

Case Study: Submarino - Diving for Good Stories

in cooperation with Frankfurt Book Fair

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Photo (left to right): Frank Wegner (Klett-Cotta Verlag, Germany), Birgitte Hald (Nimbus Film, Denmark), Peter Cowie (moderator) Frederik Juul (Sandrew Metronome, Denmark),

Former Dogma director Thomas Vinterberg's film is based on a novel of unflinching realism by Jonas T. Bengtsson, a young Danish author. This case study focuses on what made the producers choose this dark content and how they turned it into a Berlinale *Competition* film.

Peter Cowie - moderator: *Submarino* by Thomas Vinterberg has been adapted from the best-selling book by Jonas T. Bengtsson, the Danish author. It's about two brothers who grow up in very difficult circumstances. Life takes them apart and then they find each other together, at the end, in prison, and there is some hope for the future in a reconciliation between them. It's a very dark film but it's so sensitive, and it's so rich in its emotions that by the end you've identified with the characters.

I'd like to start by asking Birgitte, the producer, how you found this book and in general how do you look for your subject matter? Do you base most of your films on existing literature or do you encourage screenplays initially? But mainly first, how did you find this book?

Birgitte Hald - producer: Well, it found me, because it was sent to me by the publisher. I'm not even sure the author knew that it was sent to us. I read it and I thought it was a horrible story, much too dark... It was before it came out. Then I discussed it with my colleagues at Nimbus Film and we gave it to Thomas Vinterberg because I think a story like this demands someone with a sense of tragedy and... it's got to be a director like Thomas. He liked the book, though I think he threw it away having read half of it because he thought it was too dark and too tough really.

Peter: So the film diverges quite a bit from the original novel, is that what you're saying?

Birgitte: Yes. The ending especially is much warmer and much more full of hope in the film than in the book. We talked about it from the very beginning that we needed to do it with another ending. I even tried to persuade Jonas to rewrite the ending but he didn't agree with me.



Peter: You assigned it to someone who'd never written a screenplay before - Tobias Lindholm I believe. Why did you do that?

Birgitte: I knew Tobias from film school. I thought he was very talented and we're always looking for new scriptwriters and I thought he had what we needed. Also we were obliged to bring in new talents because this film is part of a four-film deal with Danish television broadcaster TV 2. We promised each other, when we made this deal, that we would bring in new talent in Danish film so we had to use either a new writer or a new producer.

Peter: Frank, I see a copy of the German edition in front of you there. It came out in August, last year. You've kept the original title, I see, although in the film, at least unless I fell asleep, there is no reference to this... after all water boarding which the title refers.

It's a metaphorical title, in a way. But you decided to keep it. If the film is bought for Germany - which I'm sure it will after these reviews - will you re-launch the book or would you do a paperback edition in cooperation with the producers?



Frank Wegner - editor in chief at Klett-Cotta Verlag: We would probably try to redesign the cover work, try to realign the kind of optics we have here with the corporate branding of the film. It would be a major push of course. This is a very small imprint. We are not looking at mass market here.

It's quite a dark and desolate book and it's pretty much about niche marketing to start with. With the film there might be an incredible push. And it not only confers a sense of relevance to the book but can also strongly help to promote the book with a new cover. We would of course try to affiliate ourselves as much as possible visibly with the film, try to get under the trailer, try to get under the movie poster, etc, etc, a bit kind of a parasitic approach to that. But this is really a good chance to spur further sales. It's the author's second book - we had his first book as well. So it would be great to be able to do something for the author.

Peter: He is not unknown in Germany?

Frank: He is not very well-known but he is not totally unknown either, no.

Peter: Does a screening at the Berlinale help you as a publisher?

Frank: Absolutely. From the moment we were notified, we tried to turn that massively into a press campaign to reemphasize the relevance, the necessity of the book.

Peter: Frederik, how closely do you work as a company with publishers in releasing and promoting films and this one in particular?

Frederik Juul - head of distribution at Sandrew Metronome: Very closely I would say. Really I have to start by saying there's not really two stories that are the same when it comes to marketing or launching a film which is based on a book. It all depends on how big the book has been, how big a success, how well-liked it is. Of course we have several examples where you can find books where in a sense it's important for us to make the book bigger than the movie. *Kite Runner* was a very good example of that. In this case I would say, it's more of a case of creating a synergy with the publisher. They can benefit from the movie as well as we can, from the publishing part. Jonas, the author, is very happy about the movie, which gives a sort of an extra leg in the promotion part. Also we get in touch with the publisher at a very early stage and talk also of course about a reprint, what they can do. And they will republish the book as a paperback with the art work that we will use in Denmark so we will be visible in all book stores. Also we can make deals together with the publisher, with the book outlets, where they can promote the book with posters from the movie. We arrange screenings for the book dealers so that's a whole leg that we can activate and hopefully benefit from.

