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## RE-LIVING THE CRIME: CINEMA, CONTAINMENT, CATHARSIS AND REPARATION

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**Abstract:** *Nokas* (2010) is a film based on the 2004 bank robbery in Stavanger, Norway, which traumatised the inhabitants due to its unprecedented violence and the killing of a local Police Lieutenant. One could easily argue that Norway has a distinct lack of the culture of suspicion so prevalent in western society in general. Consequently, when the robbers of the Norwegian bank 'Norsk Kontantservice' (*Nokas*) invaded the peaceful town of Stavanger with their machine guns and swat gear, the ensuing culture crash elicited a response of disbelief and denial from the locals. In the weeks and months that ensued the mythology surrounding the robbery and the perpetrators grew rapidly. In a bid to dispel these myths, the makers of *Nokas* meticulously recreated the events. Although initially met with public scepticism during pre production due to the difficult subject matter, the film became a box office success. This paper argues that *Nokas* is a good example of how the medium of film can provide an outlet for people to safely relive and overcome traumatic experiences.

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### Introduction

This paper draws on object relations psychoanalysis in order to analyse cinema within the cultural context of emotionalised culture. Film is not often seen through the lens of object relations, and this paper wishes to add to this emerging tradition of psycho-cultural work. One example of such work is Caroline Bainbridge's forthcoming chapter "'Knowing Me, Knowing You': Reading *Mamma Mia!* as feminine object' (Bainbridge, 2012a), which uses object relations theories as a tool to uncover wider questions about gender in society. There is more evidence of an object relations approach within television than cinema, particularly thanks to the work of Roger Silverstone. Through his books *Television and Everyday Life* (1994) and *Why Study the Media* (1999), Silverstone pioneered the use of psychoanalyst Donald Woods Winnicott's theories in connection with television and media studies. A more recent example of television analysis through object relations theories is Hugh Ortega Breton's article 'Coping with a Crisis of Meaning: Televised Paranoia,' which investigates

the media portrayal of the 'war on terror' (Breton, 2011). Another example of psycho-cultural work is the network<sup>1</sup> *Media and the Inner World*, formed in London in 2009 by Caroline Bainbridge and Candida Yates. The network advocates and facilitates the gathering of academics, therapists and media professionals by organising various cultural and/or academic events in order to encourage inter-disciplinary discussion and further develop the 'psycho-cultural' method ([www.miwnet.org](http://www.miwnet.org)).

Building on this emerging approach, this article is concerned with mapping out the possible therapeutic uses of cinema for audiences, especially the containing and reparative possibilities of the medium. This will be accomplished through the example of a film that recreates a specific traumatic event, by looking at relevant theories within the psychoanalytic and/or cultural domain, with an emphasis on work by Melanie Klein and Donald Woods Winnicott. The intersection between lived experience and its cinematic counterpart is usually apparent enough through audiences' ability to identify with a great variety of characters and situations. However, the film example used here is especially significant due to its direct relevance to the lives of its spectators. I will argue in this paper that cinema has the *potential* for providing the audience with a therapeutic experience, and I will focus on containment, catharsis and reparation.

The Norwegian film, *Nokas* (2010), is less like a heist film and more like observational realism similar to Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003), a film based on the tragic events of the horrific 1999 Columbine school shooting (Ebert, 2003). *Nokas* seeks to recreate arguably the most infamous bank robbery in Norwegian history, and, just as in *Elephant*, it follows characters around and observes what happens, covering the same events from various characters' points of view. However, while *Elephant* was only loosely based on true events, *Nokas* sets out to painstakingly recreate the bank robbery. Without providing motivational explanations or trying to make sense of violent actions, *Nokas* describes the bank robbery in a matter-of-fact way with minimal creative licence and almost no characterisation. The result is a film that allows the spectator room to process the actual events, making it a tool for containment, catharsis and reparation.

When the robbery of Norwegian bank 'Norsk Kontantservice' ('Nokas') took place in my hometown of Stavanger on Monday 5 April 2004 around 8 am, I was asleep in my bed less than half a mile away from the centre of events. The robbers got away with 57 million Norwegian kroner (in excess of £6 million with today's exchange rate), shooting and killing Police Lieutenant, Arne Sigve Klungland, in the process. Domkirkeplassen, the square between Nokas and the town's cathedral, turned into a battleground between robbers and

police as disbelieving locals walked calmly in between. An estimated 150 to 200 shots were fired in total, the majority of these aimed at penetrating the window through which the robbers entered the back of the Nokas building (Nokas, 2010). I will not be focusing specifically on the death of Klungland, although it was undoubtedly a contributing catalyst for the immense media attention surrounding the Nokas robbery. Instead, I wish to examine the destructive force of the robbery as a whole on the shared psyche of the inhabitants of the town. In order to do this it is important to first mention just how big an impact the crime had, something that can be readily seen through the intense media interest that followed.

