

*PELLE EROBEREN:*  
FOLKLORE, IDEOLOGY AND FILM

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In their well-known consideration of the work of Martin Andersen Nexø, Niels and Faith Ingwersen note that, “even though [socialist ideas] played a dominant role in Nexø’s perception of society, he was deeply influenced by the age-old culture of the common peasantry, the *almue*, which he had known from childhood... Nexø’s writing is most compelling when he utilizes the heritage – folklore and the Bible – of his proletarian origin and fuses social realism with myth” (Ingwersen and Ingwersen 1984: vii-viii). Nexø’s critical use of *almue* culture and the folkloric situates him in the vanguard of the *folkelige realister* [folk realists] whose work had a profound influence on the contours of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Danish literary landscape (Busk-Jensen 1985). Interestingly, Nexø’s reliance on folklore departs radically from earlier nineteenth century uses of folklore as part of a Romantic nationalist project of bourgeois nostalgia such as that found in Rasmus Sørensen, B. S. Ingemann and later, Holger Drachmann (Auring 1984). Rather, much like members of the *almue* themselves, Nexø relied on oral narrative, folk belief and other forms of folklore as part of a sustained critique of class division, exploitation of the rural poor by land owners and *de facto* and *de jure* structural impediments both to community progress and individual development.

Nexø’s almost revolutionary message of social responsibility and the need for an egalitarian society filtered through to the Danish polity in diluted form and likely contributed early on to social debates that ultimately led to the modern social welfare state. Despite this far reaching impact, over the earlier decades of the twentieth century, his predominantly socialist œuvre, *Pelle erobreren*, along with many of his other works, disappeared from the Danish cultural landscape. When Nexø’s work was revived for contemporary audiences, it was ironically in the genre of commercial film and his message – and in particular his

accession of *almue* culture as part of that message – was distorted. In Bille August's 1987 film, the *almue* culture that had played such an important part in Nexø's depiction of rural class struggle was relegated to a secondary role, a change that presaged an underlying ideological realignment in the story. Knud Bjarne Gjesing considering the film notes that, "I Bille Augusts Oscar-belønnede og Hollywood-forgyldte *Pelle Erobreren*-film går Pelle ganske vist igen, men som en slags individualistisk stræber – i slutscenen vandrende ud mod fjerne horisonter, mens han antagelig nynner: 'I did it my way!'" [In Bille August's Oscar-winning and Hollywood-gilded *Pelle the Conqueror*-film, Pelle walks again, but as a type of individualistic careerist – in the closing scene wandering out toward distant horizons while he presumably hums 'I did it my way!'] (Gjesing 1994: 9). With this evaluation, Gjesing lays his finger on August's problematic shift in emphasis toward individual resourcefulness as the story's guiding ideological principle.

The use of *almue* culture as a backdrop in August's film signals a shift back toward the Romantic nationalist projection of *danskhed* that corresponds with a conservative political position, one that diverges from Nexø's original viewpoint. During the 1980s, this conservative political stance had begun gaining considerable traction in Denmark under Poul Schlüter's bourgeois "firkløver" government. Schlüter's government in its various domestic and foreign policies simultaneously lauded individual resourcefulness (as opposed to Nexø's endorsement of collective resistance), championed the emerging European Union and its implications for global capital development (as opposed to Nexø's concern for the well-being of the industrial worker) and endorsed assimilationism for new immigrants (as opposed to Nexø's embrace of the *internationale*). None of these contemporary projections of *danskhed* can be reconciled with the role that folk belief and storytelling played in the lives of day laborers and other *almue* in late nineteenth century Denmark nor can they be reconciled with Nexø's works. Rather, they are more symptomatic of the ethnocentric and business-centric policies that characterize the Danish right wing of today.

Nexø was a master at accessing the ideological aspects of *almue* culture, a culture that has perhaps been best reflected in the collections of the Danish schoolteacher turned folklorist, Evald Tang Kristensen, who spent time collecting stories from many thousands of rural dwellers, primarily in Jutland (Tang Kristensen 1923). Although Kristensen arguably began his collecting endeavors riding on the wave of nationalist spirit that swept the country in the wake of the Slesvig-Holsten debacle of 1864, the ideology informing his later and more prolific periods of

collecting mirrored Nexø's understanding of the struggles of the *almue* in a rapidly changing economy (Holbek 1980). Tang Kristensen's informants themselves were deeply enmeshed in the ongoing changes in the Danish economic, political and social landscapes, and they used their storytelling – as the characters in Nexø's novel – to comment on, and to negotiate their personal positions in relation to these developments. This phenomenon is not unique to Denmark, but rather is a characteristic of many cultures in which individuals appeal to tradition to understand change (Taussig 1980). A brief foray into Tang Kristensen's collections and the world of one of his informants can help illustrate both how tradition acts as a personal resource for political action and how collectors were also engaged in an ideologically progressive undertaking attuned to the challenges facing the individual in a harsh social and economic climate.

On a rainy day in June 1898, Jens Peter Pedersen, a former lathe-turner and now a pensioner, stomps his feet and takes off his wet jacket as he enters the teacher's house in the little village of Lørslev in northern Jutland. He has walked through the pouring rain to catch up with Tang Kristensen with whom he has talked on three earlier occasions. In fact, it is Tang Kristensen who has sent for him, after missing Jens Peter at his little cottage when he had stopped by earlier in the day. But given the weather, Tang Kristensen has not expected him to show up. Late in the afternoon, however, Jens Peter knocks at the door, comes in and sits down, soaking wet. Describing this meeting, Tang Kristensen writes in his memoirs, "Nu begyndte han at fortælle, og jeg skrev, og saadan blev vi ved til langt ud paa Aftenen. Ja, han var utrættelig. Det var ligefrem forunderligt, som den Mand kunde fortælle. Jeg blev hos Andersen om Natten og tænkte meget paa Jens Peter. Jeg frygtede ligefrem for, at han skulde faa en Sygen paa Halsen, men han klagede sig ikke" [Now he began to tell, and I wrote, and we kept up like this until late into the night. Yes, he was tireless. It was incredible how that man could tell. I stayed with Andersen that night and I thought a lot about Jens Peter. I was afraid that he'd get a throat infection, but he didn't complain] (Tang Kristensen 1923, vol. 4: 163). Tang Kristensen's anxiety for Jens Peter, the person, is of paramount importance. Similarly, it is worthwhile to note Jens Peter's remarkable perseverance in seeking out Tang Kristensen. Neither Tang Kristensen's concern for Jens Peter nor Jens Peter's interest in seeking out Tang Kristensen can be reconciled with Romantic nationalists' notions of the "folk", their superorganic conceptions of folklore, and later characterizations of nineteenth century folklore collectors and their concerns. Rather, both events point at a more complex relationship between informant, collector and tradition, and also hint at a significantly

different role for storytelling – and folklore in general – in a society poised on the cusp of modernity and already undergoing profound social, economic and demographic change.

