we ask if there was a backlash against film feminism in Norway in the 1980s. In Norwegian film history, this decade is known as “the helicopter period” and is associated with a turn towards commercial genre film and classical dramaturgy. This has usually been narrated as a success story for Norwegian cinema. It is, however, also a decade connected to a loss of position for the women directors who had gained a footing in Norwegian cinema in the 1970s. We thus question the idea of progress associated with this decade in film history and propose avenues of investigation. We explore the loss of position of female directors by looking at film reception and film criticism. We further present and discuss a numerical breakdown of women directors and female lead characters in the 1980s and 1990s and point to thematic readings of the on-screen portrayal of women characters in this time span. We find evidence of aggression towards women and a disappearance of women’s film and argue that this points to an anti-feminist pushback in Norwegian cinema of the 1980s and 1990s.

KEYWORDS: feminism, backlash, Norwegian film history, women’s film, female directors, female characters

Introduction

This article builds on the premise that the past must be recognised to intervene in the present. Following this journal issue's call for papers, which explores questions at the intersection of media and gender in the Nordic countries within a current situation of a "considerable anti-feminist pushback and a general backlash against gender equality discourse", we make the case for what has been suggested but never systematically or explicitly explored in Norwegian film history: Developments and experiences in the Norwegian film culture in the 1980s can (or even should) be interpreted as expressions and articulations of a backlash against feminism and women's authorship in film.

Journalist and author Susan Faludi articulated the idea of a widespread backlash in her book, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991). Here, she identified the existence of a media-driven discourse of backlash against feminist advances in the US that relied on the fabrication and circulation of many untruths. Key to Faludi's argument was how this backlash developed through the strategy of blaming the women's liberation movement for being the cause of the many "problems" supposedly experienced by women in the 1980s, including, but not limited to, fertility problems and divorce. The essence of the discourse was that women's liberation had gone too far – not that it still had a long way to go. For Faludi, the backlash is history repeating itself. Each time women expanded their rights or gained new ground, a pushback followed to "keep them in their place" (Faludi, 1993: 52). Faludi's concept of a backlash loop has found its way into many disciplines, amongst them gender studies, literary studies, political science, and sociology.

Faludi's book was translated into Norwegian in 1993. The same year, the Council for Gender Equality and the Secretariat for Gender Research in Norway hosted a conference in Oslo called "Backlash in Norway? Women in the 1990s". The conference aimed to "bring forth a nuanced image of status and development when it comes to women's position in Norway" (Eeg-Henriksen et al., 1994: 3), and it brought together researchers and journalists to shed light on women's position in various parts of society, from medicine, political representation, and the pay gap, to the image of women in commercials. No definitive answer to whether a backlash had indeed taken place in Norway was given, however.

Still, the conception of a backlash, understood in a broad sense as anti-feminist sentiments that arrive after a period of progress in terms of gender equality, does resonate with certain developments concerning the position of women directors in Norwegian cinema of the 1980s. This is a decade known to have introduced an aesthetic reorientation towards the dramaturgy of classical Hollywood cinema, known as "the helicopter period", but also a marginalisation of the personal and social-modernist cinema. A loss of position for women directors in Norwegian cinema during the 1980s has been noted in several publications (Iversen, 2011a: 231; Lian, 2015: 24–25; Servoll, 2014; Iversen & Solum, 2010: 46). There is, however, still a need to systematically describe and explore this phenomenon, and its consequences for female directors, feminist filmmaking,

and the on-screen representation of women. While research has established that feminist film culture was pervasive in Norway the 1970s (for a discussion on feminist filmmaking in Norway in the 1970s, see Holtar, 2022), the question of what happened after remains underexplored.

In this article, we seek to remedy this situation by providing examples of such explorations. Inspired by Faludi's historical description of the backlash against women in the 1980s, we revisit this period of Norwegian cinema and ask the following: How can we understand the loss of position of film feminism and women directors in the 1980s? How might these experiences have affected women directors in the 1990s? What kind of female characters do we find in Norwegian films in these decades? What do the numbers say?

We begin with the film historical backdrop of the cultural and aesthetic shift in Norwegian film production in the mid-1980s, where we draw attention to anti-feminist and anti-women tendencies in film criticism. We then explore possible consequences of these tendencies by looking at the number of female directors and female characters in the 1990s. The last section is devoted to textual analysis, where we turn to two tendencies in on-screen representation: violence against women on the one hand, and a disappearance of feminist themes on the other.

Method

Our main concern in this article is Norwegian film history, and the possibility, or even necessity, of offering alternative readings or designations of the 1980s and 1990s. In this way, the article stands in the tradition of feminist film theory, whose goal, beyond anything, has been “making visible the invisible” and “becoming sensitive to what often goes unnoticed, becomes naturalized, or is taken for granted within sexist society” (Kuhn, 1994: 71), whether this concerns the discourse of narrative film history or the portrayal of women on-screen. Here, we follow film historian Patrice Petro (2002: 32), who wrote:

The project of reconstituting film history from a feminist perspective is not merely a matter of making the invisible visible. It also involves submitting regimes of visibility to a general critique of objectivity and subjectivity in the writing of film history.

According to Petro, it is essential to rethink how film history thus far has been written.