Peter: Birgitte, let's talk about the financing of the movie. You did this in a very small budget; I think around 1.8 million Euros. You also did not as most Danish films: You didn't go through the Danish Film Institute, you put it together yourself as a part of a four film deal with Danish network TV 2. How did you set it up and how did you envisage it from the start as a low-budget film?

Birgitte: Thomas was attracted to this deal because we could promise him not total artistic freedom but almost. We didn't have to go to four different partners to persuade them to be on. That's why it was interesting for him to make this film on such a small budget. We'd been doing that together before on the dogma films so he knew what he was doing.

Peter: What's nice about Submarino is that it's got all the virtues of dogma and none of the vices. It hasn't got that frantically moving camera. It's a much more classically shot film in a certain way. But when you take a book like that - it didn't sell enormous quantities in Denmark. It wasn't a huge best-seller, this book...



Birgitte: We didn't know it. We're not interested really in buying bestsellers. We're basically looking for original stories and that's not always bestsellers. Also if you buy a bestseller and make it into a film it's a totally different game.

Peter: You have to have stars presumably.

Birgitte: And you have the audience knowing the story before they see the film and I think it wouldn't be interesting necessarily for a director like Thomas Vinterberg to do such a film, based on a bestseller.

Peter: The absence of stars is something that our American friends find very difficult to understand very often. They cannot understand that in Europe there are players but not stars and you don't need those stars necessarily to make a successful film. But it must have been a risk anyway.

Birgitte: It is a risk. But there are also a lot of coincidences. We couldn't predict that this one would be as good as it is now.

Peter: So was it just Danish network TV or were there other Nordic co-producers?

Birgitte: There were Nordisk Film & TV Fond and The Match Factory for the foreign sales.

Peter: Thomas Vinterberg has said that the book is quite harsh but also quite beautiful - he said that it was in a period when he was going through a divorce and he was alone with his children in 2007 when he read the book. So I think he identified very strongly with the subject - and that's what makes it such a great film that you can tell that his heart is in this picture.

Frederik, do you have to indulge into more inventive marketing when you have a low-budget film as opposed to more glamorous films?

Frederik: First of all, it doesn't really have anything to do with whether it's been a book or it's not been a book. We're really all down to potential when it comes to marketing the film. That's how we estimate the marketing budget. Luckily for us I think we have a fine marketing budget for this one. Most importantly in Denmark, of course, we'll get a lot of press from the Berlinale, from Thomas. Critics want Thomas to do well. They're interested in him as a director. So this gives us a lot of edge in the whole launching business.

Talking about a book - either you're standing on the shoulder of a big giant or you're standing on the shoulder of a smaller person. In this case it gives us something but it doesn't make the movie blow up that it's based on the book. It sort of gives the movie credibility because it's based on a book and it's actually close to the book. It's not something that they read and said: "well we like the environment so we'll bring that into the movie." The fact that Jonas likes the movie also gives the movie and Thomas credibility. So it's a very good start for us.

Peter: And you've given yourself five weeks between the Berlinale festival and the launch in Denmark. Does that mean you can adapt if the film wins a major award here, that you can build that in your marketing campaign?



Frederik: Definitely. We would very much like to see that happen, for all partners.

Peter: And are Danish reviewers reviewing the film from here or will they wait...

Frederik: No they sort of bring out the sentiment of the Berlinale and say what's the sense that they're getting, what's the buzz on the market. They've been very positive. A Danish journalist even called it a masterpiece, said it's definitely Thomas' best movie since *The Celebration*, which is very good.

We were first to release in the month of May but we heard of the Berlinale and we pushed it to the 25th of March which is a very competitive market. But we're pushing our way in and hoping that the exhibitors will notice that it's also part of the Berlinale and that it's getting good reviews and good press. At the same time, we are also trying to broaden the appeal a bit to a wider audience, to make the viewer know that it's not "just" an upmarket, an art film.

Question from the Audience: I'm interested in the adaptation process - how long it took to reach your shooting script, how many drafts, and any major changes in directions that you could comment on?