On the afternoon in question, Jens Peter tells forty-seven or so stories all addressing, in some way or other, the challenges facing a person trying to eke out a living in the Danish countryside. The stories also elaborate the complicated social networks that an individual has to negotiate as part of their day-to-day lives. As such, Jens Peter's stories taken as a whole – as much as his presence in the teacher's house on that rainy June day – contribute to Tang Kristensen's nuanced, complex and realistic depiction of late nineteenth century rural life that resonates with Nexø's own depiction of rural life. On this afternoon, Jens Peter tells stories of ministers and ghosts, of wise women and strange illnesses, of buried treasure and of theft. He tells of beggars, and of strong men, of encounters with elves and hidden folk, of girls kidnapped into the mountain and of lending a helping hand with the mound dwellers' baking, of village idiots and of Satan and his attempts to lead people to their deaths. With each story, Jens Peter's world becomes more and more clearly defined as do his own particular beliefs. Through these stories, Jens Peter's day to day struggles as a lathe-turner, daylaborer and, finally, a poor pensioner begin to take shape – his values, his norms, and his beliefs all come out in these stories. By shaping the stories to fit into his own repertoire, resolving stories in his own way, adding idiosyncratic but personally meaningful features, and situating events in the local environment, Jens Peter turns his storytelling into a form of ideological action.

Michel de Certeau proposes that "Tales and legends...are deployed, like games, in a space outside of and isolated from daily competition, that of the past, the marvelous, the original. In that space can thus be revealed, dressed as gods or heroes, the models of good or bad ruses that can be used every day. Moves, not truths, are recounted" (de Certeau 1984: 23). Jens Peter in part negotiates all of the contingencies of daily life through his storytelling, as the narrative performances allow him an opportunity to explore entire "repertoires of schemas of action" (de Certeau 1984: 23). While it is clear that Jens Peter had very little say over what he could or could not do in his community, with his "moves" seriously constrained by extant power structures, and while it is also clear that he was denied most opportunities for a better life, storytelling did convey the tactical power de Certeau ascribes it, even if that power was only rhetorical. In one fell narrative swoop, Jens Peter is able to condemn a count's wife to a grisly death, outsmart a local minister and reveal the immorality of the district bailiff.

In a story that Jens Peter tells, a local countess falls victim to her own arrogance and an encounter with a predictably violent Satan:

Der var en Grev Feer der boede paa Baggersvogn *han* og hans Kone er begravet paa Sindal Kirkegaard. De havde stude paa *Baggersvogn* og *saa* en Vinter døde der en 50 Stude for dem og de troede det var lede Folk der var skyld i det. *Saa* laaner hun nogle kloge Bøger af Bragholt Kjællingen og fik 2 andre Fruentimmer til sig og de skulde hjælpe hende med *dether*. De kommer ind i en Stue paa Gaarden, der kaldes den blaa Sal og der var de og fik noget stilt an. De læste i Bøgerne og læste *Fanden* til dem. *han* skulde sige dem hvem der var skyld i det, met det fik de aldrig at vide. En af Kvindfolkene der var med havde en Søn paa Gaarden som var Studerøgter og ham vilde de have haft med, men *han* vilde ikke. *Saa* blev de 3 alene. Hen paa Natten hørtes der noget Skrig og da de *saa* lukkede op for dem laa alle 3 Fruer og var revet i Stykker og Stumper og *saa* lige i det Øjeblik de var døde da var der kommen 3 Rift paa Dynen i den Seng som Studerøgteren laa i. *Han* blev *saa* forskrækket og kom op og da var hans Moder død. Den 1ste der kom derind var min [Moders] Faders Moster hun tjente der. De kunde ikke kalke de Pletter af Væggene. Men da Nyholm kom der, rev *han* hele *Væggen* ned og da der kom ny Sten hørte det op (Dagbøger 7812A).<sup>1</sup>

[A count Feer lived at Baggesvogn and he and his wife are buried in Sindal cemetery. They had oxen on the farm and then one winter fifty of them died and they believed that it was evil people who were guilty of it. Then she borrows some wise books from the Bragholt hag and then she got two other women with her who were to help her with this. They go into a room in the farmhouse which is called the blue room and that's where they were and they set something up. They read in the books and read the Devil to them, he was to tell them who the guilty one was, but they never found out. One of the women who was along had a son at the farm who was the ox hand and they wanted him along but he didn't want to. So the three

<sup>1</sup> The text here is transcribed from the original unpublished field diary recordings of Evald Tang Kristensen, referred to as "Dagbøger" in the indices of the Danish Folklore Archives. Abbreviations have been expanded in italics, and occasional periods have been removed. The published version of this story, which diverges somewhat from this original recording, appears in *Danske Sagn* vol. 6, no. 167 (Tang Kristensen 1980). Tang Kristensen collected a version of the same story when he visited Jens Peter Pedersen in October, 1893, a visit described in *Minder og Oplevelser* (Tang Kristensen 1923, vol. 3: 500). That version can be found on pages 6294A-6294B of the field diaries, and is reprinted in *Danske Sagn, Ny række*, vol. 6, no. 65 (Tang Kristensen 1928).

were alone. A little later that night, screams were heard and then when they opened up in to them, all of the women lay and were torn to stumps and pieces. Just at the moment they died, three tears appeared on the comforter on the bed in which the ox hand lay. He got really frightened and got up but then his mother was dead. The first one to come in and see it was my father's maternal aunt, she worked there. They couldn't plaster the blood spots on the wall over. But when Nyholm got there, he tore the entire wall down and then when new stones were put up, it stopped.]

Here, the ill-advised actions of the countess, and her willingness to engage Satan in what turns out to be a one-sided dialogue ends in her brutal death and that of her accomplices. Not only do the countess's actions lead to her own death and that of the other women, but they almost lead to the death of the innocent stall hand as well. The deaths are so gruesome that the physical traces of their broken bodies stain the manor farm to the degree that the walls themselves need to be torn down to erase the vestiges of the event. Jens Peter not only manages to impugn the count and his family by linking them to Satan (a form of guilt by association that appears in the early pages of Nexø's *Pelle erobreren* as well), but he is able to force them to tear down the very physical representations of the aristocratic hegemony that oppresses the *almue*. In this sense, Jens Peter uses his stories as a form of narrative revenge, attacking the very foundations of a system that effectively enslaved his forebears and that resonated for nearly a century after its dissolution, encumbering small holders and daylaborers like Jens Peter himself with capricious demands on their labor and resources.<sup>2</sup> Of course, Jens Peter and the many rural laborers and small holders like him are not alone in their deployment of traditional narrative as a powerful rhetorical weapon in the class struggle that animates political and social life in late nineteenth century Denmark.

