

The *Vanishing* and *Nightwatch*

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REPACKAGING RAGE: THE *VANISHING* AND *NIGHTWATCH*

It's the same movie, only completely different. It follows the same plot, except where it changes everything.
- Desmond Howe, on *The Vanishing*⁽¹⁾

As for the work of Børnedal, I'd best reserve comment. ...Maybe he looked at the final cut and said, "Mik bortaagē dāntū ødån!" ("This is f...in' great!"). Maybe it's a great film in Denmark, but it's a terrible, terrible movie in America.

- Shane Ham, on *Nightwatch*⁽²⁾

Sometimes the devil is in the details.

- Barney Cousins (Jeff Bridges) in *The Vanishing*

In 1988, *Spoorloos*, a Dutch thriller directed by George Sluizer, premiered in the Netherlands to packed houses and rave reviews. Six years later, in 1994, Ole Børnedal's Danish thriller *Nattevagten* was released in its home country, also to critical and commercial acclaim. Besides evincing a clear Hitchcockian influence, both pictures were made on relatively low budgets, both exhibit a bizarre sense of humour, and both took home multiple awards at prestigious European film festivals.

In 1993, *The Vanishing*, a big-budget Hollywood thriller produced by 20th Century Fox, made its debut on screens throughout the United States after a great deal of fanfare. Five years later, Dimension Films (the so-called "genre division" of Miramax), released a thriller of its own entitled *Nightwatch*. Both films were financial and critical failures, condemned for their inability to generate more than a modicum of suspense. That is not all they have in common: both films star big-name actors, both are distinctly unfunny, and both were completely forgotten during awards time. One more thing: both films were remakes - *The Vanishing* of *Spoorloos*, *Nightwatch* of *Nattevagten* - directed by the same men who were at the helm the first time around.

The question this paper seeks to answer is the following: What happened, perhaps in common, to these two European films as they underwent the processes of Hollywood cinematic and cultural remaking which may have precipitated the dramatic change in their critical and commercial receptions? The reasons for a particular film's success or failure are sometimes arbitrary, often unique, and always complicated. This last is especially true of remakes, which bear the additional burden of having to live up to, if not surpass, the reputations of their predecessors. So one must be careful to avoid making too-hasty generalizations here. But if two or more films have a great deal in common, as do *Spoorloos* and *Nattevagten*, *The Vanishing* and *Nightwatch*, then arriving at some trans-textual conclusions may be possible.

It should be emphasized that the search for a neat, clean, unitary answer to the question above would be fruitless, not to mention naïve; *The Vanishing* and *Nightwatch* have more than one difference from their predecessors in common, and each of these differences is important when it comes to explaining the films' problems (though some differences are clearly more important than others). None of this, however, is to say that one's conclusions need be wholly negative - Hollywood's decision to remake innovative European thrillers with their original, foreign directors at the helm has its upside, no matter how disappointing the results. As is the case with everything having to do with the Americanization of international cinema, and the globalization of Hollywood cinema, motives can be difficult to discern, consequences are often unintended, and absolute moral judgments simply miss the point. In what follows, I will try to respect this unavoidable complexity, and attempt to trace its vicissitudes in a pair of very particular cases.

Some Remarks on Remakes

Remakes abound in script-hungry Hollywood, where conservatism rules and the chance for a "sure thing" - that is, a guaranteed money-maker - takes precedence over originality and invention every time. Since the hardest task for any studio is to find strong story material, recycling old and/or foreign hits is an obvious way to go. Countless Hollywood films released in recent years, including *The Blob*, *Cape Fear*, *Invasion of the Body*

Snatchers, *Father of the Bride*, *Cat People*, *The Fly*, *The Out-of-Towners*, *The Thing*, and *You've Got Mail*, are updates of American classics. Many others are adaptations of more-or-less contemporaneous overseas productions, with French cinema proving itself by far the most popular source of inspiration/imitation: consider, e.g., *Breathless* (*A bout de souffle*), *Happy New Year* (*La Bonne année*), *Three Men and a Baby* (*Trois hommes et un couffin*), and *Pure Luck* (*La chèvre*).⁽³⁾

This second category of remakes, in which the source material is a foreign film released only a short period of time before its rights were optioned to Hollywood, has witnessed substantial growth in the last decade or so, not least because of its impressive box office track record. It is a well-known and oft-lamented fact that American moviegoers rarely attend foreign language films. Remaking contemporary overseas hits thus becomes an appealing option, as the story is "proven" but the home market still untapped. To take just one example, when the well-received French comedy *Trois hommes et un couffin* played in America in 1986, it barely passed the \$1 million mark; when Disney remade the film as *Three Men and a Baby* in 1987, it hauled in nearly \$170 million. Recent entries in this category include *Vanilla Sky* (*Abre los ojos*), *Sommersby* (*Le retour de Martin Guerre*), *Point of No Return* (*La Femme Nikita*), *My Father, the Hero* (*Mon père, le héros*), *Jungle2Jungle* (*Un indien dans la ville*), and *Scent of a Woman* (*Profumo di donna*).

Remakes such as these are especially interesting from a global perspective, since here what gets "made over" is not simply a story, but a whole host of cultural signifiers. Producers, directors, screenwriters, and focus groups all contribute to the Americanization of these once-foreign texts, a process that goes far beyond the mere substitution of English dialogue for subtitles at the bottom of the screen. Production values increase, references get altered, locations are made recognizable, and faces become familiar. Atmosphere, mood, pacing, and tone all get the standard, post-classical Hollywood treatment. And, as we shall see, generic conventions - cinematic as well as narratological - are adopted and strictly enforced.

It is quite unusual for a director to remake his own film. Hitchcock did it, directing a black-and-white version of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* in 1934, then a colour version in 1956. Both Walsh and Ford did it as well, the former remaking his 1941 gangster-noir *High Sierra* as a Western, *Colorado Territory*, in 1949, the latter remaking *Judge Priest* (1934) as *The Sun Shines Bright* two decades later. Another member of this exclusive club is Sam Raimi, whose "splatstick" horror film *Evil Dead II* (1987) is less a sequel than a bigger-budget imitation of his own 1982 cult classic, *The Evil Dead*. It is even more unusual for a non-American director to remake his own foreign film in the States, the second time as a Hollywood production.⁽⁴⁾ There is Francis Veber, who wrote and directed *Three Fugitives* in 1989, three years after doing the same with *Les fugitifs*. And there is Robert Rodriguez, who remade his 1992 independent success *El Mariachi* as *Desperado* in 1995. There are very few others.