In this article, we pick up a central question within feminist film historiography: What happened to women in film (history)? The question has been asked in relation to different historical and geographical contexts, and as Jane Gaines discussed in the 2018 book *Pink-Slipped*, it is a compelling question precisely “because it incorporates so many questions, only the most obvious of which is ‘What events took place?’” (Gaines, 2018: 32). We are thus interested both in what happened to women in Norwegian film in the 1980s and 1990s, and in how this has been conceptualised in film history. We invoke the word backlash as a useful and, not least forceful, description, both for its concurrency (Faludi's

argument concerns the same period that we are interested in) and for its evocative power. Backlash means a turn or a countermovement: an anti-feminist backlash aimed at revoking new rights or newly won ground for women. As a historical designation, it can function as a conceptualisation with which to understand experiences of pushback and loss of position, as well as expressions of aggression towards women in and on film.

We searched for these experiences and expressions by examining film culture and film production, drawing on film reviews and film criticism, film texts, and production data. In addition to the archival-empirical method, we grounded our examination of a backlash against feminism in a discussion of the representation of women in front of and behind the camera. This method stands in a tradition of feminist film studies that insists on the relationship between the cultural condition and the portrayal of women in film (e.g., Gledhill, 1987; Haskell, 1987; Sellier, 2008). Today, a new direction of this tradition is found in studies that combine quantitative data with qualitative readings, sometimes referred to as Data Feminism (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2023). In the US, projects such as the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative (University of Southern California) and the Celluloid Ceiling (San Diego State University) provide numbers and research on women in the media industry, focusing on pay gaps, employment statistics, and on-screen portrayal of women. In Norway, there are no similar initiatives, although since the mid-2000s, the Norwegian Film Institute, following the example of the Swedish Film Institute, has provided yearly statistics on gender representation in key positions – understood as director, scriptwriter, and producer – on all feature films with public funding. From 2016, the Norwegian Film Institute has also included numbers on lead characters according to gender in their annual report. The same year, a more thorough investigation of lead roles and gender in Norwegian film between 2011–2015 was conducted on behalf of Norsk Skuespillerforbund, the Norwegian actor's association (Bjerkeland & Servoll, 2016), and in 2024, a report on diversity in film and television narratives was presented (Kleppe et al., 2023).

However, there are no longitudinal surveys of gender and film that provides figures on women behind and in front of the camera prior to the 2000s. Therefore, we have assembled and systematised data on feature film production in Norway between 1980 and 1999 from a variety of sources, choosing to focus on fiction features released theatrically. For each title, we have compiled the following: year of theatrical release, primary audience group, gender of director(s), and number of main characters along with their age group and gender. The dataset is based on the standard Norwegian filmography *Filmen i Norge* (Braaten et al., 1995) and the National Library of Norway's web filmography (National Library of Norway, 2022), the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), and the filmography of fiction film production in Gunnar Iversen's (2011a) general Norwegian film history, *Norsk filmhistorie*. We have consulted the synopses offered by these filmographies to determine audience groups and main characters. In addition, it was often necessary to view the films in question, and we have done so when possible. However, even after having seen a film, it is not a straightforward

matter to determine the number of main characters. Here, the character's point-of-view, screen-time and dialogue, narrative function, as well as the film's billing of actors in credits and posters, have been the instructive factors. Based on the quantitative data, we moved to qualitative readings. Our readings were focused on key narrative scenes, plots, and characters, and they were aimed at identifying certain themes and tropes. This method of analysis relies on interpretation, and as such is open to debate (see, e.g., Modleski, 1988). Aware of the *ur*-problem of interpretation, we have employed a mixed method: combining qualitative readings of moving images and texts (including film reviews, film journalism, and academic publications) with quantitative figures to launch a historiographical exploration of the 1980s and 1990s. For the purposes of this article, we have translated quoted material from Norwegian to English.

Women directors, helicopters, and the backlash in the 1980s

In advance of the premiere of her fifth feature film in 1981, *Forfølgelsen* [*The Witch Hunt*], Anja Breien spoke about her position as a woman director, and mused about the future:

It will probably become a tougher climate when men discover that we are here to stay. The occasional female director has probably been able to sit there as a hostage. I have experienced myself as such, and I think I will probably find it tougher now. I mean particularly internationally. For a few years now, female directors have been popular, but it is not certain that this fashion will last. Especially not when women do not make the particular kind of women's film that is expected of them. Within the male-dominated culture of the film industry, there will probably be some violent aggression against female directors. I think I can feel it already. (Kvinnefront, 1980: 21)

During the 1970s, women had made their way into the director's chair of feature filmmaking in Norway. In these years, Nicole Macé, Randi Nordby, Anja Breien, Laila Mikkelsen, and Vibeke Løkkeberg all made their feature film debut. While women directors still only accounted for about a tenth of the total national production of feature film, they emerged as a small but critical mass. 1981 was coined "the Great Year of the Girls" in the daily newspaper *Dagbladet* (Bratten, 1981: 18), as a tribute to the simultaneous release of three feature films helmed by three women directors: *Forfølgelsen* [*The Witch Hunt*], directed by Breien, *Løperjenta* [*Kamilla*], directed by Løkkeberg, and *Liten Ida* [*Little Ida*], directed by Mikkelsen. Indeed, by the early 1980s, the film industry, not unlike the country at large, had donned a self-image as particularly gender-equal. In 1979, Norway had implemented a Gender Equality Act, and in 1981, Gro Harlem Brundtland became Norway's first female prime minister. A Nordic film seminar hosted by the American Film Institute in 1982 gave rise to the term "Norway – land of female directors" (Holst, 2006: 75).