Martin Andersen Nexø who describes in the first volume of *Pelle erobreren* a deeply nuanced view of the elaborate social networks that pervaded Danish rural life at the end of the nineteenth century was keenly aware of this political power of folk narrative. In particular, Nexø was attuned to the use of legend telling among farm workers to undermine the

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<sup>2</sup> While the *stævnsbånd* was officially lifted in 1788, the feudal system with *hoveriarbejde* and other types of lease arrangements was still being dismantled through the nineteenth century. It was not until the early 1900s, with concomitant changes to the tax laws, that the last remnants of the manorial system were ultimately eliminated.

legitimacy and authority of their bosses – the land owners, the manor lords, the aristocracy. Early on in *Pelle Erobreren*, Nexø mentions:

Men den onde luft som ligger over herregårde – over al stor ophobning af hvad der burde tilhøre de mange – lå også tungt om Stengården. Det var almuen's dom, dens eneste hævn for sig og sine (Andersen Nexø 1906: 30).

[But the bad atmosphere that hangs over large estates – over all great accumulations of what ought to belong to the many – also hung heavy over Stone Farm. It was the judgment passed by the people, their only revenge for themselves and theirs (Andersen Nexø 1989: 27)].

Nexø's deployment of storytelling within his own story of *Pelle* closely mirrors the rhetorical uses of storytelling engaged by thousands of Danish rural workers at the end of the nineteenth century. Anker Gemzøe notes this as well, saying that in *Pelle erobreren*, "Fortælleren er for så vidt solidarisk med folkesnakken, som han anvender den til sit formål" [The narrator is in such great solidarity with the folk speech, that he uses it for his purposes] (Gemzøe 1975: 17). Throughout *Pelle erobreren*, Nexø accesses this narrative power freely, particularly in the first volume describing the exploits of the young immigrant Pelle and his life on the large, cold Stone Farm.

The first volume of *Pelle erobreren* opens with a depiction of a small harbor on the Bornholm coast, everyone waiting expectantly for the arrival of the steamer carrying a human cargo of Swedish immigrants. The early descriptions of Bornholm life reveal a series of oppositions that exist in a dialectic tension and animate these communities. A visitor's queries concerning the lateness of the steamer's arrival fall on deaf ears, and it becomes apparent that, in this community, there is a clear demarcation between insider and outsider, urban and rural, rich and poor. The uneasy relationship between the farmers and fishermen and the equally uneasy relationship between the Danes and the immigrant Swedes are also made explicit. On Nexø's boat, the Swedes engage a rhetorical tactic designed to assuage their collective fears by telling each other stories of the bounty of the Danish promised land:

...om dette land, hvor lønnerne var så ufattelig høje, og hvor man somme steder fik pålæg på sit brød og altid øl til, så vandvognen i høstens tid ikke kørte rundt til arbejderne men kun til kvæget. Og – ja de der ville kunne drikke brændevin som vand så billigt var det, men det var så stærkt, at det slog sin mand i tredje omgang...Og aldrig skulle pøjknen fryse dér, for det var uldent inderst... (Andersen Nexø 1906: 19).

[...the country where the wages were so incredibly high, and where in some places you got meat or cheese to eat with your bread, and always beer, so that the water cart at harvest time did not come around for the laborers, but only for the cattle. And – why if you liked you could drink aquavit like water, it was so cheap; but it was so strong that it knocked you down after the third shot...And the lad would never feel cold there, for they wore wool next to their skin...(Andersen Nexø 1989: 18)].

Meanwhile, on Nexø's shore, the Danes engage in a strategy of domination and, to a certain extent, a tactic of wishful thinking, by telling each other stories of the laborers (de Certeau 1984: xix; Tangherlini 2000):

Jo ser De, vi venter jo damperen i dag fra Ystad med en gevaldig ladning slaver. Billig svensk arbejdskvaj forstår De, som lever af fedtebrød og spegesild og slæber for tre... (Andersen Nexø 1906: 11-12).

[We're expecting the steamer from Ystad today with a big cargo of slaves – cheap Swedish laborers, that is, who live on black bread with lard and salt herrings, and do the work of three (Andersen Nexø 1989: 11)].

Nexø's novel is not solely a depiction of the overlapping and conflicting attitudes of the rural populations and the folk beliefs and attitudes that pervade their communities. Rather, he explores the difficulties of life in an oppressive agrarian system – one in which the disenfranchised poor are constantly exploited by the land owning elite. Despite the move away from the manorial system with the land reforms starting in the late eighteenth century, by the 1870s, the landholders, particularly on Bornholm, were still able to maintain aspects of the strong control of the land and of labor that had been a hallmark of the earlier feudal system (Bjørn 1988). As the Ingwersens mention, "Although in the rural areas where the majority of the people still lived, feudalism had supposedly been abolished the traditional way of life as the early parts of *Pelle the Conqueror* and *Ditte, Humanities child* show continued along age-old patterns. The common peasantry the almue worked on the farms for food, lodging and meager wages" (Ingwersen and Ingwersen 1984: 3).

*Pelle erobreren* is one of the more complex novels in Nexø's authorship as it chronicles not only a remarkably important yet convoluted time in the development of the modern industrial Danish state, but also because it follows the development of Pelle's own political thinking – thinking that changes considerably over the course of the novel's four

volumes. Accordingly, *Pelle erobreren* avoids the tedious ideological homogeneity of Nexø's later novels such as *Martin hin Røde* (Andersen Nexø 1945). Because of its ideological and narrative complexity, *Pelle erobreren* has been the subject of far ranging research, from Børge Houman's useful compendium of historical sources and reviews (Houmann 1975), through various literary-historical considerations that often focus on the ideological underpinnings of Nexø's authorship and literary developments in nineteenth century Denmark (Gemzøe 1975; Holst and Wentzel 1975; Mylius 1975; Gundlund Jensen 1983; Finnemann 1985; Bredsdorff 1994) as well as detailed considerations of symbolism and narrative structure (Andersen 1983).<sup>3</sup> Although Nexø's reliance on folklore as part of his progressive political project is considered by some of his critics, none do it as eloquently as the Ingwersens, who propose that:

Nexø was...at his best when he wrote about what he knew most intimately from experience for example in the first two parts of *Pelle the Conqueror* the early short stories about Bornholm and his memoirs but he was certainly not at his best when he wrote that very personal but listless record of his later life *Morton the Red*. Consequently it should be stressed that Nexø fared well as a writer as long as he retained his storyteller's ability to fabulate and should be noted that that ability remained with him as long as he relied on the lore of the *almue* (Ingwersen and Ingwersen 1984: 140).<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, few critics acknowledge the seeming ideological contradiction between Nexø's growing communist orientation and his frequent return to the *almue* as a "rural proletariat." Holst and Wentzel however suggest that the *almue* represent a "step" on the path toward the development of a true proletariat: "et opbrud som af almuen og af romanen opfattes som et brud på en mere omfattende orden i tilværelsen. Og almuen opbrud, der fremtræder som det første trin in en vækst" [a break that is regarded by the *almue* and by the novel as a break in a more comprehensive order in life. And the *almue*'s break, that appears as a first step in a development] (Holst and Wentzel 1975: 107). This interpretation of Nexø's reliance on the *almue* as ideological device aligns well with his

<sup>3</sup> Nexø and his work have of course also been the subject of various symposia and essay collections. See, for example, *Scandinavica* 1969 and *Nordica* 1994.