One reason for the paucity of examples here may be the following: if it is a primary goal of Hollywood studios to make successful foreign films appealing to domestic audiences, then precisely what they (think they) do not want are foreign directors running the show, no matter how good a job he or she did with the original. It will be objected that, especially in recent years, numerous European and Asian directors have been placed in charge of big-budget American productions - one need only consider the career of John Woo. But here for the most part the films in question are already so laden with the conventions of mainstream Hollywood cinema that there is little risk of foreign "contamination." If anything, getting an outsider to direct the latest studio-conceived thriller, action flick, etc., is thought to add something of an "edge" to the production.

This begs the question, of course, why both Sluizer and Bornedal were given such rare and potentially lucrative opportunities. What was so special about this pair that Hollywood not only offered to remake their pictures, but took the risk of letting them direct again under completely different circumstances? For one thing, Sluizer and Bornedal each controlled the rights to their films, and demanded from 20th Century Fox and Miramax, respectively, that they be placed in charge of production. For another, it is likely that the heads of these studios were so impressed with the original versions that they decided it was worth taking a risk for a repeat performance, with only some supposedly "minor" alterations to be made.

Foreign Originals

In 1984, popular Dutch journalist and author Tim Krabbé published a short novel entitled *Het gouden ei* (*The Golden Egg*). An international best-seller, *Het gouden ei* tells the tale of Rex Hofman, a young Dutchman whose girlfriend Saskia Ehivest mysteriously disappears at a gas station in central France during

a vacation. Obsessed with finding out what happened to her, tormented by the memory of her loss, Rex launches an international missing-persons campaign that completely takes over his life.

Years later, long after the trail has gone cold and the police have closed the case, Rex still scours the countryside in tribute to Saskia, alienating and eventually losing his new girlfriend in the process. When Saskia's abductor, a likeable French chemistry teacher named Raymond Lemorne who just happens to be a sociopath, turns up with an offer to tell Rex everything if only he will submit to undergoing the exact same experience, Rex hesitantly agrees. This because, for Rex, the worst thing of all is "not knowing."⁽⁵⁾ Raymond explains that he did indeed kill Saskia, and only because he wondered if he was capable of committing such an evil act. Rex willingly takes a sedative, and in the book's penultimate chapter awakens to find himself buried alive in a narrow coffin. "Now he knew. It was too awful to know."⁽⁶⁾ *Het gouden ei* ends with the uncanny announcement that an investigation into Rex's mysterious vanishing turned up no more leads than the one made eight years earlier into the disappearance of Saskia.⁽⁷⁾

Spoorloos is quite faithful to Krabbé's novel, Sluizer adapting the screenplay with assistance from the author himself (the two share writing credits). The main differences are as follows: (1) *Spoorloos* has a more complicated narrative than *Het gouden ei*, one that is filled with shifts in temporal order as well as character focalization. As one critic explained after the movie's American release in January 1991, "the film's narrative structure, which tells the same story from two points of view - the perpetrator's and the victim's - is complex, but the facts are straightforward"⁽⁸⁾; (2) in *Spoorloos*, Rex and Raymond spend more time together than in Krabbé's novel, and as a result of this interaction, discover that they share a certain sensibility - there is more than a hint of mutual, albeit unacknowledged, homosexual desire in their verbal exchanges⁽⁹⁾; (3) in the book, Raymond shoots and kills two hitchhikers as a prelude to his kidnapping/murder of Saskia; and (4) the final chapter of *Het gouden ei* - the "announcement" mentioned above - is basically deleted from the film version of the story. One consequence of this significant omission is that the emotional impact of *Spoorloos*' climactic coffin scene gets increased, taking on symbolic import because abstracted from any particular time or place.

Sluizer's film career began in the late 1950s, when he served as assistant director on a popular Dutch comedy entitled *Fanfare* (1958). In 1979, he directed *Twee vrouwen* (aka *Twice a Woman*), a film about a doomed lesbian relationship with Anthony Perkins in the role of a murderous ex-husband. Despite being highly regarded in Holland, nobody could have predicted the amount or degree of praise that would be lavished upon him after *Spoorloos*. At the 1988 Nederlands Film Festival, Sluizer picked up the Dutch Film Critics Award. Later that evening, his entry won the so-called "Golden Calf Award" for Best Feature. Even the Americans were impressed with Sluizer, "whose direction," Janet Maslin wrote at the time, "has the spooky precision of nonfiction crime writing."⁽¹⁰⁾

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But Sluizer was not the only one to earn kudos for *Spoorloos*. At the 1998 European Film Awards, Johanna ter Steege won Best Supporting Actress for her role as Saskia. Bernard-Pierre Donnadiu, who plays Raymond, was lauded for his "sterling performance, [which] creates a credible, chilly fusion of humanistic and sociopathic impulses."⁽¹¹⁾ And Gene Bervoets, was praised by numerous critics for making his character of Rex strong "even in the face of unbearable strain."⁽¹²⁾

A number of elements in *Spoorloos* make it stand out, not the least of which is its unconventional narrative. By revealing the killer's identity less than a third of the way through, the film forces viewers to ask questions about the how, what, and why of Saskia's disappearance, rather than about the (typically all-important) *who*. As Ebert points out, "the film's unusual structure...builds suspense even while it seems to be telling us almost everything we want to know."⁽¹³⁾ This is so because the one thing *Spoorloos* does not tell us, until it is too late, is exactly what happened to Saskia after her vanishing. Some critics viewed the dramatic shift in hermeneutic code effected by Sluizer and Krabbé as distinctly Hitchcockian in nature: "remember [Hitchcock's] decision to reveal Kim Novak's true identity midway through *Vertigo*? - *Spoorloos* is less interested in giving you a quick jolt than in planting seeds of unease that continue to sprout long after you leave the theatre."⁽¹⁴⁾