As a result, the early 1980s has become a symbolical period for feminist film history, representing the (unfulfilled) promise that the position of this generation

of women directors and their films seemed to hold. However, at the same time, an ideological shift took place that impacted both film production and the position of women in Norwegian cinema. Internationally, this would be a decade of conservative rule, popularly exemplified by the election of Ronald Reagan as president of the US and Margaret Thatcher as prime minister in the UK. Norway was no exception. In 1983, the newly elected conservative government of Norway presented the first white paper on film, which signalled the changes that the film sector, along with the media culture at large, would go through in terms of organisational form and ownership. At the same time, a new force was beckoning forth: free market capitalism – a force that “was known from other sectors and industries, but which had so far not made its imprint in the media sector, with all its traditions and ties to the state” (Servoll, 2014: 269). The buzzwords now were liberalisation, privatisation, and deregulation (Bastiansen & Dahl, 2003: 457).

For the film sector, which had been heavily state dependent in the 1970s, this shift in the political climate had tangible effects in the form of new opportunities for private capital and investment. This also instigated an aesthetic and cultural shift in the late 1980s. In the context of Norwegian film history, the latter half of the 1980s is usually understood as a time of great success for commercial genre film directors. “Helikopterperioden” [the helicopter period] is a well-established framework for analysing the overall shift away from the more socially committed filmmaking of the 1970s and into a period of “modernisation” that resulted in genre mainstreaming and commercialisation (see, e.g., Dahl et al., 1996: 441; Servoll, 2014; Solum, 1997: 187).

This shift is the topic of the historical study *Den norske filmbølgen* (Iversen & Solum, 2010). The introduction, called “From murder to miracle”, sets up an engaging narrative of the development of Norwegian film from the 1970s and into the 2000s. Iversen and Solum nominated one film as showing the way for a new aesthetic and thematic direction: *Orions belte* [*Orion’s belt*] (1985) by Ola Solum, a cold war thriller set in the North Sea involving conspiracy, helicopters, and the fight for survival. The film is placed as the beginning of a new phase of popular Norwegian cinema, characterised by stronger Hollywood inspiration in action-orientation, three-act dramaturgy, and the use of genre tropes. The helicopter period thus references other films that can be placed in the thriller and action genre, such as *Blücher* (directed by Oddvar Bull Tuhus in 1988) and *Etter... Rubicon* (directed by Leidulv Risan in 1987). However, this period also saw a popularisation of other genres, such as the crime and neo-noir film and films aimed at youth audiences.

In *Den norske filmbølgen*, Iversen and Solum framed this development rather unambiguously as a success story, where Norwegian cinema’s reorientation wins back the trust of the audience and film critics. Abandoning the agenda-setting social issue-oriented films of the 1970s, Norwegian filmmakers began to embrace narrative pleasure and commercial appeal. Iversen and Solum (2010: 46) located this shift as the beginning of not only a more popular and varied cinema, but also of qualitatively better films. The burning question is what was left behind.

Whereas women directors had been at the forefront of Norwegian cinema in the 1970s, they were now placed in opposition to these new ideals. Film was

now meant to be professional, which excluded personal engagement and films that put problems under debate (Servoll, 2014: 323). This had ramifications for the women who launched their careers in the 1970s. Contrary to the support suggested by the image of Norway as the “land of the female directors”, they were met with devastating criticism. Laila Mikkelsen left directing after her fourth feature film *Snart 17* [*Soon 17*] (1984), which received harsh reviews, while Vibeke Løkkeberg garnished so much controversy and negative attention for her films *Hud* [*Vilde, the wild one*] (1986) and *Hvor gudene er døde* [*Where the gods are dead*] (1993) that she became known as “the National Witch” (Mühleisen, 1994). *Hud* was the last explicitly feminist film to be made and released in Norway in the 1980s.

Hud chronicles the generational trauma of incest that Vilde (played by Løkkeberg herself) and her child, Malene, are victims of. Their home is in a claustrophobically small coastal trading post, where the societal grip on their lives has become unbearable. When Vilde’s parents produce a husband that will accept Vilde and her “fatherless” child, she refuses to obey. Upon its theatrical release, the film was scandalised for its depiction of incest and female suffering:

Løkkeberg bursts out with her monochromatic vision of female martyrdom. Here is incest-rape in almost sedative amounts, from Vilde’s relationship with her stepfather. Love-hate between victim and executioner. Gradually a story of self-pity with self-mirroring and self-torture. (Haddal as cited in Servoll, 2014: 306)

The reception of *Hud* stands in stark contrast with that of another personal auteur film released around the same time. Like *Hud*, Oddvar Einarson’s *X* had high artistic ambitions and was not associated with the orientation towards action genre films brought on by the helicopter period. Both films achieved recognition outside of Norway. *X* was included in the main competition programme at the Venice International Film Festival, where it won a special jury prize, whereas *Hud* was included in the prestigious “Un certain regard” programme at the Cannes Film Festival. However, when *X* won the best film category at the Norwegian Amanda film awards, it was not competing against *Hud*, which had not been nominated for the coveted prize.

