

ADRIANA MARGARETA DANCUS:

Exposing Vulnerability:

Self-Mediation in Scandinavian Films by Women.

Intellect, Bristol 2019. Pp. 148.

ISBN: 978-1-78320-988-0.

'I started feeling unwell and I instinctively turned my eyes away from the screen', Dancus describes the experience of watching director Solveig Melkeraaen receive electroconvulsive therapy in her autobiographical film *Flink pike*. The intensely personal scene as well as the unease of the viewer mark the starting point for Dancus' exploration into the strategies and ethics of vulnerability in film.

Exposing Vulnerability presents a corpus of what Dancus calls self-mediated documentary films made by women filmmakers in Norway and Sweden between 2009 and 2016. The seven films discussed in the book bring to the screen immensely personal narratives which grapple with themes such as parenthood, bullying, mental health, self-harm, racism and migration. Though varying in style and level of performativity, the films share a first person narrative voice which forefronts the vulnerability of the director.

Placing the corpus in the broader context of women's cinema and first person film, Dancus argues that the films depart from the political films of female filmmakers of the 1960s and 1970s with their intensely private and confessional style. Dancus anchors her discussion on vulnerability to the writings of Judith Butler and Catriona MacKenzie while first person film is framed using Lebow and Ranov's scholarship. Dancus raises the ethical dimension of first person filmmaking, discussing how vulnerability is imagined and staged. The book presents six essays, and an introduction and conclusion which offer broader social and political context for the analysis. Visual reading of films is at the core of each essay as Dancus teases out the differing strategies filmmakers employ in their work to expose vulnerability.

The first essay examines Solveig Melkeraaen's *Flink pike* (*Good Girl*, 2014). The director charts the stages of her depression, hospital visits and treatments whilst intermittently cutting away to fantastical scenes in which she assumes various fictitious roles. The viewer is granted access to spaces, both mental and physical, usually out of bounds. Dancus highlights the balancing act between control and lack of control in the film, discussing the use of humour and the contrast of raw material and stylised self-ironic footage.

Aslaug Holm's *Brødre* (*Brothers*, 2015) is a family portrait of material the director has shot of her two sons over almost a decade. The film captures the boys growing up, beginning at ages six and nine, at home and in school and with both Holm and partner. Dancus calls into question the power dynamics of filming family members, consent for filming children and the ethics of viewership. This debate draws on Katz and Katz's four variables of film ethics: consent, disclosure, motive and construction. Dancus debates the exchange of the parent-director and child-subject relationship, and in a very timely way links this to a discussion of the digital age in which childhood innocence is now negotiated.

Återträffen (*The Reunion*, 2013) by Anna Odell stages a school reunion in which the director is able to confront the bullies of her school years. Though explicitly autobiographical, the film subverts audience expectations and has an element of performativity blending documentary footage and staged events. The Reunion forces the viewer to examine their affinity to both director and bullies. Dancus brings to light the complexities of this cinematic experiment which startles the viewer into questioning their own position as a witness to bullying.

The fourth essay examines *Idas dagbook* (*Ida's Diary*, 2014), a film created from self-filmed footage by Ida Storm and directed by August Baugstø Hanssen. Storm films her life dealing with mental disorders and periods of self-harm, and Hanssen compiles the material into a cinematic whole. Dancus queries the ethical challenges of managing Storm's raw footage and criticises the film's failure to address the power dynamics between subject-camerawoman and director. She also analyses the embodied strategy of communicating self-harm without showing it to the viewer in relation to haptic cinema and Laura Marks.

The fifth essay compares two films on Sami identity, *Min mors hemmelighet* (*Suddenly Sami*, 2009) by Ellen-Astri Lundby and *Familiebildet* (*My Family Portrait*, 2013) by Yvonne Thomassen. In both films the directors discover their hidden Sami heritage and set out to remap their familial history as well as their personal identity. Uncovering a history of racism and discrimination, both films offer a window into Sami history and current debates around belonging. Lundby and Thomassen both use genetic testing to prove their Sami links. In a clever parallel, Dancus juxtaposes this use of biology with the history of eugenics research imposed on the Sami in the 1930s, captured in Amanda Kernell's film *Sameblod* (*Sami Blood*).

In the final essay Dancus discusses Ahang Bashi's *Skörheten* (*Fragility*, 2016). Bashi's film charts the director's struggle with panic

attacks and her process of investigating their underlying causes. In the film *Bashi* interviews family members about the family's history at a refugee camp and verbalises her own trauma of migration. Dancus argues that uniquely, *Fragility* shows the director's vulnerability in relation to other people. By placing interactions with family, friends and healthcare workers at the forefront, the film illustrates how vulnerability can not only isolate but bring people together.

The conclusion of the book moves from the personal to the national, drawing attention to the broader context of the Scandinavian welfare state. This argumentation on state individualism and the ways in which the films reflect its failings would however have benefitted from more foreshadowing in the articles themselves. All together the book offers insightful readings of a compelling corpus of films. It successfully disentangles the cinematic strategies of self-mediated films and is most compelling when raising questions about the politics and ethics of vulnerability.

ESSI VIITANEN

AALTO UNIVERSITY