Others made the Hitchcock-Sluizer connection as well, but on the basis of style rather than narrative:

There's a clinicism...in Sluizer's methods; he lays out the story...dispassionately, as if he were dissecting a frog. And yet his style seems supple, and not the least bit mechanical. His work is like that of a slightly more laconic, slightly more intellectualized Hitchcock – Hitchcock in a beret.⁽¹⁵⁾

In addition, there is the unexpected, offbeat humour in *Spoorloos*, mainly centring around Raymond's early kidnapping practice sessions and his futile attempts at getting potential female victims into his car, which may recall Hitchcock's own fondness for inserting surprise laughs in the midst of an otherwise serious situation. Finally, the manner in which Raymond (the interesting killer) becomes the film's central character, effectively taking over the story from Rex (the flawed hero), harkens back to such Hitchcock classics as *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), *Strangers on a Train* (1951), and of course *Psycho* (1960). In the final analysis, *Spoorloos* comes across as a dark, compelling, neo-Hitchcockian thriller, one that differs from the vast majority of its Hollywood counterparts in prioritizing plot twists over convention, narrative over spectacle, and character development over special effects.

Nattevagten tells the story of Martin (Nikolaj Coster-Waldau), a penurious Danish law student who is forced to take a job as night watchman of the local morgue in order to make ends meet. Meanwhile, a serial killer is on the loose in the city, murdering prostitutes and taking their scalps as tokens. A series of strange happenings in the morgue - alarms going off for no reason, corpses apparently rising up from their slabs and walking around - leaves Martin progressively frazzled. He becomes the prime suspect when the body of one of the recently-murdered prostitutes is sexually assaulted and his semen is found nearby. We suspect that Martin is being set up, however, because we previously witnessed him having sex with his girlfriend Kalinka (Sofie Gråbøl) in the corpse storage room. So who is the real killer? Possibilities include Martin's best friend, Jens (Kim Bodnia), a free spirit and practical joker who is engaged in a no-holds-barred game of chicken with Martin - all dares must be accepted, and the loser has to propose marriage to his respective girlfriend; Police Commissioner Wörmer (Ulf Pilgaard), who always seems to turn up when not expected; and perhaps Kalinka, or even Jens' frustrated girlfriend Lotte (Lotte Anderson).

Things get even more complicated when Jens sets Martin up with a young, drug-addicted hooker named Joyce (Rikke Louise Andersen). It seems that Joyce was friends with the dead prostitute, and may have had the killer as a client herself. Kalinka, suspicious of Martin's extracurricular goings-on, finds out where Joyce lives and goes there to confront her. She turns up just moments after the killer, who we now learn is Commissioner Wörmer, stabs Joyce to death and plants more of Martin's semen on the girl's naked body. Just to make absolutely certain that Martin will be blamed for the killing, Wörmer picks up Joyce's limp finger and writes his name in blood on a pillow case. Trouble is, Joyce knew Martin as "Jens," and Jens as "Martin" - a safeguard effected by Jens that Wörmer knew nothing about.

On a hunch, Martin digs through the records of past night watchmen and learns that Wörmer was fired from his job there years earlier for engaging in necrophilic acts with the corpses. Wörmer binds and gags Kalinka, then does the same to Martin, who drops his weapon when he realizes his girlfriend's life is on the line. Hope is momentarily restored when Jens arrives at the morgue with Deputy Inspector Rolf (Stig Hoffmeyer), but Wörmer quickly kills Rolf and handcuffs Jens to a pipe. In the film's memorable climax, Jens slices off part of his hand so as to slide the cuffs off his wrist, and shoots Wörmer in the back just as he is about to murder Martin and Kalinka. *Nattevagten* ends with Martin and Jens participating in a double wedding, the Priest accidentally (and humourously) mixing up the couples' names.

Before writing and directing *Nattevagten*, Bornedal was known in Denmark only for his work in television. The film was shot on a modest budget in and around Copenhagen, starred mostly young, inexperienced actors, and had next to nothing by way of special effects or dramatic set-pieces. In late February 1994, *Nattevagten* opened in Denmark to rave reviews; in March and April it was the country's top film; in September, it premiered in North America at the Toronto Film Festival; and in 1995, the film received numerous awards at festivals and conventions across Europe.

Nattevagten's Hitchcockian qualities were apparent to many critics and reviewers. As Tim Murray noted,

"the denouement is pure Hitchcock, as Martin tries to protect his girlfriend from the real killer, but, like Jimmy Stewart in *Rear Window*, or *Vertigo*, he is almost powerless to prevent anything happening to her."⁽¹⁶⁾ This interpretation was borne out by Andy Black, who asserted that *Nattevagten* embodies "the...feelings of helplessness so successfully realized in Alfred Hitchcock's canon."⁽¹⁷⁾ One also detects a touch of Hitchcock in *Nattevagten*'s surprisingly deft (considering its grim subject matter) sense of humour. The character of Jens, in particular, seems there to provide comic relief as much as to serve as a possible suspect: in one scene, he reveals to Martin that Danish legend Hans Christian Anderson was a notorious masturbator, while in another he forces himself to throw up while receiving communion in order to win a dare. Finally, Børnedal's film may be considered Hitchcockian in the self-consciousness with which it plays with the conventions of the genre in which it is ostensibly situated. Reviewer Lisa Nesselson wrote that "Børnedal's script self-reflexively makes fun of bad movie conventions ("If I were to say 'I love you,' would it sound like bad movie dialogue?"; "If this were a movie, they should call it *The Night Guard*"), but not enough for adult tastes."⁽¹⁸⁾ True enough, but to be fair to Børnedal, he was clearly less interested in appealing to "adult tastes" than to youthful ones.