X is a film about the young art photographer, Jon Gabriel, and his relationship with thirteen-year-old Flora. The film fared well with the press after its theatrical release: No reviewers instigated a discussion about the problematic aspects of a sexual relationship between a child and a grown man. Instead, critics foregrounded *X*’s many successful artistic qualities. Jan Erik Holst (1986: 34), for instance, described the couple as “two cold, frostbitten birds trying to warm each other”. In later years, *X* has been suggested as a candidate for the film canon. “‘X’ has gained status as a strong candidate for a classic in Norwegian film history”, wrote Gunnar Iversen in 2011(b). As with the film’s reviews, the text avoided a discussion of the nature of the Lolita-like relationship (2011b). The reception of *X* shows that from its initial reviews, via its award and through its later championing by historians, it has fared well.¹ Even though, like *Hud*, *X*’s narrative included impermissible

sexual relations, and the film rejected the mainstreaming and commercialisation that much of the Norwegian film industry then considered its future. This suggests that the aesthetic reorientation of the 1980s did not mean a loss of position for all non-commercial directors (Servoll, 2014: 221–224).

Anja Breien was, in this regard, correct in her suspicions that a more aggressive climate would arise. Her own film, *Forfølgelsen* [*The Witch Hunt*], received mixed reviews, ranging from critics labelling her “competent”, but too cool and distanced to claim any sense of brilliance, to a male film critic stating that the film was so poorly made it should never have been screened (Servoll, 2014: 289–290). Like *Hud*, *Forfølgelsen* was a feminist film about the historical oppression of women. Set in fifteenth-century Norway, *Forfølgelsen* tells the story of Eli, a traveling woman who wishes for independence in work and love but falls victim to fear and suspicion. Richard Penã (2015) suggested that the film was among the first to deal with the historic witch hunts from a woman’s point of view.

Hud and *Forfølgelsen* have more aspects in common. Both are based on original screenplays by their directors, their aesthetic and narrative styles further do not adhere to conventions. The ambitions of the filmmakers were high, and they even had the audacity of working with record-breaking budgets. At the same time, they did not shy away from articulating the agendas they had with their respective projects.

The film journal *Filmavisa* led the way in the aesthetical and ideological purge that was to change the film scene and conditions of film production in the 1980s (Servoll, 2014). In the film journal’s review of *Forfølgelsen*, writer-director Breien was deprecated. The journal questioned her status as one of the most critically acclaimed directors of Norwegian cinema by suggesting she was without talent or merit, and that her script was unable to adhere to any of the demands of successful narration (Szepeszy, 1981). As for Løkkeberg, she became an example of what was wrong with Norwegian cinema. While *Filmavisa* was impressed with *Løperjenten* [*Kamilla*] (1981), it also stated that her film represented an outdated way of thinking about film (Servoll, 2014: 302). The journal suggested that the time had come for the industry to choose between two future paths: the Løkkeberg-path or the Fløgstad-path, as the journal called them. The Løkkeberg-path was that of auteur films; the other path was named after Norwegian author Kjartan Fløgstad, who wrote several essays about the failure of political art of the 1970s to engage the public. He argued that it was necessary to return to the liberating power of the universal myths upon which westerns, film noirs, and old Hollywood B movies were founded (Fløgstad, 1981). According to *Filmavisa*, the Fløgstad-path was the only path forward for Norwegian cinema in the 1980s, as it was facing a complex media landscape and would have to compete with American blockbusters, television, and home video (Skagen, 1981).

The shift was thus explicitly formulated as a movement away from feminist, activist, and personal films to a so-called universal discourse. The use of one of the most visible and outspoken feminist directors, Vibeke Løkkeberg, as an example of the wrong path certainly speaks volumes. The failure to name this

development as an outcome of anti-feminism has masked the loss of position of women directors as an inevitable result of changing preferences. What primarily warrants further research, then, is what consequences this backlash had on women behind and in front of the camera.

What the numbers say

As facts and figures on Norwegian film production in the 1980s and 1990s only partly exist, we begin with a situational overview of the two decades covered by this article. What do the numbers tell us?

Figure 1 shows the yearly number of feature films directed by men and women between 1980 and 1999. Figure 2 illustrates the same numbers in percentages and stretches back a decade by including the 1970s.

FIGURE 1 Feature films by gender of director, 1980–1999 (n)

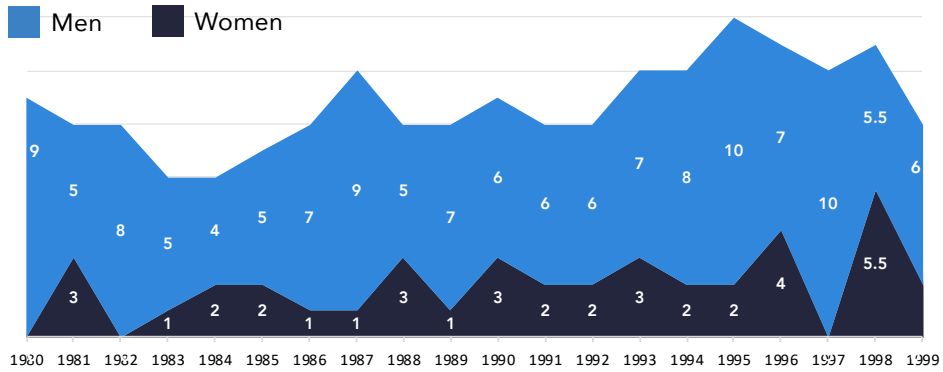
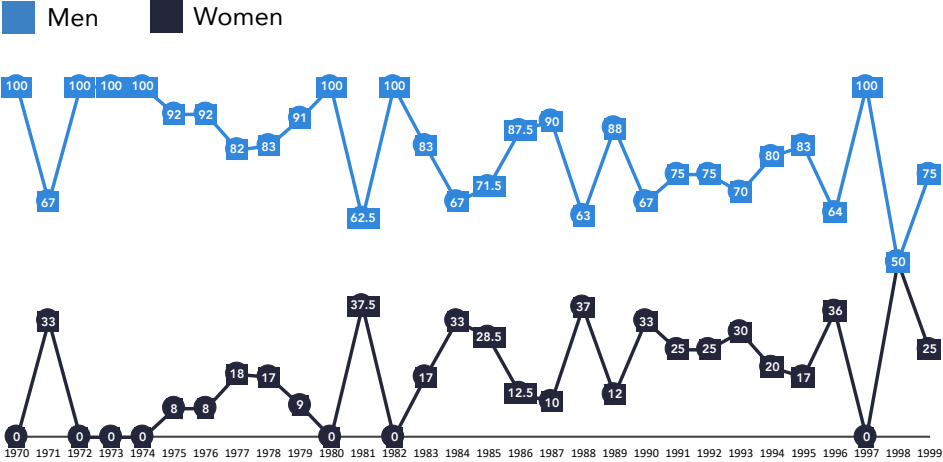