Birgitte: Well it took quite a while, I don't remember exactly how long, maybe one-and-a-half years. I must say Thomas has been writing together with Tobias. It was quite difficult to find the form of the script because the two stories have to be connected. How to do that? We were cross-cutting between the two stories, then going back to separate stories and so on. So it was quite difficult.

Peter: It's a film where there's very little dialogue. There are bursts of dialogue, then long stretches where it observes the characters and they're alone with themselves. So that must have been a difficult screenplay to come up with.

Birgitte: It was quite difficult, also because it goes down. How to keep the reader, the audience staying on that travel or journey? When you read, you basically already start to re-write, to re-edit. We never wanted to make a dark, totally hopeless film.



Question from the Audience: I'm a scriptwriter who does book adaptations. Given the sometimes sensitive nature of the diplomatic relationship between the producer and the original author, what advice would you give me to make myself most helpful to my producers in that process?

Birgitte: I think it's all about trust and relationship. As long as you respect the author you can do a lot of things. Because it's not about telling exactly the same story, it's about translating it into a film whilst respecting the original idea, or the soul of the story.

Peter: And the author didn't mind not being part of that scriptwriting process?

Birgitte: No, we made that perfectly clear from the very beginning. We've always done that: The author is not part of the writing process. He can be asked and he can say no or yes during it. But basically he or she has nothing to do with that. And it's made clear from the very beginning, otherwise you get into some grey zones about who's doing what.

Question from the Audience: Birgitte, you said that the story of the film changed quite significantly from that of the book. I wondered how difficult that was to negotiate with the original writer. Was that made possible because the writer is a young writer? For instance I can't see how an established writer would agree to the last part of his book being changed?

Birgitte: We've never worked with an established writer so I don't know how that would be. We said from the beginning to the author that we wanted to change the ending and as I said before I even tried to persuade him to rewrite his book. So he knew that we would make the ending in another way. But I think we respect the story, I don't think it's significantly different. It's just got a little bit more of hope than in the book.

Peter: Does the book open with the scene with the baby?



Birgitte: No, the book opens with the death of the baby. So you read ten lines and then the baby is dead. So welcome (*laugh*). You can't do that on a film, or maybe you can, but we couldn't.

Peter: But you deliberately make it come full circle so that you begin and end with these very delicate images in close-up of the two brothers and the baby and the feeding of the family unit.

Birgitte: Maybe I should add that it's also very important for us to build up a relationship with the author because we would like to continue the collaboration with him and also with other authors of books. So you need to do it in a way that you can continue after this book, maybe there'll be another book, or another film. I even asked the author to write a screenplay for us directly. So he might do that.

Peter: But you wouldn't let him work on the screenplay of his own book?

Birgitte: No. Actually we tried to do that but he thought it was horrible. It was simplifying his work in a bad way he thought.

Peter: Let's widen it. Frank, I'd like to ask you, looking over your publishing programme as a whole. Have you published adaptations of big films or best sellers that have been turned into films? Have you had an interaction with cinema before?

Frank: Yes, in a variety of ways. This is a Tropen Verlag imprint and the entire compound is called Klett-Cotta. They have a fantasy section there, they have Tolkien's *Lord of The Rings*, so this real mass market stuff. Those are very profitable but also delicate and difficult cooperations to engage in there. With this kind of books to be honest, no. We were as yet quite inexperienced there.

Peter: But you took the risk before you knew there was going to be a film there anyway?

Frank: Absolutely, we like the book, the author is a very nice guy, and as I said we liked the first book. And we believe that he's up to further interesting novels that we should enjoy, so we were quite convinced by this book and also by the idea that it fits rather well in the programmatic profile that we've been trying to shape in these past years.

Peter: And Frederik, I understand that the author has moved on from People's Press to another publisher. Did that cause you any friction? Did People's Press say: "Well, we don't want to hear anymore about this guy"?

Frederik: No. I think People's Press, either way where Jonas is, they want to sell more books. So I wouldn't say that's a problem.

I want to add about what Brigitte said about this whole "what are your terms of freedom when you want to adapt a book". I think it's easier with a book that's not well-known because then you have more freedom. And also from our point of view, if you have a very big success of a book, then you know that the audience will want to see the book materialised on the screen. So that gives you less freedom because you know that your biggest audience is the book readers. In the case of Stieg Larsson trilogy but also with the

Kite Runner: It sold 220.000 books in Denmark, and it sold 220.000 tickets in Denmark. Without the book, a film like that would probably have sold between 3 to 5000 tickets but the people who read it were really people who loved the book and they thought the book was as good as the movie. But definitely you have much more freedom in *Submarino's* case because you don't have any expectations to live up to, apart from the author and the few people who bought the book.