Where *Nattevagten* diverges from Hitchcock's films is in the graphic nature of its violence, and in the way it explicitly identifies sex with death. One scene has Martin and Kalinka making love against the morgue wall; another shows a dead prostitute, partially scalped and totally naked, being inspected on a metal slab; and yet another reveals Wörmer using a test tube to plant Martin's semen on Joyce's dead body. Scenes such as these reveal *Nattevagten*'s debt to American serial killer films like *Manhunter* (1986), *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), and especially *Se7en* (1995). This cross-cultural influence was remarked upon by a number of reviewers, one of whom wrote that "the grim and macabre feel of this story seeps through the screen with shots of dim rooms, lit by flickering fluorescent lights, and low-key acting. ...Although some of the scenes are extremely disturbing, even after having seen *Se7en*, they do add to the total impact."⁽¹⁹⁾ Another commented that some of the scenes "borrow heavily...from the recent history of Hollywood action films."⁽²⁰⁾ But it would be a mistake to place *Nattevagten* squarely in the action or serial killer genre. For one of the film's main strengths is the extent to which it manages to *transcend* genre boundaries. If anything, *Nattevagten* is an action-serial killer-suspense-horror hybrid, which is just to say that it combines a number of different elements and makes use of a number of different conventions in order to create something new.

To recap: in terms of their production histories, *Spoorloos* and *Nattevagten* have in common a low (by Hollywood standards) budget that did not afford their respective directors the luxury of lush sets, well-known actors, or mind-blowing special effects. While neither picture looks cheap by any means, both give the impression of being somewhat less polished, and less standardized, than their Hollywood counterparts. Both films make use of relatively inexperienced actors in starring and supporting roles who, almost without exception, gave sterling performances. And both films were directed by men who contributed, either partially or wholly, to the writing of the script, and who clearly had a decisive authorial influence on the final product.

At the level of plot, both pictures make a point of exhibiting the powerlessness of their ostensible heroes (recall that Martin has to be saved by his best friend at the end of *Nattevagten*). In addition, both films effectively argue that too much knowledge can be a very bad thing indeed: Rex should have left well enough alone, and it is once Martin figures out who the killer is that the real trouble begins. *Spoorloos*, in Ebert's words, "is a thriller, but in a different way than most thrillers. It is a thriller about knowledge - about what the characters know about the disappearance, and what they know about themselves. ...a plot that makes you realize how simplistic many suspense films really are."⁽²¹⁾ In addition, both films are resolutely unconventional, *Spoorloos* primarily in terms of its narrative, *Nattevagten* in terms of its graphic content. Both films succeed in generating suspense, albeit in different ways - *Nattevagten* is a whodunit, *Spoorloos* a "whydidoit" - as well as humour. And both films owe a clear debt to the work of Alfred Hitchcock.

Finally, when it comes to reception, both *Spoorloos* and *Nattevagten* topped the box office charts in their respective home countries. Both were rewarded with multiple awards at various European film festivals. And both were lauded for looking backwards to Hitchcock while at the same time breaking with tradition and bringing something new to the horror/suspense genre. The films' similarities were not lost on critics. In the liner notes accompanying the UK video release of *Nattevagten*, Tim Murray writes that

One of the major problems Scandinavian movies like *Nattevagten* have [is that] they're so hard to pigeonhole.

In many respects it suffers from the same problem that afflicted its closest European relative, Dutch George Sluizer's *Spoorloos*. There are no precedents for a film like *Nattevagten*, little else you can compare it to, and it's just so damn hard to categorize. ...And while, like *Spoorloos* before it, the film does feature some recognizable elements dotted liberally throughout: a dollop of Hitchcock here, a touch of Dario Argento there; it twists the conventions and injects original ingredients into the sometimes tired genre of serial killer movies.⁽²²⁾

And at the time of its premiere in Great Britain, the *Daily Mail* described *Nattevagten* as simply "the scariest European film to have hit our screens since [*Spoorloos*]."

Before moving on to their American counterparts, and so as not to overstate our case, it is worth noting the major differences between these two films. Whereas in *Spoorloos* violence is mostly alluded to (e.g., we never actually *see* what happens to Saskia after Raymond kidnaps her, not even in flashback), in *Nattevagten* violence is presented as gory spectacle (e.g., we watch the blood dripping down Joyce's leg onto the floor as Wörmer plunges a knife into her back). This brings us to another difference: *Nattevagten*, for all of its novelty, has much more in common with US serial killer films than does *Spoorloos*, which may have something to do with the fact that the former production was written directly for the screen, whereas the latter was adapted from a highly original and unconventional novella. Furthermore, *Nattevagten*, unlike *Spoorloos*, seems to be specifically targeting a teenage crowd, as evidenced by its core of attractive young characters, its self-reflexive dialogue, its graphic content, and its adolescent humour.⁽²³⁾ Finally, whereas *Spoorloos* opened to rave reviews in America theatres three years after its European debut, as of 2002 *Nattevagten* still has not been released Stateside. Apparently Miramax learned a lesson from *The Vanishing*; as Ebert noted, "Dimension Films bought the original [*Nightwatch*]...and kept it off the market here while producing the retread, no doubt to forestall the kinds of unfavourable comparisons that came up when the Danish director George Sluizer remade his brilliant *Spoorloos* (1988) into a sloppy, spineless 1993 American film."⁽²⁴⁾

Hollywood Facsimiles

As noted above, in the case of *The Vanishing*, the pattern of assigning an American director to remake a successful foreign film in Hollywood did not hold, a key reason being that Sluizer owned the rights to Krabbé's novel and was willing to sell them only if he could direct. Twentieth Century Fox thought highly enough of *Spoorloos* that they took Sluizer up on his offer, under the condition that Hollywood screenwriter Todd Graff be permitted to retool the script so as to make it more palatable for American audiences. Sluizer was given a generous budget to work with - \$20 million, as compared to around \$1 million for *Spoorloos* - a huge production crew, and a host of well-known, experienced actors, including Kiefer Sutherland as Rex (or rather, "Jeff"), Sandra Bullock as his kidnapped girlfriend Diane Shaver,⁽²⁵⁾ Jeff Bridges as the antagonist Barney Cousins, and Nancy Travis as Rita, Jeff's new romantic interest. The film was shot mostly in Seattle, and numerous hints leave no room for doubt as to where we are: in the opening scene, Jeff and Diane drive near Mt. Saint Helens; Jeff kicks around a hackeysack while waiting for Diane at the gas station, which is located next to a Dairy Queen; Jeff's car keys are attached to a Bullwinkle Moose keychain; etc. It is the resolute American-ness of this picture, in fact, that makes Barney's unplaceable quasi-European accent so puzzling. Some critics hypothesized that the accent was supposed to be of Dutch origin, and that actor Bridges was thereby paying homage to Sluizer, but a more likely explanation is that he was merely following generic tradition in depicting the villain as outsider/alien/foreigner. *The Vanishing* opened in February 1993 to mostly harsh reviews, and wound up grossing a mere \$14.5 million in US box office receipts.