FIGURE 2 Feature films by gender of director, 1970–1999 (per cent)



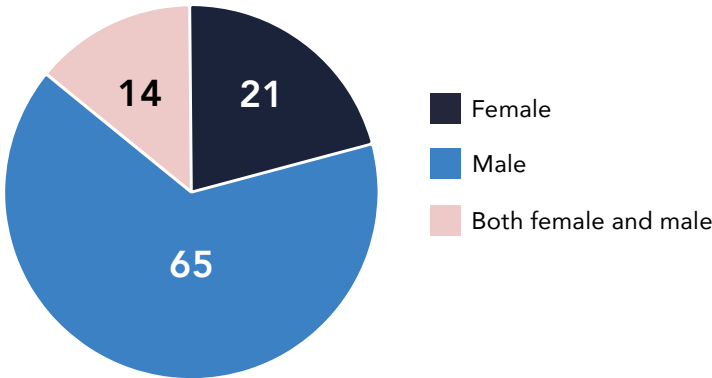
During the 1980s, the three directors Laila Mikkelsen, Anja Breien, and Vibeke Løkkeberg were joined by five more female feature film directors: Eva Dahr, Eva Isaksen, Bente Erichsen, Grete Salomonsen, and Margrethe Robsahm. In this decade, one or more women directed a feature film every year, with the exception of zero women in 1980 and 1982, the two years bookending the peak “year of the girls”. In the 1990s, the number of women filmmakers became twice as high, with Unni Straume, Berit Nesheim, Liv Ullman, Mona J. Hoel, Sirin Eide, Vibeke Idsøe, Anne Marie Nørholm, Torun Lian, Karin Julsrud, and Hilde Heier all taking a seat in the director’s chair. Still, the number of films directed by women did not increase proportionally. From typically one or two films directed by women each year in the 1980s, the share only grew to two to three films by women yearly in the 1990s.

These numbers tell us that while the 1980s and 1990s brought more women into the pool of directors, it did not lead to a corresponding increase in the share of fiction feature films directed by women. From 1980–1989, the share of feature films directed by women was 17.9 per cent, only increasing by 7.6 per cent to 25.5 per cent in the following decade, 1990–1999. This shows a persistent underrepresentation of women directors more generally, but also possibly a decline in opportunities relative to the number of women working in film. In other words, while more women had entered the film industry during the 1990s than in the 1980s, the share of feature films directed by women did not grow proportionally.

When it comes to on-screen representation of women, the numbers reveal a similar situation of underrepresentation to those found in the share of women working as directors. Between 1980–1999, the share of female main characters in Norwegian cinema was 32 per cent. These numbers include children, youths, and adult female characters, as well as films with multiple main characters, such as ensemble films, and films revolving around a heterosexual couple or love triangle-plots, a rather popular constellation in Norwegian cinema.

The graph in Figure 3 shows the distribution of adult protagonists in films, by gender. The numbers are based on all feature films released in cinemas, including films for young audiences.

FIGURE 3 Protagonists in feature films, 1980–1999 (per cent)



This graph shows that 21 per cent of the films aimed at an adult audience had female main characters, 14 per cent featured a combination of male and female main characters, whereas 65 per cent of the films had male main characters. Zooming in on a subset of the films aimed at adult audiences that have a single, identifiable main character – a protagonist – the share of female characters is 25 per cent in 1980–1999, while the corresponding number for male characters is 75 per cent.

During these two decades, then, there were thrice as many male character studies or films centred on male experiences than there were female characters or women-centred films. The numbers reveal how women were underrepresented on-screen throughout the two decades we focus on in this article, and that they directed a small share of the feature films during the same period.

Women and violence on screen

Our numbers show a consistent underrepresentation of women on-screen. Moreover, at the height of the helicopter period, female lead characters decreased further, and in 1987 and 1989, there were zero adult female protagonists in Norwegian feature films. Jon Iversen, writing from the vantage point of 1988, pointed out that the action film *Blücher* was a “man’s film in an era of equal rights” (Iversen, 1988: 7).