<sup>4</sup> An interesting discussion of the rural in Nexø's short stories appears in Lisbeth Gundlund Jensen's evaluation of Nexø's authorship (Gundlund Jensen 1983).

later development and helps explain why the *almue* fade from prominence in his later works. Nexø's increasing focus on the urban proletariat, even over the course of the four volumes of *Pelle erobreren*, is certainly more in line with classical Marxist theory.

*Pelle erobreren* is frequently characterized as the first overtly socialist Danish *Bildungsroman* (Andersen 1983, Ingwersen and Ingwersen 1984). Such a characterization is not only remarkably apt but also opens the concept of *Bildung* up to a more collective conceptualization than traditionally ascribed to the genre. The position is also consistent with the sense of community that pervades the storytelling of *almue* narrators like Jens Peter. Finally, the idea of the *Bildungsroman* also resonates with its folkloric counterpart, the fairy tale. Just as with the fairy tale, Holst and Wentzel propose that the driving force throughout the novel is the concept of the *lykkedrøm* [dream of happiness]:

Hvad driver proletariatet frem og bestemmer dets vandring fra miljø til miljø er det der gennem hele romanen kaldes lykkedrømmen. I denne ubestemte skikkelse fremtræder den som en forestilling der – knyttet til eventyrets anonyme symbolverden – drejer sig om prinser og prinsesser og halve kongeriger der skal erobres (Holst and Wentzel 1975: 114).

[What drives the proletariat forward and determines its wandering from environment to environment is what is called throughout the novel, the dream of happiness. It treads forth in this indeterminate form as a conception that – bound to the fairy tale's anonymous world of symbols – concerns itself with princes and princesses and half kingdoms that are to be conquered.]

Extending this argument, Andersen goes so far to suggest that:

Drømmen om eventyret er knyttet til den undertrykte hverdagskulturs lykkedrømme og forbundet med forestillingen om at erobre prinsessen og det halve kongerige. Således er jo også i Garibaldi en eventyrlig skikkelese, som der går sagn omkring... Almuens myter og fortællinger indeholder som nævnt eventyrlige og fantastiske elementer (Andersen 1983: 109-110).

[The dream of the fairy tale is bound to the suppressed everyday culture's dream of happiness and connected to the notion of conquering the princess and half of the kingdom. In this same manner, there is a fairy tale form in Garibaldi, about whom stories are told... The peasants' myths and stories contain, as mentioned, fairy tale and imaginary elements.]

Here the fairy tale – rather than the more tactically resistant legend – becomes a considerable component of the folkloric in Nexø, at least at the level of narrative structure. The sense of the “optimism” these critics ascribe to the fairy tale is possibly somewhat misplaced, and may be more a reflex of Romantic interpretations of the genre informing subsequent critical endeavors, than the apparent *almue* orientation toward the fairy tale. For instance, in his analysis of the fairy tale, Bengt Holbek calls into question the extent to which fairy tale narrators were expressing optimism through their stories (Holbek 1987). He proposes that the fairy tale is likely more a case of wishful thinking than a reflection of a shared optimism and a genre that, in any event, reflects local community and family politics, rather than describing a grander developmental arc. On the other hand, the analysis of the fairy tale as optimistic may well be one that informed Nexø’s use of the genre in shaping his socialist *Bildung*, as the concept of *lykke* is certainly all-pervasive in *Pelle erobreren*. Pelle’s *lykkedrøm* of course turns out to be just that – a dream – and is consistently derailed by one barrier after another. The most obvious barrier is the immobile Stone Farm that looms as a brooding mass on Pelle’s horizon, a mass that can only be rocked by the weight of one damaging story after another pushing against it year after year.

Stone Farm is the all encompassing metaphor for the oppressive land owning system in Nexø’s opening volume. Workers on the farm and day laborers in the surrounding area can only attack it through narrative. Nexø writes,

I folkestuen sad de og dasede de lange aft[e]jner uden at have noget at tage sig til. De brød sig ikke meget om pigerne men sad og spillede kort om brændevin – eller fortalte uhyggelige historier, der gjorde det til en halsbrækkende ting at slippe over gården ned til stalden når man skulle i seng (Andersen Nexø 1906: 108).

[...the men sat moping through the long evenings without anything to occupy themselves. They took little notice of the maids, but sat playing cards for liquor – or told terrifying stories that made it a hazardous venture to run across the yard down to the stable when it was time to go to bed (Andersen Nexø 1989: 97)].

Through this *almue* storytelling, the Stone Farm acquires a dangerous quality – it becomes the locus for horrible misfortunes and Satan’s playground. Nexø’s description of the farm’s owners and the history of the farm itself are told from the perspective of the farm workers, and reveal their perceptions of the evil inherent in the landowning class:

Da Lasse og Pelle kom til Stengården, mindedes de gamle husmænd endnu bonden fra *deres* barndom Janus Køller – ham der mere end nogen anden satte fart i sagerne. I sin ungdom sloges han en nat kl. 12 med fanden oppe i kirketårnet og overvandt ham – og siden lykkedes alting for ham. Hvordan det nu var eller ikke røg på hans tid den ene nabo efter den anden, og Janus gik rundt og overtog efter dem. Behøvede han en hest mere spillede han sig den til i trekort – og sådan på alle områder; den lede selv lagde alting til rette for ham. Hans største fornøjelse var at køre gale heste til, og de der traf til at være født julenat på slaget tolv, kunne tydelig se den onde sidde hos ham i sædet og holde tømme. Han fik en beskidt død som ventelig var! En tidlig morgen kom hestene løbende hjem til gården, og ham selv fandt man ved vejsiden med hovedet knust mod et træ (Andersen Nexø 1906: 28).

[When Lasse and Pelle came to Stone Farm, the older tenants still remembered the master from their childhood, Janus Køller, the one who did more to get things moving than anyone else. In his youth he once fought with the devil at midnight up in the church tower, and overcame him; after that he succeeded in everything. Whatever the reason, during his time one after another of his neighbors was ruined, and Janus went around and took over their holdings. If he needed another horse, he played for and won it at three-card. It was the same with everything – the Loathsome One himself fixed it all for him. His greatest pleasure was to break in wild horses, and people who happened to have been born at the stroke of midnight on Christmas Eve could distinctly see the Evil One sitting on the box beside him and holding the reins. He came to a bad end, as might have been expected. Early one morning his horse came galloping home to the farm, and he was found lying by the roadside with his head smashed against a tree (Andersen Nexø 1989: 26)].

Although in this story one finds a certain respect for the manor lord and his ability to fight Satan and win, the alliance leads to his inevitable death much like the countess's shocking death in Jens Peter's story. Claiming an alliance with Satan for the manor lord also allows the workers to undermine the legitimacy of the claims of the land owner to power and, to a great degree, allows the farm workers to feel superior to him.