In interviews, screenwriter Graff stated that he left *The Vanishing* about "60% the same" as the original film. Here is how he describes the main changes:

There were themes in the original that I wanted to expand upon that lent themselves to American audiences. Our version is about control, how, to keep our sanity, we must go through our lives believing we have some control... Out went all the heavy symbolism about "golden eggs colliding in space"... And the female roles have been expanded, especially the second girlfriend played by Nancy Travis. These are no-b.s. American women.⁽²⁶⁾

Another change Graff made was to the film's narrative structure: *The Vanishing* begins by introducing us to an apparent weirdo, Bridge's Barney, who chloroforms himself in order to determine exactly how long it takes to regain consciousness. This opening scene has the effect of mitigating the suspense later on,

as we immediately connect Barney to Diane's disappearance. Other changes include less time spent on character development; more time devoted to the violent, action-packed climax; the introduction of a series of ridiculously fortuitous events which enable Rita to track down and eventually save Jeff from being buried alive⁽²⁷⁾; Barney's overt creepiness, which stands in stark contrast to Raymond's quiet charm; a lack of doubling and consequent heteronormalization of the relationship between Jeff and Barney; Rita's decision not to abandon Jeff despite his obsession with the past; and Jeff's subsequent decision to give up on finding out what happened to Diane prior to Barney's showing up. The most obvious and outrageous change of all, however, is *The Vanishing's* happy ending. Instead of leaving us with an image of Rex screaming and laughing maniacally inside a dark coffin, Sluizer and Graff wind down their remake by having Rita - a slightly older but no less spunky version of the typical teen stalker movie's "final girl" - outsmart and outfight Barney long enough to free Jeff from his earthy grave. Jeff, not Rita, then proceeds to kill Barney with a shovel, giving him exactly what he deserves - the familiar American themes of guiltless payback and just desserts here converging. The film's final scene has Jeff and Rita reconstituted as a happy, "normal" couple, neither dysfunctional nor traumatized in any way. Diane is no longer an obsession now, just a memory - one that both of them are trying hard to forget.

Even adjusting for the uncritical tendency many critics have towards comparing remakes unfavourably with their originals - viewing the differences as heresy and the similarities as evidence of a lack of imagination⁽²⁸⁾ - it is clear that Sluizer's second go at directing this film is a great deal less successful than his first. Which is not to say that *The Vanishing* is a terrible picture, or that it is wholly lacking in entertainment value; generally speaking, the reviews were lukewarm, not scathing. For those who did not see *Spoorloos* before going to see *The Vanishing*, the latter version has an interesting plot, and raises some interesting issues. But for those who *did* see *Spoorloos* first, its US remake ranges from a pale imitation, to painful to sit through, to an embodiment of everything that is wrong with Hollywood's appropriation and assimilation of foreign films and worldviews.

Unfortunately for *The Vanishing*, many of those who reviewed the film fall into this second category. A number of critics simply dismissed it as "a case study in how Hollywood can make a complete mess out of what was previously a marvellous film."⁽²⁹⁾ (Cf. Ebert: "*The Vanishing* [is]...a textbook exercise in the trashing of a nearly perfect film," and the *Maclean* movie critic who wrote, "Compared with the original, the remake seems like sacrilege - a vulgarization of a film that already seemed perfect."⁽³⁰⁾) Two changes in particular really seemed to annoy: *The Vanishing's* descent into conventional thriller fare, exemplified by the larger and more politically correct role given to the protagonist's new girlfriend; and the film's unrealistic happy ending. Regarding the latter, some went so far as to attack Sluizer directly, arguing that he sold out for the chance to leave Holland for Hollywood: "I guess he didn't have enough of a spine," fumed one reviewer, "to tell the producers and the studio to go screw themselves when they suggested the new ending."⁽³¹⁾ Another complained, "Given that the new film is in every way less interesting than the original, Sluizer stands accused of having knowingly hamstringed a thoroughbred, of destroying his integrity for money."⁽³²⁾

Some critics went so far as to call the remake of *Spoorloos* an affront to the American public: "*The Vanishing* provides a prime example of a studio that has little respect for the intelligence of the moviegoing public."⁽³³⁾ Although this last complaint has some validity, the personal attacks on Sluizer are unwarranted, considering that the director waited until he was sixty years old to come to Hollywood, and that his very next film, *Utz* (1991), was a critically-acclaimed independent production. When asked why he decided to redo *Spoorloos* in the first place, Sluizer answered, "The No. 1 fascination for me was to be able to recreate characters in a different culture, in a different movie with different actors, but based on the same story."⁽³⁴⁾ Though perhaps a bit disingenuous, it seems safe to conclude that most of the blame here belongs to *The Vanishing's* Hollywood backers, those paid "experts" who believed that the chilling understatement of the European original would not cut it with emotional US audiences. According to *Vanishing* co-producer Paul Schiff, "We acknowledged and embraced the expectations that we know exist in an American audience for this kind of movie, which are that the characters whom we grow to identify with do triumph in some significant way, that there's some positive, affirming result at the end of the journey."⁽³⁵⁾ Schiff and company's mistake - one of them, at least - seems to have been in underestimating the desire of American audiences for films that surpass, subvert, or otherwise run *counter* to their expectations.⁽³⁶⁾