FIGURE 4 Still from *Blücher* (Oddvar Bull Tuhus, 1988)



Source: The National Library of Norway, courtesy of Filmparken AS

Orions belte, *Blackout* (directed by Erik Gustavson in 1986), *Etter... Rubicon*, *Brun bitter* [*Hair of the dog*] (directed by Sølve Skagen in 1988), showed that the filmmakers had been inspired by thriller novels featuring male heroes and female supporting roles. “Quite often, the woman is a threat,” he wrote, speculating:

All these films are directed by men. Why this particular trend among male Norwegian film directors who are now in the age group 35–45 to make such big boys’ films? I believe much of the explanation can be found in the political gender developments this generation has experienced. In a few decades, Norwegian women have broken free from the kitchen and ventured into the workforce, politics, and culture in a way very different from their mothers. Men have not only opposed this development, but even among those who fought for “women’s liberation”, there are evidently many who did not catch the feelings along the way. (Iversen, 1988: 7)

Iversen suggested that an emotional reaction was at play, and that nostalgia for genres where “men could be men” led to a certain indulgence on the part of male directors. While an overarching argument of the on-screen representation of women in Norwegian cinema is beyond the scope of this article, the orientation towards action and crime genre found in the late 1980s and 1990s does appear to have imbued female characters with a new connection to danger and violence (see Figures 4 and 5). As Iversen suggests, women in these films could themselves be the threat, as the femme fatale characters found in *Blackout*, *Karachi*, and *Brun bitter*, or in Eva Isaksen’s meta film *Det perfekte mord* [*The Perfect Murder*] (1992), in which a male director’s fantasy creation, a Greta Garbo-like film character played by his girlfriend, seems to come alive to seduce and kill men. Other female characters are themselves subjected to violence as a generic function, as seen in *Hodet over vannet* [*Head Above Water*] (directed by Nils Gaup in 1993), a violent spin on the comedy of entanglement, or in the thriller *Farlig farvann* [*Dangerous Waters*] (1995) by Lars Berg, about a female bank employee who is taken hostage in a robbery. Portrayed as a cold, career-driven, and unloving mother, she learns to identify a warm heart within a hardened bank robber. The woman, the film seems to suggest, becomes a better person due to the trauma of being held captive.

FIGURE 5 Promotion still from *Farlig farvann* (Lars Berg, 1995)



Source: The National Library of Norway

Violence and humiliation, however, are also used consciously to thematise social realities. *For dagene er onde* [*For the Days are Evil*] (directed by Oddvar Einarsen in 1991) thematises social control and destructive forces through a narrative about a married woman, Hildegunn, and her relationship with Robert, an older man who returns to the village from a long journey. The two nurture a strong friendship, unaware that the whole village is following their movements, especially Hildegunn's husband, Tore. One night, Tore rapes his wife as punishment, to transfer his feelings of shame over to her. The narrative suggests that Hildegunn should have been more perceptive than Robert about how their friendship appears to their surroundings. While the narrative sympathises with both characters, it offers no solution, and the only logical ending seems to be a dramatic and unhappy one. Another example is *Hard asfalt* [*Hard asphalt*] (directed by Sølve Skagen in 1986), an adaptation based on former street prostitute Ida Halvorsen's diary, which had become successful in book form in 1982.

FIGURE 6 Poster for *Hard asfalt* (Sølve Skagen, 1986)



Comments: Tagline: “the love story of the century”

Source: The National Library of Norway

Neither *For dagene er onde* nor *Hard asfalt* adopts the perspective of the female characters they portray, and thus cannot be said to ground these narratives within an argument about women’s experiences. This is especially apparent in *Hard asfalt*: While the book tells the story of Ida’s suffering and later way out of drug addiction, the film centres on the violent relationship between Ida and her partner. Both the director and film critics primarily considered the film a story about love (Iversen, 1986) rather than prostitution or drug addiction: The tagline on the film poster read “...the love story of the century” (see Figure 6). The film’s narrative is often told from the male perspective, and in this way, the narrative of the book is altered, from being Ida’s story to a shared story with a partner. Moreover, rather than focus on Ida’s way out of substance abuse and prostitution, as in the book, the film closes with an image of the character at rock bottom, unable to make it on her own and losing the care of her child. In the film’s last scene, the camera is placed inside a car driving slowly through the red-light district, giving audiences a “customer’s perspective” on Ida. She is alone and high on drugs, approaches the car, bends over, and lists the prices for her services.

The disappearance of women's films?

We find a similar portrayal of suffering and a harsher climate for women in feminist filmmaking of the 1980s. In the 1970s, the most important themes of feminist filmmaking were solidarity among women, the role of the housewife, and the right to self-determined abortion (Holtar, 2022). In the 1980s, the same directors turned to thematise bodily violence more directly. Anja Breien and Vibeke Løkkeberg were in different ways concerned with victims of sexual or psychological abuse, as in *Papirfuglen* [*Paper Bird*] (directed by Breien in 1983) and *Hud*. Feminist journalists and documentary filmmakers in the Norwegian public broadcaster, NRK, investigated these same issues, as in, for example, Else Myklebust's two programmes on child abuse, *Valdtekt – ein vond sirkel* [*Rape – a circle of pain*] (1984) and *Ingen rom er trygge* [*No rooms are safe*] (1985), made for the evening news, or in Ellen Aanesen's documentaries *Kampen mot porno* [*The fight against porn*] (1983) and *Pornografi under debatt* [*Pornography under debate*] (1985) about the anti-pornography movement in the 1980s. Breien's first film of the decade, *Forfølgelsen*, surely signalled this shift in emphasis. Persecuted for witchcraft and betrayed by the man she loves, the film ends as the female character Eli Laupstad is carried off in a rowboat, bound and blindfolded, to be executed. A shift is further evident in Breien's sequel to the popular feminist film *Hustruer* [*Wives*] from 1975. In the first film, three childhood friends escape their everyday lives by going on a binge in Oslo. As they navigate the cityscape and move between discussions and arguments about their lives as married women, the film addresses several issues of women's conditions: childcare, beauty standards, freedom, domestic work, and gender discrimination. The film is open-ended, and suggests, more than anything, the liberatory power of solidarity between women (Holtar, 2022: 126). In *Hustruer – ti år etter* [*Wives – ten years later*] (1985), the three friends reunite for new escapades, but the film finds them in a rather desperate condition: hopelessly in love, sexually frustrated, and suffering from venereal disease. The film of the 1980s presents a different and arguably more challenging landscape for women to navigate, a change symbolically underscored by substituting the light summer nights of *Hustruer* with freezing temperatures and the darkness of wintertime.