Satanic alliances at Stone Farm are not reserved solely for the former owner, but creep into the current owners' lives as well:

Nu kom fru og proprietæren også... Men sikken et par øjne der sad i hovedet på hende i dag! Pelle skyndte sig at se til den anden side da hun vendte ansigtet ned mod gården – folkene hviskede om, at hun kunne se et menneske i ulykke når hun ville (Andersen Nexø 1906: 39).

[Now the mistress came out and the landowner too...But what a pair of eyes she had today! Pelle hastily looked away when she turned her face down toward the yard – it was whispered among the servants that she could bring misfortune upon anyone just by looking at him, if she wanted to (Andersen Nexø 1989: 35)].

This suspicion concerning the evil nature of the manor lady is confirmed by a local wise woman as well:

“Det har altid været pinenes galt med blodet hos kvindfolkene i den familie!” vedblev den gamle. “Og det har sig nok sådan, at der engang var en af dem som holdt omgang med selve Satanas. Siden har han jo kravet på dem, og farer ilde med dem hvergang månen er i aftagende – hvad enten de så vil eller ej selv. De rene har han ingen magt over forstår sig...” (Andersen Nexø 1906: 102).

[“There’s always been something really wrong with the blood of the women in that family,” the old woman continued. “They say one of them once gave herself to Satan. Since then, he’s had a claim on them and mistreats them whenever the moon is on the wane – whether they want to or not. He has no power over the pure, of course... (Andersen Nexø 1989: 91)].

For Pelle, all that he hears, all that he sees and all that he experiences lead to the inevitable conclusion that the manor lady is a witch:

Sidste dag Pelle var hjemme omkring, var han også oppe hos fru en og sprang sit ærende for hende. Og den dag så han noget uhyggeligt, som fik ham til at være glad ved at dette var forbi – hun tog tænder, gane og alting ud af munden og lagde det foran sig på bordet! Hun *var* en heks! (Andersen Nexø 1906: 154).

[On the last day that Pelle stayed home, he went up to the mistress and ran her errand for her. And that day he saw something spooky that made him glad that this was over – she took her teeth, palate and all, out of her mouth and laid them on the table in front of her! So she *was* a witch! (Andersen Nexø 1989: 138)]

Of course, the witch, Satan's close ally, is one of the most terrifying figures in Danish tradition, as she destroys the community from within (Tangherlini 2000).<sup>5</sup>

Nexø's description of rural life is not at all one dimensional. The rural proletariat does not stand as an undivided group, but rather their ranks are rife with in-fighting, jealousies and internal divisions. Holst and Wentzel note, "Hvad den beskriver er den gamle almues livsform, samlet omkring den enkelte lille gårdhusholdning, hvor forholdet mellem over- og underordnet i produktion samtidig er et familiært forhold mellem forældre og børn" [What it describes is the lifestyle of the old peasantry, centered around the small farming household, where the relationship between superior and inferior in production are at the same time a familial relationship between parents and children] (Holst and Wentzel 1975: 109). The division between haves and have-nots is also nuanced. Nexø delineates the entire range of rural workers – the servants, the day laborers, the quarry workers, the small holders, the fishermen – along with his descriptions of the small merchants, the schoolteacher and the parson, and the large land owners. Nexø notes the complexity of organization on the island as well as at the farm: "Stengårdens folk hold lige så stærkt over rangfølgen som øens egen befolkning, og den var lige så indviklet" (Andersen Nexø 1906: 167) [The men of Stone Farm were just as strict about their pecking order as the native inhabitants of the island and it was just as complicated... (Andersen Nexø 1989: 150)].

Given this understanding of social organization and its complexities, Nexø's use of folklore functions politically on several levels. On one level, he refers to the peasants' use of legends as a means for taking narrative revenge on their oppressors. On another level, he accesses the role that folklore plays in determining social organization and the attendant power struggles of any complex community. On the level of structure, he plays with the *lykkedrøm* and happy ending of the fairy tale that stands in stark contrast to lived reality for the working classes. On yet another final level, he engages the role folklore plays in late nineteenth century Danish literature, particularly in the context of "det folkelige gennembrud" [the folk breakthrough] led by the small group of folk realists of which he was part (Hvidt 1990: 42-75). In this context, folklore becomes part of the realistic depiction not of a rural idyll as the Romantic nationalists such as Drachmann would have it, but rather of an oppressed

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<sup>5</sup> Not surprisingly, accusations of witchcraft have long played a pivotal role in community politics (Tangherlini 2000b).

class struggling against structural impediments to self betterment and a fair distribution of wealth across communities. The use of folklore on all these levels is, accordingly, an integral part of Nexø's sustained critique of Danish agrarian economic organization and the burgeoning capitalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and its effect on the rural populations.

Fast forward eighty years. In 1987, Bille August's film version of the first volume of Nexø's epic took the film world by storm, garnering the Palme d'Or award at Cannes and the award for best foreign film (Oscar) from the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences. The film was an overwhelming commercial success, grossing over two million dollars in the United States alone and creating a windfall for the Danish film industry. But something happened when Nexø's ideological novel was wedded to the apparatus of film. Once on celluloid, the work transformed from being an exploration of rural life in turn of the century Denmark, focusing on the daily struggles of oppressed workers to survive and the need for significant socialist change, into the story of a boy and his father, their relationship and their personal struggles.

Certainly, making a film out of a novel requires changes, and it is impossible to capture the narrative complexity of several hundred pages in a film. In a discussion of this very problem, Dudley Andrew notes, "the making of film out of an earlier text is virtually as old as the machinery of cinema itself. Well over half of all commercial films come from literary originals but by no means all of these originals are revered or respected," and continues, "unquestionably the most frequent and most tiresome discussion of adaptation (and of film and literature relations as well) concerns fidelity and transformation. Here it is assumed that the task of adaptation is the reproduction in cinema of something essential about an original text" (Andrew 1984: 421-423). Rather than engage in a discussion of "what is different" in the film version, a more important discussion concerns what these "differences" lead to. In this case, the differences signal a significant ideological shift enacted not only through overt changes to the storyline and the concatenation of several characters into a single character, but also in a more subtle accession of folklore in a manner that is reminiscent of the simplistic manner in which folklore is used by the more reactionary Romantic nationalists.

The apparatus of film is intimately linked to production and profit which are, ironically, two of the oppressive forces that Pelle struggles with and against throughout the novel. They are also two of the forces that any director must consider. Echoing Andrew, Bille August mentions that, in

filming *Pelle Erobreren*, he was forced to change Nexø's work, in part due to the pressures of the commercial film market:

You can't take books and just directly transfer them, it has never been done successfully in the history of film. One has to find the filmic expression, the visual nerve. For example, one also has to rationalize the character gallery. In the novel...there were a bunch of secondary characters, who I didn't think there was place for in the film but, by the same token, I felt that some of their stories were important. So I combined many of the people and certain events. At the same time, it was important that everything that happened revolved around Lasse and Pelle's relationship...That's not the way it is in the book. There are certain parallel stories which in principal have nothing at all to do with Lasse and Pelle's life, so I had to omit them (Wolden-Ræthinge and August 1993: 100).

