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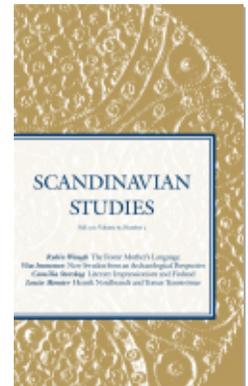
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## Lone Scherfig's *Italian for Beginners* (review)

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merely an illustration of current theory on subjectivity. All in all, the theories however enable Hermansson to discuss subjectivity in the novels in an illuminating manner.

The main result of Kristina Hermansson's doctoral thesis, an observation of interest and importance, is that in the novels under scrutiny conflicting conceptions of subject cut through themselves, interact and preclude each other. Hermansson shows convincingly how utterly contradictory the ways of subject formation are in postmodern literature; what in the first sight appears as a post modern playful presentation of identity is in fact anchored in a concept of the individual's inner self, a stable individual identity.

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■ Mette Hjort. *Lone Scherfig's Italian for Beginners*. Nordic Film Classics 3. Seattle and Copenhagen: University of Washington Press and Museum Tusulanum Press, 2010. Pp. xvii + 277. Appendix, Filmography, Notes, Bibliography, and Index.

Mette Hjort's masterful analysis of Lone Scherfig's 2000 film *Italian for Beginners* is a welcome addition to the scholarly literature on contemporary Danish film and the Dogma film movement. Scherfig's remarkably popular film dramatically extended the relatively short reach of the Dogma films from their reified perch as challenging art films into the popular realm, and solidified Scherfig as one of Denmark's leading filmmakers. Her position as a woman in a male-dominated field of film production—even in the progressive sphere of Nordic film—is one of the *leitmotifs* that runs throughout Hjort's work. She explores Scherfig's position in the Nordic film landscape as both a woman and a member of the Dogma group, considering this question already in a section in the first chapter, "Women and Film in Small Nations" (15–25). By situating this discussion of women in the context of the challenges of film production in small nations such as Denmark, Hjort is able to develop a critical stance that provides her significant opportunity to interrogate the ever-changing role of women in Danish artistic production. Hjort, however, does not make this consideration a focal point of her study. Instead, she provides a sophisticated and nuanced series of readings of the film that takes into account not only Scherfig's own background and her artistic oeuvre, but also considers aspects of production within the confines of the Dogma rules and, importantly, the reception of the film both critically and publically.

Hjort mentions early on in her study David Bordwell's defense of a certain approach to film criticism that he characterizes as "middle-level research" (xiii). This type of criticism avers grand theoretical narratives, such

as Marxism, psychoanalysis, or semiotics, and instead focuses on coupling the analysis of film to examinations of context, style, and practice (xiii). Hjort maintains this accessible position throughout her work, focusing predominantly on what she calls “practitioners’ agency.” For her, “practitioners’ agency” extends far beyond the agency of the director, as in *auteur* studies, and includes the agency of the other members on the production team, as well as the actors and actresses. By extending her approach to include reception, Hjort is able to produce an accessible, sophisticated, and substantive investigation of this important film.

The film, generally classified as a romantic comedy, tells the story of six interconnected characters who are brought together in an Italian language class led by the unlikely cafeteria worker Hal-Finn (Lars Kaalund), who inherits the unexpected role of Italian teacher after the sudden death of the original teacher. The tightly intertwined cast of characters includes a recently widowed minister, a bakery assistant, a hairdresser, a recently fired hotel manager, and a young Italian immigrant, along with a small cadre of supporting characters, many of them the parents of the main characters. Hjort cleverly avoids getting sucked into a plot analysis in her book, focusing instead on the complexities and challenges confronting Scherfig as she wove this complex story line not only against the challenges set by the Dogma rules, but also by the challenges she set for herself in the making of the film.

Hjort’s emphasis on practitioners’ agency informs the structure of the book. In the first chapter, “Lone Scherfig: The Person, The Oeuvre,” Hjort flirts a bit with the auteur-centered biography that often accompanies the study of the director-as-auteur. Her explorations of Scherfig’s background as a member of the cultural elite (her father’s uncle was the famous Danish author Hans Scherfig, her mother a principal at the Royal Danish Ballet School, her father the chairman of the board of the conservative newspaper *Berlingske Tidende*, and so on) are interesting as a backdrop for Hjort’s subsequent discussion of Scherfig’s motivations as a filmmaker. Hjort does not get bogged down in the minutia of the filmmaker’s early life and possible influences. Instead, the remainder of the chapter helps Hjort situate Scherfig not only in the broader context of women filmmakers and small state filmmakers, but also in the context of the Dogma movement, the Danish *filmby* in Avedøre, and contemporary Danish film and television. Hjort also describes in increasing detail the goals of her practitioners’ agency approach.