In the 1990s, feminist discourse became overall less visible in Norwegian filmmaking. The number of films about women were, as previously noted, few. This was especially the case for the kind of film represented by Breien and Løkkeberg, which were not only by and about women, but also clearly centred on women's experiences and conditions. While both Anja Breien and Vibeke Løkkeberg continued to make films with narratives that featured female characters into the 1990s, it was without the explicit feminist approach that characterised their films in the 1970s and 1980s. Instead, we have found in our data a clear tendency of female newcomers making films either with male lead characters or that centre on youth or children. The exceptions, next to Løkkeberg and Breien, are Liv Ullmann, who directed the Scandinavian co-production *Sofie* in 1992, followed by *Kristin Lavransdatter* in 1995, and Unni Straume, who made *Til en ukjent* [*To a Stranger*] in 1990 and *Drømmespel* [*Dreamplay*] in 1994.

Liv Ullmann's films are narratives of women who make life choices within contexts governed and formed by paternal and religious expectations. Her only Norwegian-produced film, *Kristin Lavransdatter*, garnished similar attention and controversy as *Forfølgelsen* and especially *Hud* for its high budget, long production period, and a cinematic language that departed from classical dramaturgy in its pacing. The film was an adaptation of Norwegian Nobel prize-winning author Sigrid Undset's book *Kransen* from 1920, set in medieval times; Liv Ullmann wrote the screenplay. The project drew a lot of attention due to its record-breaking total budget, and the stakes were high for the adaptation of a canonical work. The press covered the production's misfortunes eagerly, especially the tension between Ullmann and then director of Norsk Film, Espen Høiland Carlsen. While Liv Ullmann was not present for any budget talks, and Carlsen in the end took responsibility for the budget by leaving his position (Dahl et al., 1996: 476; Holst, 2006: 133), Ullmann had already received a fraught reputation as a difficult prima donna.

After the premiere, reviews were quite mixed. *Kristin Lavransdatter* was first met with highly positive reactions amongst reviewers who were present at the film premiere at the Norwegian Film Festival in Haugesund. However, after the film was released theatrically across Norwegian cinemas, a second wave of negative reactions arose against both the film itself as well as the initial positive reviews (Gjelsvik, 2002: 121–124; Rees, 2003). No reviews were harsher than *Arbeiderbladet's* film critic Harald Kolstad (1995: 31), who undermined Ullmann's competence:

Unfortunately, there is much Liv Ullmann doesn't know how to do. She seems incapable of building and "keeping" a longer sequence [intact] in such a way that we believe in it from beginning till end. She has little or no knowledge about how the plastic, spatial, or visual construction of a cinematic sequence affects the dramatic, psychological, or poetic expression. The word that best describes her "style" as director is: Basic.

While the film became the most-seen Norwegian feature film of the decade, Liv Ullmann stated that she would never again work in Norway, and to this day, the absence of Liv Ullmann from the Norwegian film industry has received more attention than her presence.

Unni Straume's films offer a departure from the themes of the feminist movement by centring narratives around what we suggest could be called an abstract female protagonist. Straume's first fiction feature, *Til en ukjent* [*To a Stranger*] (1990), is about a young woman hitchhiking to her childhood home in western Norway. The journey there becomes an inner journey as well, to her roots and origins, where her experiences are intertwined with places from her past. Straume's own voice is heard throughout the film as she reads the voice-over in dialect. While some critics hailed the film, others criticised the project for being personal to the point of egotistical. Filmed for the most part in black and white, the modernist film is in dialogue with a European arthouse tradition in its exploratory and poetic film language.

Far removed from the helicopter film aesthetics and narrative structure, Straume's films connect with the ideas of the auteur more generally accepted in previous decades in Norwegian film culture. In terms of gender, the films do not engage in feminist discourse or analysis by, for instance, connecting the characters to historical or social reality. Rather, the films present a more abstract, or even universal, concept of a woman: a woman who has no clear time or place markers, is highly fictionalised, and with vague presences. Straume's female characters have withdrawn into a symbolic world.

Importantly, not all women directors were necessarily interested in addressing women's issues in their filmmaking, nor should they have been expected to. We wonder, however, whether the disappearance of women's films after *Hud* in 1986 was also a consequence of the backlash experienced by the older generation of women directors in the 1980s, as illustrated by the reception and sharp rhetoric directed towards the films *Forfølgelsen* and *Hud* and their directors.