Peter: It's an interesting statistic that I'd never heard before, the correlation between the number of tickets and the number of books sales....

Frederik: No, no, no, we are free from the pressure, but it's a double side assault, because I also launched *Harry Potter* and I don't know how many tickets *Harry Potter* would have sold if it hadn't been such a successful book. So you can benefit from it if it's a bestseller, but then you have to be adored by the audience to get their acceptance.

Question from the Audience: Most producers now produce internationally. But do you really look for stories in other countries, and is it difficult to sell your films to other countries as well?

Birgitte: We always try to sell our films internationally. Very often, we even earn more money from abroad than from Denmark.

Looking for material from abroad is very difficult. I've been to the book fair actually. But if I read a book - when it reaches me, you know it's been published years ago in the original country and whenever I try to ask for the rights, they've been sold already. So I think maybe within the Nordic countries, we are looking for books in Norway and Sweden, Iceland also, but outside that it's going to be very difficult. We're a small player, it's always: "Sorry, Miramax just bought the rights".

Peter: Is there ever any temptation to shoot in English or do you always shoot in Danish?

Birgitte: We have done some films in English. I think it's possible, but you very easily lose what's very original and you might lose what international buyers are looking for. Because then in the game of international films, what is so special about us then? But it would be fun to succeed in doing it.

Peter: I mentioned that actually because just last week I saw on Swiss Television, the film that won the Palme d'Or at Cannes, the Romanian film and that was dubbed, very well dubbed. But it was dubbed and it reminded me that when you have a minority language outside Denmark it's got to be subtitled. If it's subtitled it restricts your television sales, it restricts the market almost automatically to a certain number of theatres. So there must be a temptation occasionally to go that English route.



Birgitte: It is a temptation definitely but it's also very difficult to finance. We need the money from the Danish subsidy system and they don't like very much to do films in English of course, because they are basically there to support the Danish language, the Danish culture.

Peter: And how long a window do you have before Danish network TV 2 screens the film? How long will it be after the release in theatres?

Birgitte: Two years. But I'm not sure it's going to be like that forever.

Peter: And DVD, how long will you wait?

Frederik: It's not a matter of how long would we wait, it's a matter of how long we have to wait. We have to wait six months in Denmark, which in my opinion is too long, especially since foreign films shown in Denmark only have to wait four months. So we're fighting with the theatres on that one.

Peter: We haven't discussed agents at all this morning. Is that an important factor in Denmark? When you said that the publisher contacted you - once that contact had been established and once you liked the book, did you then have to deal with a literary agent?

Birgitte: No, because the author didn't have an agent. He has now. I made the deal directly with the publisher. I never tried anything else. But maybe it can change now, I don't know.

Peter: So he had assigned the film rights to the publisher?

Birgitte: Often they don't agree but when it happens, most authors let the publishing house handle the rights.

Question from the Audience: I was so astonished to see a debut writer and a debut DOP on this film, working with such a renowned director. It's great that in Denmark you seem to have many of these opportunities for young talent...

Birgitte: Well, also it's interesting for a director like Thomas Vinterberg to work with someone new because he's got a lot of experience and even experienced people need to be inspired in new ways to direct themselves in new directions. It's basically good for everybody to work with new people now and then.

Peter: Did the form of the book, did the structure, the way the narrative is told, did that affect the way Thomas Vinterberg shot the film? Because the picture is somewhat different than his earlier films. It's more classically shot. And I wonder if that comes from the book at all, or whether it was just his way moving beyond dogma.

Birgitte: I think he's even back before dogma, to his earlier films, his first films, his films from film school. So it's really back to basics.

Frederik: I wanted to add that we're actually quite happy about using new talents. Because Denmark is such a small country then it sort of doesn't give you any press if you keep on using the same names. You think it might give you some security but I think in this case it will give us a lot of press options because they add something very fresh to the movie. Also because Thomas, as a well-known director, wants to work with young people and new actors that are really exciting. And that gives us possibilities, commercially.

Peter: Is that because you have good acting schools? All those actors, did they have a background in television or theatre or coming from an acting school or are they real amateurs?

Birgitte: Both. One of them is a well-known Danish actor who has been doing a lot of films. He plays Nick, the older brother. And the one who plays the younger brother has been doing a lot of theatre but this his first big role on film. It's a mixture. I think we have good actors in Denmark because we have good directors; we have a good theatre school, and a good tradition.