### **Collective memory and the media**

Because of the persistent mediatisation of the robbery and its repercussions in the following weeks, months, and years, it is almost as if I saw everything that happened with my own eyes. The ‘collective memory’ (Lipsitz, 1990) accumulated for years following the robbery, as the television and print media meticulously described the massive mobilisation of police resources, the investigative progress, arrests, trials and, eventually, convictions of the criminals involved. The collection of links and descriptions still available on one national newspaper’s website provides evidence of these massive collections of information, with its play-by-play description of the events of the robbery, complete with a downloadable map where you can see what happened where (Widerøe *et al*, 2005). The title of the map is telling: ‘5 April 2004: The day Stavanger was taken hostage’ (my translation). This title reveals a personification of an entire city, a city that appears innocent and powerless. Perhaps it was the fear of a loss of innocence following the robbery that caused the media obsession with the Nokas case. Either way, the media helped create a phenomenon that was larger than life, and it was this myth of the crime that the filmmakers set out to de-mystify (Bie, 2010). The technique they use is a form of intensely honest realism.

### **Mnemonic objects and realism**

On 1 October 2010, the film version of the robbery, simply named *Nokas*, premiered in Norwegian cinemas (Fossmo, 2010). Just as the media obsessively reconstructed the events of the robbery, so does the film, to the point of including details such as the actual music that was playing on the radio that morning. This is an example of a *mnemonic object*, described by Bollas as a ‘subjective object that contains a projectively identified self experience’ (Bollas,

1992: 21). One might argue that the film is entirely composed of these mnemonic objects, which intensify the viewing experience by evoking emotions felt at the time for those who remember the particulars of the day of the robbery. Adding to the realism perceived by audiences, the actors used authentic equipment and weapons rather than similar or fake props, and as far as possible all scenes were shot in the actual location where events took place. Moreover, barring three professional actors, the cast was almost exclusively composed of amateurs, chosen because they resembled the real people upon whom their characters were based. One of the police officers was even played by his twin brother (*Nokas*, 2010; *TV 2 Nyhetene*, 2010). Interestingly, despite this attention to detail in the reconstruction of events exactly as they happened, the film does not ring true to everyone who sees it because of its break with the heist or action film conventions (Fevang, 2010). Is it possible that the formulae of the typical action film have become the benchmark of realism? If cinema seems more ‘real’ than reality, what happens when people encounter the real thing? In the case of the reactions, or lack thereof, of the passers-by on the streets of Stavanger during the *Nokas* robbery, the first word that comes to mind is *denial*.

### **A nation in denial?**

A review of *Nokas* in local newspaper *Stavanger Aftenblad* describes Stavanger as ‘the world’s most naive town’ (Abrahamsen, 2011: my translation). Perhaps the ‘culture of suspicion’ (Furedi, 1997) that, to some extent, has normalised violent events in many countries, has not traditionally had a very strong hold on Norway. Violent occurrences tend to elicit denial from the population instead of instant fear, something that could be seen during the terrorist attacks in Oslo and on Utøya on 22 July 2011. When Norwegian Labour Party youth on the island of Utøya initially heard Anders Behring Breivik’s shots, many did not catch on right away to what was really happening. Siri Marie Sønsteli, who survived the Utøya massacre where Breivik killed 69 people, explains on the talk show *Skavlan* that she did not recognise the sound of gunshots because she had only ever heard it on television. Her father, Erik Sønsteli, says that even as his daughter started relating to him over the phone what was actually going on he continued to think she was exaggerating and that it was a case of mass hysteria (*Skavlan*, 2011). Perhaps Norwegians have not traditionally been quick to draw the conclusion of danger, and do not become suspicious until the evidence of violence is unavoidably obvious. It could be argued that the denial and initial lack of fear apparent in Norwegians’ behaviour when encountering violent events such as at Utøya and in Stavanger

could be seen as a symptom of mental health rather than naivety. Using Klein's theory of projection, one might say that the lack of fear in the first, instinctive reaction signifies a healthy inner life where no internal hostility needs to be projected onto the external world (Klein, 1946: 103).

