



Review of *Exposing Vulnerability: Self-Mediation in Scandinavian Films by Women*

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Abstract

This review assesses Adriana Margareta Dancus's *Exposing Vulnerability* (Intellect, 2019), which argues that first-person filmmaking by Scandinavian women mobilises vulnerability as an aesthetic, ethical, and political force, cultivating spectatorship that oscillates between intimacy and distance. Through close readings of *Good Girl*, *The Reunion*, *Ida's Diary*, *Sami Blood*, and *Fragility*, Dancus links formal strategies—collage, haptic visuality, long takes—to consent, care, and circulation across public spheres. The review credits the book's careful mapping of self-mediation as public address and its nuanced account of exposure becoming ethical encounter, while noting limits around audience heterogeneity and Scandinavian scope. Overall, it offers a teachable framework for courses on documentary ethics, feminist media, and Nordic cinema.

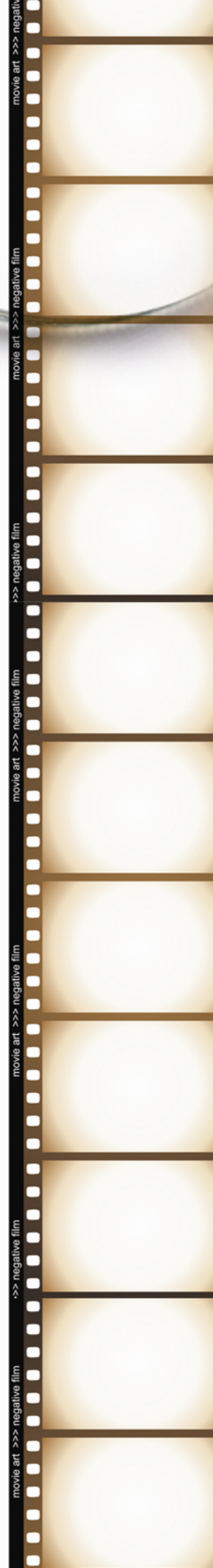
Keywords: vulnerability; self-mediation; spectatorship; ethics; Scandinavia



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Review of *Exposing Vulnerability: Self-Mediation in Scandinavian Films by Women*

Sinem Yankı Özcan

Adriana Margareta Dancus's monograph offers a lucid and tightly argued account of how contemporary Scandinavian women directors mobilise first-person filmmaking to stage vulnerability as an aesthetic, ethical, and political force. Building on her earlier article on *Good Girl* and an interview with Anne Haugsgjerd, as well as the later open-access anthology she co-edited on vulnerability in Scandinavian arts, Dancus situates filmic self-mediation at the intersection of personal exposure and public address (Dancus 2016; 2020a; Dancus, Hyvönen & Karlsson 2020). The book's central wager is both straightforward and ambitious: when women filmmakers in the Nordic region turn the camera toward themselves and their intimate worlds, they do not simply "confess." They construct viewing situations that recalibrate responsibility between the filmed subject, the filmmaker, and the spectator, and thus reconfigure what counts as ethical spectatorship.

From the outset, *Exposing Vulnerability* punctures the familiar hygge imaginary of a frictionless Nordic welfare state. Rather than a space of seamless care, Dancus finds ambivalence: bureaucratic regimes that promise relief but also normalisation; social demands for happiness that produce exhaustion; a pedagogy of wellness that polices its own limits.

Conceptually, she draws on “form–effect” thinking (how formal choices activate particular spectatorial dispositions), while engaging debates in affect theory and ethics. Three guiding questions structure the volume: How is vulnerability imagined and staged? How do those stagings travel in the public sphere? And how might they function as ethical resources for viewers? Her answer—developed across six case-driven chapters—is that self-mediating films by Scandinavian women fashion an engaged spectatorship oscillating between intimacy and distance, confession and critique, therapy and politics.

The opening chapter on Solveig Melkeraaen’s *Flink pike/Good Girl* (2014) is emblematic of Dancus’s method. She tracks how the film’s collage of ballerina fantasies and raw footage of electroconvulsive therapy generates productive friction between control and loss of control, agency and surrender. The reading is persuasive because it remains formally attentive—editing rhythms, framing strategies, shifts between enactment and documentation—while never losing sight of the public horizon of reception. For Dancus, this is not just one woman’s treatment journey; it is a dramatisation of the “cost of happiness” as a social demand and of the ambivalence embedded in care regimes. The chapter models the book’s recurring move: link micro-formal detail to macro-ethical stakes without moralising or pathologising the subject on screen.

A particularly strong intervention arrives in the discussion of parental authorship and child privacy in Aslaug Holm's *Brothers* (2015), placed in dialogue with Doug Block's *The Kids Grow Up* (2009). Here Dancus probes the parental camera as a "soft surveillance" apparatus that can turn domestic intimacy into a testing ground for documentary ethics. The analysis is at its sharpest when it ties film form—duration, framing, repetition—to questions of consent, motivation, and the temporal structure of family life. Dancus also gestures to the afterlives of such images in platformed media ecologies, where circulation can exceed authorial intention and where the filmed children's future selves become stakeholders in a record they did not fully choose. The chapter's comparative move—Nordic material read alongside a U.S. counterpart—helps clarify what is regionally specific (welfare-state imaginaries, trust in public institutions) and what is transnational (platform logics, archival anxiety).