Nightwatch is a great deal more faithful to its predecessor than *The Vanishing* is to *Spoorloos*, even if this fidelity did not result in a more favourable critical response. Hollywood was interested in *Nattevagten* right from the start, with Sony and Miramax both seeking rights to the film. Along with producer Michael Obel, Børnedal was represented by the high-rolling American agency International Creative Management, and in March of 1995 the pair signed a two-project deal with Dimension Films. *Nightwatch* was to be the first of those projects. In return, Dimension acquired distribution and remake rights to Børnedal's original effort. Five months later, during pre-production planning for *Nightwatch*, Dimension brought in celebrated writer/director Steven Soderbergh (who at the time was known primarily for 1989's *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*) to revamp the script. British actor Ewan McGregor, on the brink of superstardom after his performances in *Shallow Grave* (1994) and *Trainspotting* (1996), signed on to play Martin. Hollywood notables Josh Brolin, Patricia Arquette, and Nick Nolte also joined the cast. A lot of buzz surrounded the film during shooting, as critics were eager to see Børnedal's American directorial debut. To ensure the largest possible audience - and to prevent the film from having to compete against its earlier self - Dimension declined to release *Nattevagten* anywhere in the US. It is reported that shooting on *Nightwatch* wrapped in late 1996.

The first indication that things were not going smoothly came when Dimension postponed *Nightwatch*'s original release date. Various explanations have circulated as to the motivation for this postponement. Some wrote that the film was pushed back so it that it would not have to go up against McGregor's 1997 releases *The Pillow Book* and *A Life Less Ordinary*. Others wrote that it was in order to fix certain "problems" with the script, identified via negative test audience feedback. In any case, by the time *Nightwatch* finally hit the theatres in April 1998, McGregor's popularity had temporarily levelled off and the excitement surrounding the film had all but evaporated.⁽³⁷⁾ Generally poor reviews did nothing to help matters. *Nightwatch* made just under \$600,000 its opening weekend, and by early May had managed only \$1.15 million at the US box office. Considering its big budget and lavish production values, the film must be considered a flop, even taking into account projected video revenue.

The differences between *Nightwatch* and *Nattevagten* are for the most part fairly subtle, which is not to say that they are unimportant. *Nightwatch* begins with a prologue, absent from its predecessor, in which a prostitute who regularly plays dead for her john is brutally murdered by someone whose face remains off-camera. This scene is obviously imitative of similar openings appearing in such recent US horror fare as *Scream* (1996) and *Halloween H20* (1998).⁽³⁸⁾ Other differences include a more polished look (still lots of creepy atmosphere, but now lacking the rough edges), a more sinister Police Inspector, less time spent developing the relationships between Martin and Katherine (formerly Kalinka) on the one hand, Martin and James (formerly Jens) on the other, additional intertextual references (to *Psycho*, *Alien*, and *The Shining*), and even more graphic displays of violence and bloodshed. Finally, Tim Murray was three for three when he predicted, prior to *Nightwatch*'s release, that "you can be sure...any gratuitous references to throwing up in church, Hans Christian Anderson's, er, hobbies, and blow jobs in restaurants will be slashed." The last item on Murray's list occurs in *Nattevagten* when Jens attempts to embarrass Martin by paying Joyce to service him in the middle of a packed restaurant. In *Nightwatch*, a similar event takes place, but this time all Martin receives is a hand job. Suffice to say, the former scene is a great deal more effective than the latter.

Predictably, because of *Nattevagten*'s unavailability in the States, few of the critics who reviewed *Nightwatch* were able to compare it to the original. This did not stop some of them from drawing unfavourable comparisons anyway; Robert Horton, for example, wrote that "you can see how the same story might have been a taut Euro-thriller," before proceeding to detail what he considers the "problems" with the remake.⁽³⁹⁾ But most critics were content to criticize *Nightwatch* on its own terms. High on the list of complaints was McGregor's unconvincing American accent - casting a British actor to play an American in a Hollywood remake of a European film has got to be as self-defeating as having an American actor affect a European accent under the same set of circumstances, e.g., Jeff Bridges in *The Vanishing*.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Nolte's over-the-top, wooden performance as the serial killing Police Chief was also singled out for criticism ("He's turned his role...into a lumbering oblique presence who veers from the dimwitted to the sagacious without the use of drugs"⁽⁴¹⁾; "Nick Nolte has several extended close-ups where he moves his eyebrows up and down"⁽⁴²⁾), as was the film's stilted dialogue, gratuitous violence, whodunit mystery that is too easy to figure out, and plot that seems held together by the loosest of threads. It is hard to believe that such complaints would have been levied against *Nattevagten* by the same critics had they been given the opportunity to see the original

film.

Whereas Sluizer's purported goal in directing *The Vanishing* was to make a different, "American" (i.e., uplifting, life-affirming) version of his film using the same story as before, Bornedal's aim seems to have been to make the same picture over again, only this time with a heightening of the "American" (i.e., conventional, Hollywood) elements already at play to begin with. The difference here has everything to do with the nature of the original films. At one level, both directors succeeded in achieving their goals. For it is safe to say that if a viewer did not know *The Vanishing* and *Nightwatch* were remakes of contemporaneous European productions, that viewer would not be inclined to view them as anything other than typical Hollywood thrillers. Too typical, in fact, which may be where the heart of the problem lies.

Conclusions

Finally, we are in a position to outline the common differences between the originals and remakes of our two films, and to draw some general conclusions about our findings.

1. The American versions of *Spoorloos* and *Nattevagten* lack the keen sense of humour manifest in the European versions. This is not simply because *The Vanishing* and *Nightwatch* fail in their attempts at generating laughs, although that is certainly true as well. It is because they hardly make any effort to be funny at all. As Charles Taylor explains in his review of *Nightwatch*: "What do you think this is - entertainment? Its uncompromised view of evil is what seemed to impress people about *Se7en*... What's interesting is how the view of the world in movies about serial killers now seems to differ less and less from the view held by the killers themselves."⁽⁴³⁾ Whereas *Spoorloos* and *Nattevagten* manage to achieve a measure of wry cynicism concerning the current state of the world, gender relations, etc., *The Vanishing* and *Nightwatch* are little more than exercises in pessimism, even nihilism.