The second chapter, “Practitioners’ Agency: The Impact of the Dogma Framework,” institutes a theoretical and practical overview of this approach in the context of the fairly rigid Dogma rules, first propagated by Lars

von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg with their “Vow of Chastity” in 1995. The most interesting aspect of this chapter is Hjort’s exploration of what is gained and what is lost for different members of the production team in adhering to the rules of Dogma. Hjort first considers the directors’ attitudes toward Dogma as well as the initial motivations for positing these challenges. In several subsequent sections, she explores the “gains” and “losses” for the various “agents” involved in the film’s production, taking in turn the sound designer, the editor, the cinematographer, the actors, and the director. The shift that Dogma forces in production away from the primacy of the cinematographer toward the sound designer leads to an intriguing discussion of the balance between different members of the production team. This chapter offers some fascinating glimpses into the dynamics of film production and will be of great interest not only to students of film, but also to students of film production.

The third chapter, “Critical Reception: Toward an Ethical Feel-Good Movie,” moves the theoretical focus of the work toward reception. In general, “feel-good” movies are considered to be less weighty than other more “serious” films. Hjort, while recognizing the commercial success of the film in contrast to the more common “critical acclaim” that has accompanied other Dogma films, provides a nuanced reading of the ethical dimension of the film, noting that Scherfig’s own stated goal with the film was to produce a “light-hearted film about some heavy issues” (111). Hjort includes the critics such as Stephen Holden who viewed the film as “light-weight entertainment” (112). Hjort ties her ensuing discussion of the film to the emerging discussion in film literature concerning the nature of emotion and, in this case, sentimentality. She successfully recasts this discussion into a productive examination of “sympathy,” a theoretically rich concept that Hjort explores with great skill.

The fourth chapter, “Kindness: On the Manifestation of a Consistent Attitude,” moves beyond sympathy to the examination of kindness, not only expressed in the characters’ words and actions, but also in their gestures and positioning—in short, in their attitude. This attitudinal approach to kindness is coupled to a sophisticated analysis of humor and the comic in the film. This ultimately phenomenological approach comes to the fore in Hjort’s excellent section on “Combining what is funny with what is touching” (151–163). Hjort supplements her discussion with a selection of movie stills that help illustrate the important points made in this section. The final chapter, “A Different Kind of Feel-good Movie: *Italian for Beginners* and Moral Learning,” focuses on the epistemological and ethical dimensions of the film, leading to what Hjort contends is a form of “moral learning.” Although the film is a “feel-good” movie, its instantia-

tions and examinations of kindness and sympathy lead inexorably to a moral recognition of the “good” in others. The chapter is guided by an interrogation of Noël Carroll’s work on moral learning in the context of narrative art (177). Hjort concludes with an examination of the choices of three pairs of dyadic relationships that animate the film, seen in the context of this overarching theoretical notion of moral learning: Karen and her mother, Olympia and her father, and Andreas and his parents. Hjort notes, “What is valorized in the film, as Scherfig herself points out, is the younger characters’ ability to effect transitions, to take steps toward improving their situations” (209). Ultimately, Hjort proposes that moral learning of the sort encapsulated in the movie is a pleasurable experience, and hence results in the “feel-good” nature of the film.

There is very little not to like in Hjort’s book. The volume itself is handsome, thoughtfully laid out, and includes excellently reproduced movie stills. Although the format is a slightly unusual 14cm x 19cm, the production is top notch. Similarly, the writing is clear and accessible, while the theoretical arguments are well-developed and convincing. Hjort has had remarkable access to Scherfig’s personal archives while writing the book, and has also taken advantage of the relative ease with which one can contact members of the production team and actors in small state cinema. Consequently, the depth of analysis based on access that she provides far exceeds that normally available to most film scholars. The chapters are well conceived and flow well together—consequently, the book can easily be adapted for use in film courses, not only on Nordic cinema, but also on movements such as Dogma, and in more general film courses. It will also be of interest to more general readers with interests in film and contemporary Nordic culture. Of particular note is Hjort’s development of “practitioners’ agency” theory and her excellent application of the theory to a practical example. The book thus stands as an exemplary case study for this type of “middle-level” analysis.

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■ Carla Del Zotto, ed. *La letteratura cristiana in Islanda*. Rome: Carocci, 2010. Pp. 135.

The present book is published under the direction of Carla Del Zotto and offers a collection of three papers presented during a conference held on 30 March 2009 at the University of Rome, entitled “Christian Literature in Iceland.” We should not make the mistake of approaching this book as a work of vulgarization intended for an Italian readership—maybe less familiar to Scandinavian studies than others—but as an original piece of