If *Brothers* turns on the ethics of looking within the family, the chapter on Anna Odell's *Återträffen/The Reunion* (2013) reframes bullying not as a discrete plot problem but as a viewing problem. Through long takes that deny conciliatory resolution and through a two-part structure that exposes the artifice of social performance, Odell implicates the audience in the dynamics the film stages. Dancus charts this implication with admirable restraint: there is no scolding of the spectator, only a demonstration of how the film positions viewers to register

their complicities and evasions. The strength of the account lies in how it connects frustration and discomfort to ethical labour: the time the film “withholds” is also the time it grants spectators to re-position themselves.

Equally compelling is Dancus’s reading of August B. Hanssen’s *Ida’s Diary* (2014), which she treats as a case in “haptic visuality.” The film’s blurred focus, chiaroscuro, and jump cuts do not aestheticise self-harm but solicit embodied empathy while resisting spectacularisation. The ethical tightrope is thin; Dancus argues that the film matters pedagogically, yet she also acknowledges risks of misreading for vulnerable viewers. Across these chapters, the book demonstrates a critical vocabulary nimble enough to describe form (texture, motion, fragmentation) while still keeping ethical stakes in view.

The penultimate chapters widen the lens: to Sámi identity in Amanda Kernell’s *Sameblod/Sami Blood* (2016), Ellen-Astri Lundby’s *Suddenly Sami* (2009), and Yvonne Thomassen’s *My Family Portrait* (2013); and to migration and panic in Ahang Bashi’s *Fragility* (2016). In the Sámi cluster, Dancus traces tensions between twentieth-century racial anthropology and contemporary genetic imaginaries, showing how these films refuse both biological determinism and an abstract politics of pride. Instead, they stage identity as an ongoing negotiation among language, memory, and institutional violence. In *Fragility*, Bashi’s

blend of dark humour, clinical encounters, and family dynamics becomes what Dancus aptly calls a “solidarity-oriented symphony,” where panic is not merely a clinical symptom but an idiom for social belonging—and unbelonging. These readings are strongest when they foreground how formal choices (camera distance, use of voiceover, sound design) make space for both vulnerability and critique.

One of the book’s most productive through-lines is its account of publicity. Dancus is attentive to how first-person films travel: festival circuits, broadcast environments, classroom settings, and digital platforms. She thus avoids reducing “self-mediation” to a purely autobiographical gesture. Instead, she treats it as a relational practice that organises encounters among multiple publics—medical, familial, Indigenous, diasporic—each with distinct protocols of witnessing. This emphasis on publics leads to a welcome engagement with pedagogy: *Exposing Vulnerability* repeatedly shows how these films can be taught without either collapsing into therapeutic discourse or evacuating their political charge.

If the book has a blind spot, it concerns the heterogeneity of viewers. At times the analyses lean toward a universal “we” whose ethical awakening is presumed to be broadly shared. Yet experiences of vulnerability are stratified by social position and embodied history. For instance, second-generation immigrant viewers may register *Fragility*’s panic sequences not primarily as

an invitation to solidarity but as triggers that reopen embodied memories; older or disabled viewers may encounter *Ida's Diary's* haptic textures through different sensory economies. A brief coda acknowledging such plurality—and offering concrete strategies for differentiated teaching contexts—would strengthen an already compelling account of the films' address.

A second limitation is geographic spread. While Norway and Sweden justifiably anchor much of the discussion, parallel first-person practices by women directors in Denmark, Finland, and Iceland would have enriched the comparative frame and further tested the book's conceptual lexicon across diverse production cultures. The omission does not undermine the argument, and Dancus does not claim exhaustiveness; still, moments of Scandinavian cross-reference could have been extended into fuller case studies to probe, for example, how Danish public-service infrastructures or Finnish funding ecologies differently inflect self-mediated vulnerability.

These reservations notwithstanding, *Exposing Vulnerability* delivers a sustained argument for understanding vulnerability not as deficit but as a scene of relation—one that binds the intimate and the institutional and makes spectators answerable to what they see. Its scholarly contribution is threefold. First, it consolidates a corpus of Scandinavian women's first-person films that has often been discussed piecemeal, offering a coherent map for future research.

Second, it provides a method of ethically alert close reading that refuses both voyeuristic fascination and sanitising uplift. Third, it synthesises debates in affect theory, documentary ethics, and feminist media studies into a pragmatic toolkit readily adaptable for classroom use. For scholars and students of Scandinavian cinema, documentary studies, and feminist film theory, the book will be immediately useful; for instructors programming these works, it offers a teachable pathway through films that are frequently screened but not always confidently framed.

Dancus's achievement is to show how first-person cinema can convert exposure into encounter, and encounter into a dispersed yet tangible politics of care. Her guiding premise—that form is not decorative but constitutive of ethical relation—reminds us that the ethics of looking are made, moment by moment, in the very textures of the image and the times of its unfolding. In an era when platforms incentivise confession while often foreclosing care, *Exposing Vulnerability* models how to read with attention, caution, and generosity. It will circulate fruitfully across film and media studies, gender studies, Scandinavian studies, and visual culture—and it merits a place on syllabi that seek to align analytic precision with ethical responsibility.

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