2. The American versions, as opposed to the European ones, prioritize spectacle and action at the expense of character development and plot subtlety. Things move so fast in *The Vanishing* and *Nightwatch* that, compared to their predecessors, behaviour appears unmotivated, expressions of passion are unconvincing, and as a result, outcomes become unimportant. It is likely that a quicker pace is precisely what the films' respective directors were trying to achieve for their remakes, and why experienced Hollywood screenwriters were called in for assistance. Describing the difference between the European and American treatments of *Spoorloos*, Sluizer uses words like "cerebral" for the former and "visceral" for the latter: "It's the difference between being more intellectual or more gut level." And according to Mimi Avins, "The [American] audience participates in a way that is more childlike."⁽⁴⁴⁾ But one consequence of these films' prioritization of spectacle over plot is that both *The Vanishing* and *Nightwatch* are high on shock, low on suspense, whereas the opposite holds for their European counterparts.

3. The American versions are less psychological, and less philosophical, than the European ones. With events occurring so rapidly in *The Vanishing* and *Nightwatch*, the characters have precious little time for reflection. In the interests of space, just one example from each film will have to suffice here. In *Spoorloos*, as in *Het gouden ei*, Raymond's motivation for randomly kidnapping and murdering a young woman stems from a lifelong debate he has with himself concerning the nature of free will and the possibility of committing acts of pure evil; in *The Vanishing*, despite Barney's narratively equivalent "confession," neither Jeff nor the audience believes he is anything but crazy. In *Nattevagten*, Jens stands as a charismatic counterpart to Martin, providing the id where his friend is all ego. In *Nightwatch*, Brolin's James is mean-spirited, completely unsympathetic, and quite possibly insane.

4. The American versions are more conventional, and more predictable, than their European counterparts. In support of this claim, one could cite *Nightwatch*'s excessively violent prologue and the equal amounts of story time spent painting each character as a possible murder suspect, *The Vanishing*'s retribution theme and happy ending, etc. The conjunction of these four points allows us to conclude in addition that both *The Vanishing* and *Nightwatch* forfeit their predecessors' claims to being genuinely Hitchcockian in spirit. They may be more stylish than *Spoorloos* and *Nattevagten* - certainly they are more polished - but they lack the wit, psychological complexity, and convention-bending originality that made the earlier European films so suspenseful and provocative. With this in mind, it is worth noting the headline of a review published in February 1993, which read "*Vanishing* Cries Out For the Hitchcock Touch."⁽⁴⁵⁾

Considering that both of the remakes examined here flopped with US critics and audiences alike for what appear to be at least some of the same reasons, should one conclude more generally that American imitations of successful European thrillers are doomed to failure as a result of Hollywood's conservatism and lack of insight into audience desire? Did Sluizer and Bornedal each make a terrible mistake in holding out to re-direct their own films for a new and more competitive market? Does *The Vanishing* and *Nightwatch* epitomize all that is wrong with Hollywood's appropriation and reconstitution of other cultures' masterworks?

The answer to all these questions is no, albeit a hesitant and qualified no. Hollywood is nothing if not adaptable, and losing money on *The Vanishing* and *Nightwatch* could not have gone unnoticed. The more interesting question to ask is how the studios will respond, whether by giving up on remaking these sorts of film altogether, by promoting and giving wide release to the original subtitled versions, or by allowing foreign directors more freedom from bureaucratic control and outside "assistance." Sluizer and Bornedal did not make a terrible mistake by remaking their films in the States: their technical prowess and eye for creative shotmaking was praised even while the overall product was criticized for reasons largely (even if not wholly) outside their control. And to close on a positive note, because so many people were intrigued by, but ultimately disappointed in, *The Vanishing* and *Nightwatch*, interest in *Spoorloos* and *Nattevagten* - the "Real Things" - has grown substantially. This fact is verified by video sales of the former film and a release of the latter on DVD in 2001. That Dimension Films withheld *Nattevagten* from the US marketplace for so long is a shame, but remaking *Nattevagten* as *Nightwatch* was not that bad an idea - just poor execution.⁽⁴⁶⁾

Notes

1. Desmond Howe, "The Vanishing." *Washington Post*, February 5, 1993.
2. Shane Ham, "Nightwatch." *Journal X*, April 17, 1998: <http://www.journalx.com/reviews/movies/m980417b.html>.
3. Of course, these two categories by no means exhaust the remake phenomenon. For a helpful "Preliminary Taxonomy" of remake categories, see Robert Eberwein, "Remakes and Cultural Studies," in *Play It Again, Sam: Retakes on Remakes*, ed. Andrew Horton and Stuart Y. McDougal. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998: 28-30.
4. This claim is confirmed by Stuart Y. McDougal. See his "The Director Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock Remakes Himself," in *Play It Again, Sam: Retakes on Remakes*, ed. Andrew Horton and Stuart Y. McDougal. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998: 52.
5. Tim Krabbé, *The Vanishing*. Translated from the Dutch by Claire Nicolas White. New York: Random House, 1993: 44.
6. Krabbé, 102.
7. The "Golden Egg" of the book's title is a reference to a nightmare of Saskia's (later shared by Rex) about being trapped in a golden egg, all alone, floating through space for eternity.
8. Hal Hinson, "The Vanishing. [Spoorloos]." *Washington Post*, March 8, 1991. Het gouden ei also "tells the same story from two points of view," but the narrative structure is definitely less complex than that of Spoorloos (perhaps because the book is so short, only 103-odd pages).
9. It should be noted, however, that in Krabbé's novel a subtle "doubling" is set up between Rex and Raymond. For example, we learn that both men got spontaneous, non-sexual erections when they are excited, and both men have advanced knowledge of the sciences (Raymond is a chemistry teacher, Rex writes articles on mathematicians). See Steven Jay Schneider and Kevin Sweeney, "Genre Bending and Gender Bonding in Dutch Horror Cinema," in *Horror International*, ed. Steven Jay Schneider and Tony Williams. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002.
10. Janet Maslin, "Review/Film; How Evil Can One Person Be?" *The New York Times*, January 25, 1991: Section C, Page 8, Column 1. This is an interesting comment considering the self-conscious construction and

constructed-ness of *Spoorloos*' narrative. It would be worthwhile comparing Sluizer's film to Erol Morris' documentary, *The Thin Blue Line*, which came out the same year and is similarly stylized.