Thus, the film no longer aspires to the ideological critique of social organization – the inspirational basis of Nexø's work, and the reason for his accession of folklore in the spirit of the folk breakthrough. Rather, it aspires to commercial success by describing a relationship between father and son – the social conditions simply form the backdrop for August's sentimental examination of paternal love and filial piety. The film also becomes a critique of immigration and a paean to cultural assimilation. This last ideological aspect of the August film of course situates it on the polar opposite end of the political spectrum than Nexø had likely intended.<sup>6</sup>

Surprisingly, Bille August was not the only one hard at work on a filmization of *Pelle the Conqueror* in the 1980s. Christian Steinke, working with East German television, was handed a project early in 1984 based on Nexø's novel (Steinke 1994). The project, according to Steinke, had a long and convoluted history, starting as an attempt at coproduction across the Iron Curtain in the mid 1970s (Steinke 1994). As the curtain was drawn ever more tightly, the Danes pulled back from the collaboration and it looked unlikely that any production of Nexø's work

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<sup>6</sup> While one must always be careful arguing intentionality lest one fall prey to the hobgoblin of literary criticism, the intentional fallacy, given Nexø's political ideology and his own foreword to *Pelle erobreren*, it is not overstating intentionality to suggest that Nexø was not interested in proposing an assimilationist policy for recent immigrants as part of a valorization of the bourgeois idyll of the Romantic *Bildung*, that by hard work coupled to a clear desire to assimilate, the immigrant can also be successful in Denmark.

would ever see the light of day. Questions of film rights, production costs, and the outcome of Danish parliamentary elections – all utterly antithetical to Nexø's ideological project and all artifacts of the cinematic-industrial apparatus – had seemingly sounded the death knell. Steinke rather curtly summarizes the events leading to the abandonment of the project:

Nun muß ich allerdings auch erklären, daß wir 1976 alle 4 Teile von Nexøs Roman machen wollten, also nicht nur die Kindheit Pelles, sondern auch sein Wachsen zum proletarischen Kämpfer und sogar den letzten, sicherlich problematischsten Teil des Romans. Das wäre natürlich eine riesige, sehr teure Produktion geworden... Aber noch bevor es zu einer Entscheidung über 2 oder 3 oder 4 Teile der Romanverfilmung kam, gab es in Dänemark Wahlen zum Parlament. Und in der Folge der Wahlen einen Wechsel des Intendanten im Dänischen Fernsehen und in dessen Folge keine Möglichkeit mehr einer Zusammenarbeit mit dem DDR-Fernsehen (Steinke 1994: 178).

[Now I must clarify of all things that in 1976 we wanted to make all four parts of Nexø's novel, not only Pelle's childhood, but also his development as a proletariat fighter and the last, doubtlessly most problematic part of the novel as well. Of course, that would have been a giant and very expensive production... But before a decision was reached over two or three or four parts of the novel's filmitization, there were parliamentary elections in Denmark. In the aftermath of the elections came a change in the Directorship of the Danish television and as a result of this, there was no longer a chance for a collaboration with the DDR television.]

Many years later, *Pelle der Eroberer* is green-lighted by the DDR television and Steinke is brought on board to direct. He details some of the problems confronting his team, including the death of the original screenwriter:

Der Chefdramaturg und Autor des Szenariums, Dr. Kaltofen, dem das Verdienst gebührt, die Romanverfilmung vorgeschlagen und immer wieder in die Diskussion gebracht zu haben, war inzwischen gestorben, der Film mußte nun ausschließlich auf dem Boden der DDR realisiert werden (Steinke 1994: 178-179).

[The chief dramatist and the author of the screenplay, Dr. Kaltofen, to whom credit should go for the original idea of filmitizing the novel and for making sure the discussions continued, had, in the meantime, died, and so the film finally had to be produced from the bottom of the DDR.]

As with the Danish production, Steinke and his group decide to focus on the first volume of *Pelle erobreren*. Steinke readily admits that his poorly funded production could hardly compete with the well-funded Nordic production, mentioning that, because of the DDR's stringent controls, "Wir hatten ja auch in der DDR keine mit Bornholm vergleichbare Landschaft, keine Insel in der Ostsee, die vulkanischen Ursprungs war, nicht einen Hafen an felsiger Küste, nicht eine einzige weiße Kirche in freier Landschaft" [In the DDR, we had no landscape that was similar to that of Bornholm, no island in the Baltic of volcanic origin, no harbor along a rocky coast, no solitary white church in the open landscape] (Steinke 1994: 182). He was also unable to find actors who were not utterly urbanized, "Natürlich war auch unser Pelle ein Großstadtkind mit Angst vor allen größeren Tieren, zumal vor Kühen und Ochsen, von einem Stier ganz zu schweigen. Und dazu ein Kind von heute, wohlbehütet zwischen Fernseher und Autos aufgewachsen und Erfahrung von körperlichem Schmerz durch Arbeit und ohne Vorstellung von sozialer Demütigung..." [Of course, our Pelle was a city boy, afraid of all big animals, cows as well as oxen, to say nothing of a bull. And also a child of today, who'd grown up safely between television and cars without any experience of bodily pain from work and no idea of social humiliation...] (Steinke 1994: 182). But unlike August's ideological right turn in his production, Steinke focused his production, perhaps not surprisingly, on the collectivity and the class struggle that have been identified by critics such as Gemzøe as the most important ideological foundations of Nexø's work. Steinke says of his production, "die DDR-Fassung aber demonstriert immer noch das Klassenkampfmodell, dies ist sein heimliches dramaturgisches Ordnungsprinzip" [the DDR-production always demonstrated the model of class struggle, which was its secret dramatic organizing principle] (Steinke 1994: 179). He also notes that the differences between the two productions seemed to him to be "typisch" [typical] (Steinke 1994: 179) and adds:

Sie werden sehr schnell feststellen, dass die DDR-Verfilmung, anders als der dänische Film, sich sehr eng an das bei Nexø auch vorgegebene Klassenmodell hält, also das Gegenüber von Herrschaft und Gesinde. Während in der dänischen Verfilmung der Steinhofbauer und vor allem seine Frau kaum eine Rolle spielen, ist dieses Gegenüber von Oben und Unten bei Uns sehr viel wichtiger (Steinke 1994: 179).

[One ascertains quickly that the DDR-production is different from the Danish film, as it clings narrowly to the class model also given by Nexø, namely the opposition of the gentry and the servants. While in the Danish

film, there is a role for the manor lord of Stone Farm and for all his women, the opposition of the top and bottom for us is far more important.]

Unlike August, Steinke relies on the complexities of *almue* culture as an important component of his elaboration of this class model.

