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## What sexual harassment in Zentropa tells us about cultural policy post-Weinstein

As accusations of sexual misconduct and harassment in the film industry reverberated through Hollywood in the second half of 2017, Scandinavia was also affected. 487 Norwegian and 576 Swedish cast and crew signed #MeToo inspired open letters detailing unwelcome advances, sexual offences and expectations of sexual favours for career progression in the film and theatre worlds. In Denmark a survey showed that 66% of actresses had received unwanted sexual comments and physical advances (Kott, 2017; Fejerskov, 2017). Sexual abuse and predators, of course, also exist in countries commonly perceived as having high levels of gender equality and protected workers' rights. However, what surprised the world were Björk's allegations of harassment by Lars von Trier, and revelations of systematised, organisationally condoned and everyday sexual transgressions, violations and humiliations at his award-winning film company Zentropa.

Zentropa is Denmark's foremost internationally successful and prolific production company, with a track record of Oscar, BAFTA and Palme D'Or nominations and awards for von Trier films like *Melancholia*, *Antichrist*, *The Idiots* and *Nymphomaniac*. Zentropa was established in 1992 by producer Peter Aalbæk Jensen and director Lars von Trier. Their vision was to create an alternative to film production in Denmark which, according to Aalbæk, was riddled with nepotism and dominated by a bourgeois, self-serving establishment. Today, Zentropa is owned by Nordisk Film, Scandinavia's largest producer and distributor, with Trier and Aalbæk as 25% shareholders.

In November 2017, nine former staff went public with stories alleging inappropriate behaviour and sexually charged ritual, public humiliations at Zentropa. These centred around Aalbæk, who, as part of the day-to-day running of the company, administered public spankings as punishment for mistakes. Aalbæk, often naked in the office, kissed, hugged, and groped staffers as part of the Zentropa “family”, and hosted obligatory skinny dipping sessions in the Zentropa pool and at festivals. Sexually charged games and competitions were a tradition at company parties. There were cash rewards of 10.000 D.kr. (£1000) for stripping the fastest and prizes for longest pubic hair. A Zentropa logo tattoo unlocked a trip the Cannes film festival (Wind-Friis & Stockmann, 2017b; 2017c).

Most of this was directed towards the company’s’ trainees. The so-called “Småtter” are on practice-based internships, working in various production roles. Unpaid for the first six months, Småtter can be sacked and reemployed several times a day (Lundtofte, 2013; DR, 2013; 2017). According to Zentropa’s website<sup>1</sup>, Småtter undergo the “hardest and best film education” to “equip them for all the challenges in film production, postproduction or distribution” and to ensure that “they never give up and can handle even the most difficult and stressful situations.” The website declares Småtter to be “the eternal youth of Zentropa” (Author’s translation). The term can also be seen as a portmanteau of “småting” (“little thing”) and “måtte” (“doormat”). As well as objectifying and othering the trainee, the term is infantilising and derogative.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://zentropa.dk/vision/>

Fending off accusations of wrongdoing in the Scandinavian press, Aalbæk has always rejected that Zentropa's internships or work culture are problematic. Aalbæk prides himself on being subversive, anti-establishment, and pushing boundaries in the films he produces, in his company and as a person. He claims that Zentropa's transgressive ethos furthers people's creativity (DR 2013; 2017).

Initially, Zentropa's management backed Aalbæk, and Claus Ladegaard, Head of the Danish Film Institute (DFI), a major Zentropa funder, stated that the company's working environment was not the responsibility of the funder. After all, the work culture at Zentropa was well known in Denmark, and described in the book, *Zentropia* (Lundtofte), and a documentary by the Danish Broadcasting Corporation, DR, as early as 2013. But, after the Weinstein scandal, the revelations were taken seriously and the Danish Department for Work and Pensions was tasked with investigating. Then, Film i Väst (FiV), the Swedish regional co-producer and co-funder of Zentropa's films, announced that they would pull the production *The House that Jack Built* that was filming in their facilities unless Aalbæk was removed as Executive Producer. Anna Serner, Head of the Swedish Film Institute (SFI) and Enrico Vannucci, Deputy Director of Eurimages, both Zentropa funders, questioned whether Zentropa could now qualify for future funding (Wind-Friis & Stockmann, 2017a; 2017c). Finally, Zentropa's management side lined Aalbæk from the company, its day-to-day management and barred him from speaking on its behalf.

It is no coincidence that Eurimages, FiV, and SFI threatened Zentropa with funding stops, and the DFI did not. Eurimages is committed to the Council of Europe's

priority area of gender equality<sup>2</sup> with its own Gender Equality Strategy<sup>3</sup>. FiV and SFI are implementing the Swedish Film Law that has an explicit remit of 50/50 male/female cast and crew for all funded film (Kang, 2017). The divergent reactions highlight differences in these organisations' perceptions and implementations of screen policy. Eurimages, FiV and SFI see their remit of supporting the screen industries in a wider policy and societal context that also includes the conditions and rights of those who work within it. Their objections to Zentropa were effective because they extended and exerted their roles beyond a narrowly defined cultural policy remit, and linked the right to lever arts funding to satisfactory and lawful working conditions and the protection of worker's rights. In doing so, they were able to not only call out unacceptable behaviour, but also potentially penalise this with sanctions.

Today, associations and unions – e.g. the Danish Director's Association; the British Women in Film and Television, and the American *Time's Up* – are lobbying for guidelines and codes of conduct to enable staff to call out abuse (Ravindran, 2017). However, in order to empower and enable meaningful change in work cultures beyond #MeToo, these need to be backed up by policy mechanism that can effectively penalise individuals, and safeguard against abusive discriminatory company cultures. What we know from Zentropa and The Weinstein Company is that production companies are unlikely to put these policies in place or police them themselves.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.coe.int/en/web/genderequality>

<sup>3</sup> <https://rm.coe.int/eurimages-gender-equality-strategy-2018-2020-aiming-for-50-50-by-2020/1680760bff>

In January 2018, the investigation of Zentropa concluded that the Småtte abuse was historic, and working conditions within the company had improved with new guidelines put in place by the Department of Work and Pensions and Zentropa's management. Aalbæk returned to work. The long term repercussions of #MeToo and the scandals of Zentropa and The Weinstein Company remain to be seen. The Zentropa case, however, illustrates the role screen funders can play in enabling action and countering endemic, institutionalised toxic and abusive work environments in the screen industries.

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