In an interview provided as an extra on the DVD of the film, director Erik Skjoldbjærg observes that the robbery shattered the boundary of what people in Stavanger thought was possible in their world (*Nokas*, 2010). Two realities came crashing together, and people who were involved in the event said it was like a film (*Stavanger Aftenblad*, 2010). 'Like spider men in slow motion,' as one of the bank employees said when describing the robbers jumping into the backyard of Nokas before breaking in through the window (*Nokas*, 2010). This disbelief became a massive challenge for the police on the day, because the general public did not understand the gravity of the situation, and kept walking into the line of fire. One passing bicyclist thought for a long time it was just a drill by the police and consequently felt no fear, even as he was taken hostage by the robbers (Widerøe *et al*, 2005). Although initial reactions on the day might have been less than dramatic, the spectators viewing the film would know its tragic outcome, and potentially respond emotionally while watching. Indeed, one of the greatest strengths of cinema is arguably its capacity for providing audiences with a communal space for emotional responses.

### **Catharsis and cinema**

As we have already seen, the filmmakers wanted *Nokas* to dispel the many myths surrounding the robbery through adhering as closely to the actual occurrence as possible (Bie, 2010). In addition, the cinematography was inspired by video games (Godø, 2010); this hand-held, claustrophobic style gives the film an interactive quality, which makes the emotions for those involved more accessible to the audience even though the film does not include characterisation, dramatic exaggeration or embellishment. A number of film reviews pick up on the emotional quality of the film, arguing that it lets the spectators experience the situation in an intensely emotional and physical way, almost as if they were present (Dahl, 2010; Brochmann, 2010; Vestmo, 2010). When I first watched *Nokas* I was surprised, for example, by the emotional impact of the slow and tactful reveal of Klungland's death. I never knew Klungland personally, but as a resident of Stavanger I shared in the trauma of the events: a trauma that was arguably produced just as much by the media obsession in the aftermath as of knowledge of the robbery itself. The quietly understated scene where Klungland's body is

discovered provided me with a release in the form of tears and *contained* sadness, the combined effects of which were strangely comforting and reassuring. As James Watson explains, this type of ‘emotional release’ can be described as a ‘catharsis’:

The word *catharsis* comes from Greek, meaning ‘purification’ or ‘purgation’. Today it is defined as emotional release. We watch a play, film or TV drama and its humour, tragedy or violence triggers release of our emotions. (Watson, 1998: 253)

### **Projection and introjection**

Watson goes on to talk about a ‘cathartic effect’ where ‘watching screen violence’ may replace and prevent ‘real violent behaviour’ (ibid., 253). This could be considered a form of containment, as seen in this reference to Bion (1962):

Feelings which become too much for the baby are split off and projected into the mother. The mothering, containing role is to take in these incomprehensible unmanageable feelings and metabolise or digest them on the baby’s behalf so that they are felt as less overwhelming. (Sobey & Woodcock, 1999: 146)

What Sobey and Woodcock are referring to here is Bion’s reading of Klein’s theories regarding object relations:

The vital need to deal with anxiety forces the early ego to develop some primary mechanisms and defences. ... Projection, as we know from Freud, originates from the deflection of the Death Instinct outwards and in my view helps the ego in overcoming anxiety by ridding it of danger and badness. Introjection of the good object is also used by the ego as a defence against anxiety. (Klein, 1946: 101)

The process of projection and introjection that Klein describes applies to Stavanger and *Nokas* if you think of Stavanger as an individual who has experienced trauma. This way of looking at group experiences in individual terms can be extrapolated from Furedi’s discussion of ‘the culture of emotionalism’ (2004).

### **The emotionalisation of everyday life**

Furedi argues that psychoanalytic discourse has permeated western society, causing a shift towards individuals as the source of unrest, while disregarding the role of social and cultural trends in the development of the individual self. However, he admits that ‘understanding the self and the internal life of the individual is important for comprehending individual behaviour and the wider life of the community’ (Furedi, 2004: 25). Furedi’s arguments about discourse and culture are part of a debate regarding the apparent ‘psychologisation and emotionalisation of everyday life’, which is commonly referred to as ‘therapy/therapeutic culture’ (Richards & Brown, 2011: 18; Bainbridge & Yates, 2011: iii). The psycho-cultural method of analysing media emphasises the link between the individual psyche, cultural objects and broader cultural trends (Bainbridge, 2012b: 155-156). A solution to Furedi’s problem of reconciling personal reality with a macro view of society arguably exists within Freud’s idea of the individual as connected to ‘the prevailing cultural super-ego’ (Freud, 1930: 142). One might say that the super-ego of the individual is in synchronicity with the super-ego of society, and society may then be viewed as a representation of the individual.