As with Nexø's novel, August's film opens with the distant hoot of a steam whistle lost in the fog out at sea. But instead of turning the narrative focus toward the fishing community as Nexø does, August turns to Pelle and Lasse fabulating over the endless possibilities that Denmark holds in store for them. As such, from the very opening scenes, the film situates itself in Pelle and Lasse's relationship first and foremost. In one very short move of the camera, the Danish countryside, the social organization of village life, and the conflicting groups that form the backbone of late nineteenth century Denmark are relegated to playing a secondary role. Indeed, the use of *det folkelige* [the folkloric] in August's film is reminiscent of the static Romantic representation of folklife known from the folk museum, and in line with the nationalistic endeavors of the earliest Germanic folklorists such as Wilhelm Gottfried Herder and later in Denmark in the work of Just Matthias Thiele and Sven Grundtvig. Rather than using folklore as a powerful and relevant resource for the workers' resistance to the class system as Nexø does, August uses folklore as a means for projecting a particular reactionary vision of Danishness that contributes to a conservative cultural politics. This vision of Danishness is then used as a contrastive element for the immigrant Swedes who refuse to assimilate. Pelle, who assimilates well to Danish society, melds with this otherwise elusive Danishness, keyed primarily in his loss of his Swedish accent, and his quick and steady rise in fortune both at the farm and in the Danish school.

Jörgen Persson's photography of August's scenes also contributes to the ideological shift in the film. His establishing shot of Stone Farm – a high tracking shot using a long focal length – conveys the harshness of the farm and its isolation far out in the Bornholm countryside. But as the film progresses, the depiction of Stone Farm softens, and the general cold and isolation often dissipates. Perhaps one of the most startling changes between Nexø's novel and August's film – a change that plays directly into the change in ideological stance – comes in the conflation of Nexø's Gustav and Erik into the single film figure of Erik. Where in the novel, the confrontation between the foreman and Erik stands as yet another confrontation between the foreman and the workers – a confrontation stemming from no particular single event, but rather from pent up frustrations over the harshness of the life of a farm worker and a conflict

steeped in their storytelling – August constructs a scene in which the conflict arises from a personal distaste between Erik and the foreman.

As the scene opens, the audience's sympathies can only lie with Erik. But as the scene progresses, the camera shifts its allegiance from Erik to the manager. It begins with a montage of a series of medium shots, showing the harvest, and the pacing foreman and his puppy dog-like trainee. It then pulls back to a medium long crane shot in which Erik and his coworkers move slowly through a half mown field, a scene reminiscent of Dinesen's "Sorrow Acre," a short story entirely based on a legend of the harshness of manor lords and the manorial system and that considers the ethical underpinnings of such nonegalitarian systems (Dinesen 1942). As the others one by one move back in the frame to rest, Erik continues to mow the field, before finally lowering his scythe to rest as well. A confrontation with the manager ensues and the camera remains remarkably neutral, showing both the manager and Erik in profile. As the manager and the trainee leave, a subtle shift begins to take shape in the visual endorsement of the characters.

As the two depart, the camera moves back to the earlier medium long crane shot, with Stone Farm in the background. After a pause, Erik, now a man possessed, lurches off toward the farm with his freshly sharpened scythe appearing more as an individualistic psychopath concerned primarily with his own "self," than a determined revolutionary who has suffered the brunt of the foreman's blows and is fighting to preserve the integrity of the community. Indeed, the crowd that follows Erik up to Stengården in the film seems to be an interested crowd of bystanders, rather than the revolutionary comrades-in-arms that Nexø describes in the novel, a status signaled by the distance between them and Erik when they enter the farm's courtyard. As Erik approaches the farm, the camera, positioned at shoulder height, follows the small parade of farm workers up the road, while on the soundtrack an ominous cello counterpoint accompanies mournful yet revolutionary oboes – the audio cues suggest something dangerous is about to happen.

The camera itself, with its static positioning, constructs an ever increasing distance between itself and Erik, who is clearly set on blood revenge. A medium shot establishes Pelle's presence in the courtyard, and a quick reverse shot at eye level catches Erik and the farm workers' procession as they round the corner of the barn. Another quick reverse shows the spreading panic on the face of the foreman as Pelle announces their arrival, "Nu kommer de far!" ["Now they're coming, dad!"] and a quick cut brings the viewer back to Erik. Within a few short cuts that build the tension of the scene, the audience regains his point-of-view, signaled

through a switch to jumpy handheld camera. However, as Erik lashes out at the foreman with his sharpened scythe, the alliance shifts – Erik takes on an even more crazed look caught in a medium close-up and the subsequent shots begin to endorse the manager's position. Another close-up reveals the unhooked water bucket and, with a long shot, one sees the counterweight swinging towards Erik's head. Then, from a shot that could only be from the point of view of the manager, we see the fast approaching counterweight. The ensuing medium shot confirms the manager's point of view. The thud of the rock against Erik's head guarantees the end to any type of revolutionary fervor. A long silence on the soundtrack is followed by the manager's calls for assistance for the now unconscious Erik. Thus, in one short sequence, August encapsulates and then abandons one of Nexø's major motivations for writing *Pelle Erobreren* in the first place, namely to write a story "om arbejdernes brede gang over Jorden på hans endeløse, halv ubevidste vandring mod lyset!" (Andersen Nexø 1906: 5) [about the bold stride of the worker across the earth on his endless, half-unconscious journey toward light! (Andersen Nexø 1989: 241)] By shifting the point of view to that of the manager in the sequence leading up to Erik's defeat, August rejects once again the struggle of the proletariat as the driving force of the work.

In August's film, the one time member of the rural proletariat gets it together enough to fight, he does it solely as an individual. August's Erik, rather than being a revolutionary, is a character whose stubborn unwillingness to assimilate into Danish culture leads him to the murderous rage of a criminal. When he raises his scythe in his final murderous gesture, the counter-weight comes undone through no agency of the manager and ultimately, the stubborn immigrant worker turned criminal sinks to the ground defeated and becomes a loyal puppy to the film's representative of production. Writing about this significant change from agency to accident, Elias Bredsdorff says,

Da karlene på Stengården er drevet så vidt, at de forsøger et oprør, er det store Erik der er deres anfører. Han søger den forhadte forvalter "med fordrejet ansigt og en bredbladet kniv i hånden" og ligner "en olm tyr", skriver Martin Andersen Nexø, men han bliver brutalt slået ned af forvalterem og er derefter en sløv og forkuet stakkel resten af livet. I filmen er det ikke ved en bevidst handling, at store Erik bliver slået til idiot, det sker ved et uheld, og jeg er overbevist om, at Martin Andersen Nexø ville have protesteret mod denne ændring i en film, der ellers så smukt følger handlingen i romanens første del (Bredsdorff 1994: 27-28).