11. Desmond Howe, "The Vanishing. [Spoorloos]" *Washington Post*, March 8, 1991.

12. Maslin 1991.

13. Roger Ebert, "The Vanishing. [Spoorloos]." *Chicago Sun Times*, January 25, 1991.

14. Steve Murray, "Vanishing act makes Lambs look tame." *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, December 27, 1991: Section D, Page 1. Along the same lines, Spoorloos warrants comparison with Donald Cammell's vastly underrated serial killer film, *White of the Eye* (USA, 1986). This latter picture, which is also based on a novel, and which also pays homage to Hitchcock (*Psycho* in particular), effects a similarly dramatic hermeneutic shift when the killer's identity is revealed to the audience two-thirds of the way through. For more on *White of the Eye*, see Steven Jay Schneider, "Killing in Style: The Aestheticization of Violence in Donald Cammell's *White of the Eye*." *Scope: An Online Journal of Film Studies*, June 2001: <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/film/journal/articles/killing-in-style.htm>.

15. Hinson 1991.

16. Tim Murray, "Nightwatch. Ole Bornedal." Liner notes from the UK video release of *Nattevagten*. Tartan Video, 1996.

17. Andy Black, "Progressive Horror: Transcending Genre Boundaries: *Nightwatch* and *Mute Witness*." In *Necronomicon: The Journal of Horror and Erotic Cinema*, Book Two, ed. Andy Black. London: Creation Books, 1998: 160.

18. Lisa Nesselson, "Nightwatch (*Nattevagten*)." *Variety*. May 30, 1994-June 5, 1994: 46.

19. Damian Cannon, "Nightwatch (1994) (aka *Nattevagten*)." *Movie Reviews UK*, 1997: <http://www.film.unet.com/Movies/Reviews/Nightwatch.html>.

20. Braynt Frazer, "Nattevagten (1994)." Review posted to the Internet Movie Database web site, 1994: <http://us.imdb.com/Reviews/29/2980>. On this note, there is a scene near the end of the film in which Kalinka, bound and gagged, crawls along the floor over piles of broken glass – a true *Die Hard* (1988) moment.

21. Ebert 1991. In this respect, both *Spoorloos* and *Nattevagten* have something important in common with *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. Consider the tagline of the 1956 version of Hitchcock's film: "A little knowledge can be a deadly thing!"

22. Murray 1996.

23. See Steven Jay Schneider, "Kevin Williamson and the Rise of the Neo-Stalker." *Post Script: Essays in Film and the Humanities* 19.2, 2000: 73-87.

24. Roger Ebert, "Nightwatch." *Chicago Sun Times*, 1998: http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert_reviews/1998/04/041704.1

25. We learn during the course of the film that the letters in her can be rearranged to spell "vanished." Cute, and of course completely unbelievable.

26. Susan Wloszczyna, "Play it again, Pierre / Foreign Films: Remade in the USA." *Life*, February 3, 1993: 2.

27. These include Barney's voice getting recorded on Jeff's answering machine, Jeff's senile neighbor remembering Barney's license plate number, and Rita's figuring out the password to Jeff's computer (incredibly, "Diane Shaver" is an anagram for "are vanished").

28. For further discussion of this tendency in regards to Gus Van Sant's 1998 remake of *Psycho*, See Steven Jay Schneider, "Van Sant the Provoca(u)teur." *Hitchcock Annual*, forthcoming 2001-2002.

29. Hal Hinson, "The Vanishing." *Washington Post*, February 5, 1993.

30. Roger Ebert, "The Vanishing." *Chicago Sun Times*, February 5, 1993; B.D.J., "A Disappearing Act Gets

the Hollywood Treatment.” *Maclean’s*, Feb. 15, 1993: 55.

31. Ned Daigle, “Reviews: The Vanishing (1993).” *Bad Movie Night: For the Movies That Are pure @#&Z!!!*: http://www.hit-n-run.com/cgi_bin/read_review.cgi?review=49662_wyldf

32. Adam Mars-Jones, “Now you see it, now you don’t; Adam Mars-Jones reviews George Sluizer’s second stab at *The Vanishing*.” *The Independent* (London), June 11, 1993: 22.

33. Daigle 1993. Cf. Ebert: “Now we have an American version [of *Spoorloos*], with an ending that is an insult to the intelligence, and also, by implication, to American audiences” (1993).

34. Mimi Avins, “A Dutch Director Trafficks In a Bit of Deja Voodoo.” *The New York Times*, February 14, 1993: Section 2, Page 20, Column 4; Arts & Leisure Desk.

35. Avins 1993.

36. The success of *Se7en* (1995), with its resolutely unconventional/non-Hollywood ending, provides a case in point here, as does *The Sixth Sense* (1999).

37. In retrospect, it is unfortunate for Dimension that they didn’t just sit on *Nightwatch* another year or so, until after the release of George Lucas’ blockbuster smash, *Star Wars, Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (1999). McGregor’s career benefited immensely from his role in this film as the young Obi-Wan Kenobi.

38. This narrative convention – of a murder scene taking place prior to the film’s opening credits – can be traced at least as far back as the original *Halloween* (1978).

39. Robert Horton, “Mayhem in the Morgue.” *Film.com* Review: <http://www.film.com/film-review/1998/10412/18/default-review.html>

40. Though it should be noted that McGregor looks extraordinarily like Coster-Waldau, the original Martin.

41. Leonard Klady, “Nightwatch.” *Daily Variety*, April 13, 1998: 2

42. Ham, 1.

43. Charles Taylor, “Nightwatch.” *Salon*. April 17, 1998: 1-3

44. Avins 1993, 2

45. Jack Garner, “Vanishing Cries Out for the Hitchcock Touch.” *Gannett News Service*, February 4, 1993

46. A shorter version of this essay was read at The 27th Annual Conference on Literature & Film, held at Florida State University (Tallahassee) on January 24-46, 2002. My thanks to Steffen Hantke, Christopher Sharrett and Jan Uhde for their support and helpful feedback.

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