### **The holding environment**

Much of the media discourse surrounding the Nokas robbery has included this type of personification or individualisation of the town of Stavanger, as seen in the earlier example of the map from the national newspaper *VG* (Widerøe *et al*, 2005). One *Nokas* reviewer went as far as comparing the robbery to a rape, where Stavanger was the innocent victim (Nerheim, 2010). Indeed, trauma has been described as ‘an event capable of giving rise to *new* anxiety through the penetration of the “protective shield against stimuli” (*Reizschutz*)’ (Sacerdoti and Semi, 1989: 95). It is my argument here, that if Stavanger is seen as the child, then the film takes on the role of the mother. This is made possible through the *transitional* qualities of film, which create a ‘holding environment’ where the film, as an object of culture, is situated within the intermediate area – Winnicott’s ‘potential space’ of play and self-discovery that initially develops between a baby and its mother (Winnicott, 1971: 41), and within which he argues that culture is also located (Winnicott, 1967: 371). As spectators engage in the creation of meaning through watching the film together and discussing it, they take part in the transitional, or mothering, process. Paradoxically, as the main target audience for the film is the inhabitants of Stavanger, spectators simultaneously provide the holding environment and benefit from it. This process is similar to an embrace, where the giver and the receiver of

comfort are one and the same. The reciprocal reassurance provided by the aforementioned transitional process might help explain the attraction of the retelling of traumatic stories, as the cinema provides a safe environment for audiences to develop meaning, and work through lived experiences.

### **The compulsion to repeat**

The bad feelings, in Kleinian terms, projected from the child, or the traumatised town, show themselves through people's preconceived fears of what they thought the film would be like. Many, including members of Klungland's family, argued the film was premature and worried that it would glorify and mythologise the robbers. Some people were intent on not seeing the film at all (Reginiussen, 2008; Stokka 2008). Despite this reluctance to accept a filmed re-enactment, there is, according to Freud, a human 'compulsion to repeat' negative events in an effort to recapture what might have been disturbed by a trauma (Freud, 1920: 36). Recreating a traumatic event on film is not in itself enough to achieve catharsis and reparation; here, the therapeutic value of working through past events is very much dependent on factors like the style and accuracy of the story as well as the project timing. An example of poor timing was when the trailer for an American low-budget film adaptation of the events of Utøya was released; the negative reactions were strong enough to cause the Norwegian police to contact the director and ask him to remove the trailer from YouTube (Brenna and Hopperstad, 2011). Not only did this project seem to be based on gross misinterpretations of events, but it also arrived a mere three months after the terrorist attacks (Andersen, 2011), seemingly capitalising on the news-worthiness of the topic. The makers of *Nokas* waited much longer before bringing the story back to the public, and have avoided exploitation through, intentionally or not, ensuring the film's therapeutic potential. The filmmakers' vision was to create an experience that was as true to life as possible (*Nokas*, 2010), thus providing for the audience the chance to relive the experience. Schaff observes the following about the theatre, drawing on Freud's experiences with patients 'crying about earlier experiences':

Drama, then, does not create new emotional distress – it simply 'restimulates' old distress. ... [C]atharsis in the theater occurs when drama touches on arrears of distressful emotion in the audience, under conditions which are comforting enough to allow them to re-experience the distress and discharge it through laughing, crying, or other expressions of emotion. (Schaff, 1976-1977: 539)



## Reparation

Placed within Winnicott's theory of a 'holding environment' provided by the mother (Winnicott, 1965: 47, 74), a cathartic experience is only safe if it is simultaneously contained, or experienced within the aforementioned environment. The catharsis is contained in this instance largely due to the Norwegian mainstream media's relentless repetition of the story, making the viewing experience predictable through the retelling of a narrative that became familiar to the audience far ahead of the film release. The Kleinian mothering process mentioned earlier takes place as the audience watches the film and accepts the bad feelings it recreates, allowing the town of Stavanger to eventually integrate the myth with reality. What I am talking about here is the 'return gift' the child gives the mother as 'reparation' for attacks on her breast (Klein, 1932: 367). One could say that through watching the film the spectators *metabolise* the event and allow Stavanger to make reparation. Klein highlights reparation as a key element in the process of reaching the 'depressive position,' wherein the child develops a more realistic perception of the good and bad aspects of 'the loved object,' thereby becoming more integrated. This 'growing synthesis' between good and bad influences 'the drive to repair or protect the injured object'. (Klein, 1946: 105)

Barry Richards emphasizes reparation within 'the Kleinian tradition of psychoanalysis':