[When the farmhands at Stone Farm have gone so far that they attempt an uprising, it is big Erik who is their leader. He seeks out the hated manager “with a twisted face and a broad bladed knife in his hand” and resembles “an angry bull,” writes Martin Andersen Nexø, but he is brutally knocked down by the manager, and after that he is a listless and subdued wretch for the rest of his life. In the film it is not a conscious action, and I am convinced that Martin Andersen Nexø would have protested this change in the film, which otherwise so beautifully follows the plot in the novel’s first part.]

By reducing the strong Erik figure to an imbecile, and then side-stepping the thorny issue that, by the second chapter of the second part of the novel, “Erikmand har fået talens brug igen og begynder ligesom at blive lidt menneske...” (Andersen Nexø 1906: 288) [Well, Erik has gotten his speech back and is starting to be a human being again... (Andersen Nexø 1991: 27)], August’s ideological position of punishing the outsider is complete.<sup>7</sup>

Steinke readily admits that in his adaptation he too is forced to make changes to character and plot, but he resists ideologically unsound changes such as conflating the characters of Erik and Gustav into one. Instead, Steinke’s Erik becomes the clearest spokesperson for the rural proletariat, leading his coworkers toward a revolutionary confrontation with the representative of the oppressors. Steinke says of his Erik, “in der deutschen Fassung... man Erik für einen sozialistischen Agitator halten konnte, der noch ein paar Begriffe bei Marx und Engels persönlich, wenn nicht gar bei Lenin aufgeschnappt haben musste” [In the German production... one can hold Erik up as a socialist agitator, who must have snatched several concepts directly from Marx and Engels personally, not to mention Lenin] (Steinke 1994: 180). Steinke’s necessary silence concerning Erik’s later recovery has far less ideological weight for two very real reasons. First, in the Steinke film, the manager’s agency in destroying Erik is never in question. Second, at the end of the Steinke film, Pelle marches onward toward his predestined socialist *Bildung*, a path that Erik can of course rejoin. By contrast, August’s Erik is carted off by the authorities – most likely for deportation – when his employer’s contractual obligations end. Erik’s dream of a better life in a capitalist America – a dream that August constructs for Erik and has him plant in Pelle’s head – is taken from him and that, one is to understand, is the great tragedy. “If

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<sup>7</sup> Bredsdorff seems to forget Erik’s burgeoning recovery as well.

only he'd learned to be Danish like Pelle," one is left thinking, "he could have made it to America."

August's own account of how *Pelle erobreren* came to be made underscores his interpretation of Nexø's work and his insertion of himself and the apparatus of commercial film production between Nexø's project and the eventual film:

It was the Danish Film Institute or, more correctly, the film consultant at the time Jørgen Melgaard, who suggested that I make *Pelle erobreren*. I said to him that it was a fantastic idea, because I loved that book. After our meeting, I went down to the bookstore, bought the book, hurried home and read it. I had in fact never read it before. And what a story, what a moving and beautiful picture of the lives of two deprived people. I immediately became a part of the story...(Wolden-Ræthinge and August 1993: 99).

By the time filming starts, August's manuscript has undergone ten revisions and, by his own admission, after the first draft, he has not returned at all to Nexø's book. Whereas Nexø's book is also intended as a beginning, an opening salvo on the path toward a socialist *Bildung*, August's film stops short, and *Pelle* remains fully encapsulated within the film, unable to walk off screen even during the credit roll.

The role of folklore in ideological debate and its deployment in literary production (of which cinema is part), is a difficult issue to tackle. While the prevailing wisdom proposes that nineteenth century folklore collectors – and by extension the participants in the folk tradition – were motivated by and engaged in a crude Romantic nationalist project tinged by a nostalgia for an endangered way of life, such an evaluation proves to be overly simplistic and ignores the complex motivations that lay behind individuals' reasons for telling stories and for collectors to collect. The storytellers from whom collectors such as Tang Kristensen collected were not mired in a feudal past but rather were active participants in the rapid contemporaneous transformation of political, social and economic organization. Their stories were not survivals from some ancient time, but rather part of their everyday expression, deployed rhetorically to negotiate the tricky social waters of their communities. Similarly, not all nineteenth century collectors were allied with Romantic nationalist projects of cultural urban elites. Rather, folklorists such as Tang Kristensen became increasingly allied with progressive intellectual trends such the folk breakthrough that continued the realist agenda of the earlier *moderne gennembrud* [modern breakthrough]. One need only look at Tang Kristensen's *Gamle Kildevæld* to realize that, despite the title of the work,

he is deeply concerned with the plight of the individual rural dweller (Tang Kristensen 1927). In this sense, Tang Kristensen's ethnographic endeavor has more in common with the progressive literary projects of authors such as Jeppe Aakjær and Nexø than it has in common with Herder's Romantic nationalism and the early Danish Romantic nationalists such as Drachmann or contemporaneous bourgeois nostalgists such as Sophus Bauditz. Indeed, Tang Kristensen's *Gamle kildevæld* can arguably be seen as a precursor to the progressive ethnographic works of James Agee and Walker Evans for the WPA presented in their *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Agee and Evans 1941).

The deployment of folklore in literary texts necessarily includes an ideological dimension, as made abundantly clear by the versions of *Pelle erobreren* discussed here. Although the use of folklore as part of a nostalgic backdrop for a Romantic depiction of agrarian life is well known in world literature, Danish authors from the folk breakthrough chose a more progressive deployment of folk culture. In so doing, their use of folklore aligns much better with the tradition participants' use of narrative tradition and with the motivations of some late nineteenth century folklore collectors as well. This progressive use of folk culture echoes up through the twentieth century in Blixen's modernist project, most evident in her short story "Sorg agre," but is stymied by a continued Romantic and often nationalist use of that same folk culture as part of an ideologically reactionary project by right wing ideologues. With the shift to the right of the Danish government in the 1980s (a shift that continues to resonate through the late 1990s and early 2000s with the shocking ascendancy of *Dansk folkeparti*), this Romantic and nationalist use of the folk has gained traction once again. Bille August's use of folk culture as a nostalgic background for his interpretation of *Pelle erobreren* perhaps stands as the best known and clearest representative of this tendency. By contrast, Steinke's nearly simultaneous reading of *Pelle erobreren* suggests that an understanding of folk culture as a progressive force, something that Nexø himself recognized, is still accessible. Ironically, Steinke's film falters under the weight of its heritage and not under its progressive message, as the dissolution of the DDR revealed that regime to be as oppressive and morally bankrupt as the feudal system against which the *almue* railed in their storytelling.<sup>8</sup> What remains is August's revisionist reading of *Pelle erobreren* in which folk culture supports an assimilationist and capitalist *lykkedrøm* of *danskhed*. This contrasts sharply with Nexø's reading of folk

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<sup>8</sup> Sadly, Steinke's film is no longer accessible for reasons that are unclear.

culture, a reading that understands the complex phenomenon that animates folklore, namely the dialectic tension that exists between the individual and tradition, and the role that folklore can play as part of a discourse of dissent.

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