In the debate book *Ta det som en mann, frue! [Take it Like a Man, Ma'am!]*, Ingrid Dokka (2015) investigated Norwegian film criticism in order to look at the relationship between women filmmakers and the film critical discourse. She found a less-gendered discourse at play in these years, and wrote:

The term women's film (kvinnefilm) disappears more and more from the film critical discourse. Even though the director is a woman, even though she writes the script and makes films with women in all the central roles – about women's lives – this is no longer mentioned as something particular. In this regard, one had “arrived” by the start of the 2000s, in the sense that women's filmmaking in Norway appears to have become part of a universal film discourse. (2015: 84)

Dokka has interpreted the disappearance of the discourse of women's films as a sign that women had more opportunities because of a less-gendered film discourse. However, a different interpretation is also possible, and can equally be tied to a de-politisation of the film sector and film culture in the 1990s. Our data on Norwegian films in this period shows that there were altogether very few films with both a female director and a female lead character made in this period. As such, the vanishing of this discourse does not necessarily imply that women directors had more room for expression. If anything, it shows that a certain strand of feminist filmmaking – films by, for, and about women – had vanished by the 1990s.

Conclusion

When the Backlash conference unfolded in Oslo in 1993, film was not a topic – save for the presentation of the poster from the film *Pretty Woman* as part of an ironic art project (Eeg-Henriksen et al., 1994: 78). Similarly, in the afterword of the Norwegian translation of Faludi's book, where Brit Fougner (1993) discussed the backlash in a Norwegian context, no reference is made to the on-screen representation of women, to which Faludi devotes two chapters

of her book. In fact, there is no indication that Faludi's analysis of the backlash against feminism in the US gained any significant interest in Norwegian film culture or that Norwegian feminist academics interested in Faludi's project had any scholarly interest in film.

In this article, we have taken as a point of departure a backlash that has not been sufficiently described and conceptualised in Norwegian film history. The aim has been to illustrate what can be gained from revisiting the 1980s and 1990s, underscoring that this period followed a decade of vibrant feminist filmmaking. Previous research has focused on genre-mainstreaming and commercialisation as a welcome change for the Norwegian film industry starting in the mid-1980s, concluding that Norwegian cinema was saved by this change effectuated by a group of all-male directors associated with the helicopter period (Iversen & Solum, 2010: 46).

We observe these changes through another lens. While the loss of position for female filmmakers in this period has been noted by several scholars, this phenomenon has not been adequately described or explored. In this article, we have presented statistics from our data collection on women behind and in front of the screen, focusing on numbers that relate to the share of women directors, and the share of adult female characters. Summarised, the numbers all indicate the same fact: an underrepresentation of women.

By engaging with a broad range of sources, including moving images, film reviews, interviews, press materials and media coverage of film productions, we argue that we have found various experiences and expressions of a backlash against feminism in film. The directors themselves articulated that a harsher climate was felt at the beginning of the decade (Kvinnefront, 1980). Film critic Jon Iversen (1988: 7) also summarised what he considered a tendency of male nostalgia for a time and a place where the effects of the feminist movement were less visible, to the point where he suspected many had been disingenuous allies of feminism. The observation of a backlash is uniquely present in his writing. Other film critics wrote aggressively about the films directed by women in the 1980s and 1990s, undermining their competency and scandalising their reputations.

Feminist filmmaking and women filmmakers were a strong presence in Norwegian film culture in the 1970s. Many considered the peak year to be 1981, when three women launched feature films that reached international success. However, after Vibeke Løkkeberg's *Hud* in 1986, the Norwegian filmography reflects that no explicitly feminist films followed. While we ask the question of what happened to women directors alongside female film characters, the question of what happened to feminism in film is a larger question that still begs answers. According to Jane Gaines (2018: 22), "a more political approach [would be to] think in terms of knowledge apportionment". By this, Gaines indicated that one way to engage with the question of "what happened" – in this case to feminist filmmaking in Norway in the 1980s – would be to re-direct the question towards film historiography itself, and what she suggested could be called the issue of "unequal distribution of narrative wealth" (Gaines, 2018: 22). In Norwegian film history, the narrative of the success of feminist filmmakers in the "land of

female directors” gives way to the success of commercial genre films in the helicopter period. A narrative that investigates career stagnation and loss of position for feminist film directors after the promising start in the 1980s, however, can only be found between the lines of the same history books, indicating that the narrative wealth of film history has been unequally distributed.

We hope that this article will inspire further research into gender and Norwegian film history in a broad sense. One way forward would be to consider whether Norwegian film historiography is equipped with a sufficient range of conceptualisations. One way to summarise the developments of the last half of the 1980s and into the 1990s would be to consider it a tale of progress: a move away from radical filmmaking into an era of genre filmmaking, choosing to celebrate commercial influences and internationalisation. The other side of the coin would be to recognise what was lost on a more national and local level, or even what did not come to fruition in this climate. This article highlights a backlash against feminism; future research may ask how this political climate affected Indigenous or LGBTIQ+ themes, representation, and filmmakers, or other possibilities of challenging white heteronormativity. Having started by zooming in on a particular situation in the Norwegian film industry and a specific time period, we encourage perspectives that zoom out and find the larger questions about Norwegian film historiography that remain to be asked, analysed, or conceptualised.

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Endnotes

1. The reception history of *Hud*, however, is changing. In 2021, a DVD/Blu-ray box set of Løkkeberg's films, including *Hud*, was released by the National Library of Norway, receiving positive reactions. The new reception trajectory for *Hud* (and other films by Løkkeberg alongside it) share similarities with the reception history of Barbara Loden's *Wanda* (1970), that after decades of neglect and even feminist pushback, is now perceived as a key feminist text.