The popularity of crime fiction and drama is one indication of how concerned in general we are with questions of destructiveness, guilt and responsibility. More specifically, some recent developments in criminal justice recognise the importance of reparative encounters between criminals and victims. (Richards, 2007: 99-100)

Reparation in the case of the real Nokas robbery is seen through how Kjetil Klungland, Arne Sigve Klungland's son, sought out the criminals after they were arrested, even talking to the man who shot and killed his father (Bruland and Gjerald, 2007). In the DVD audio commentary scriptwriter Grøndahl says that the main character of the film is the robbery itself (*Nokas*, 2010). Consequently, to the inhabitants of Stavanger, it is the actual robbery that functions as the perpetrator that must be encountered for reparation purposes. When seen in this light, it becomes apparent how focus on the robbers might increase the mythology

surrounding the robbery, while focus on the robbery itself functions as reparation and enables the inhabitants of Stavanger to arrive at a Kleinian ‘depressive position’:

The drive for reparation ... shows a more realistic response to the feelings of grief, guilt and fear of loss resulting from the aggression against the loved object. Since the drive to repair or protect the injured object paves the way for more satisfactory object relations and sublimations, it in turn increases synthesis and contributes to the integration of the ego. (Klein, 1946: 105)

The loved object is here the town and its innocence. The result is not a return to innocence, but rather an acceptance of the ambivalence of life: a ‘disappointment’ the town and its people can live with (Craib, 1994).

### **The good and bad object**

Central to the idea of Klein’s ‘depressive position’ is the idea of an integrated object that is both good and bad at the same time. *Nokas* offers a coping mechanism for those affected by the robbery through the film’s aesthetic qualities. Freud notes that ‘happiness in life is predominantly sought in the enjoyment of beauty’:

This aesthetic attitude to the goal of life offers little protection against the threat of suffering, but it can compensate for a great deal. The enjoyment of beauty has a peculiar, mildly intoxicating quality of feeling. Beauty has no obvious use; nor is there any clear cultural necessity for it. Yet civilization could not do without it. (Freud, 1930: 82)

Freud also argues that the only way to experience ‘intense enjoyment’ is ‘from a contrast’ (1930: 76). This contrast may in part account for the popularity of the film. Almost 250 000 tickets were sold in 2010, placing it within the top ten films of the year in Norway; it even outperformed successful international imports such as *Toy Story 3* (2010) and *Iron Man 2* (2010) (Drivenes, 2010). Taking something that was such a ‘bad object’ in people’s minds and gleaning beauty from it does not, perhaps, in the case of *Nokas* create a ‘good object’. Rather, what I believe it does create is a dual, integrated object that is both ‘frustrating’ and ‘gratifying’ (Klein, 1946: 99), thereby rendering it more or less neutral, or ‘depressive’. The

robbery is bad because of the trauma it caused, yet good in so far as it has been dealt with and overcome.

### **Conclusion**

Not only is film a medium for entertainment and information but it potentially also provides a containing environment for the audience to relive and work through a traumatic experience. Through a contextual analysis of the film *Nokas*, this article shows how film as a medium has the possibility to fulfil a therapeutic objective. It is my argument that *Nokas* has the potential to effectively contain the anxieties of a traumatised town and its inhabitants, encouraging them to mother themselves and achieve a position of healthy disappointment and acceptance. It could also be argued that *Nokas* has come a long way towards responding to Freud's concern regarding whether our 'cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbance of [our] communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self-destruction' (Freud, 1930: 145). Through its gentle yet authentic and brutally honest depiction of events the film succeeds in providing reassurance, while breaking down the symbols of mythology created by the media following the robbery. Although concerns were raised before the film was made that it would be exploitative, I have not come across any such accusations after its release. This, in addition to the overwhelming popularity of the film at the box office, suggests that the film is a positive experience for the audience, despite being difficult to watch (Dahl, 2010). It would be interesting to pursue further research to see if the media myth surrounding the robbery has waned, although such a phenomenon would be difficult to measure.

Although this paper has focused on emotion and psychoanalysis, I should clarify that I am not attempting to take on the role of therapist or to suggest that the theories mentioned herein represent an exhaustive perspective on possible interpretations. Nevertheless, when looking at cinema as a cultural object with therapeutic qualities within an emotionalised culture, I would argue that there are currently few models of analysis more suitable than object relations psychoanalysis, particularly Winnicott's idea of the transitional, creative and cultural space between the external and the inner world. The transitional space provides a safe, containing environment for revisiting traumatic experiences, expressing emotions and making amends.

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**Notes**

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