

Pelle Erobreren

("Pelle the Conqueror")

Denmark / Sweden : 1987 : dir. Bille August

: Per Holst / Danish Film Institute / Svensk Filmindustri : 160 min

prod: Per Holst : scr: Bille August : dir.ph.: Jörgen Persson

[Pelle Hvenegaard; Troels Asmussen](#)

Max Von Sydow; Erik Paaske; Björn Granath; Kristina Tornqvist; Morten Jorgensen;
Alex Strøbye; Astrid Villaume; John Wittig; Anne Lise Hirsch Bjerrum; Sofie Grabol

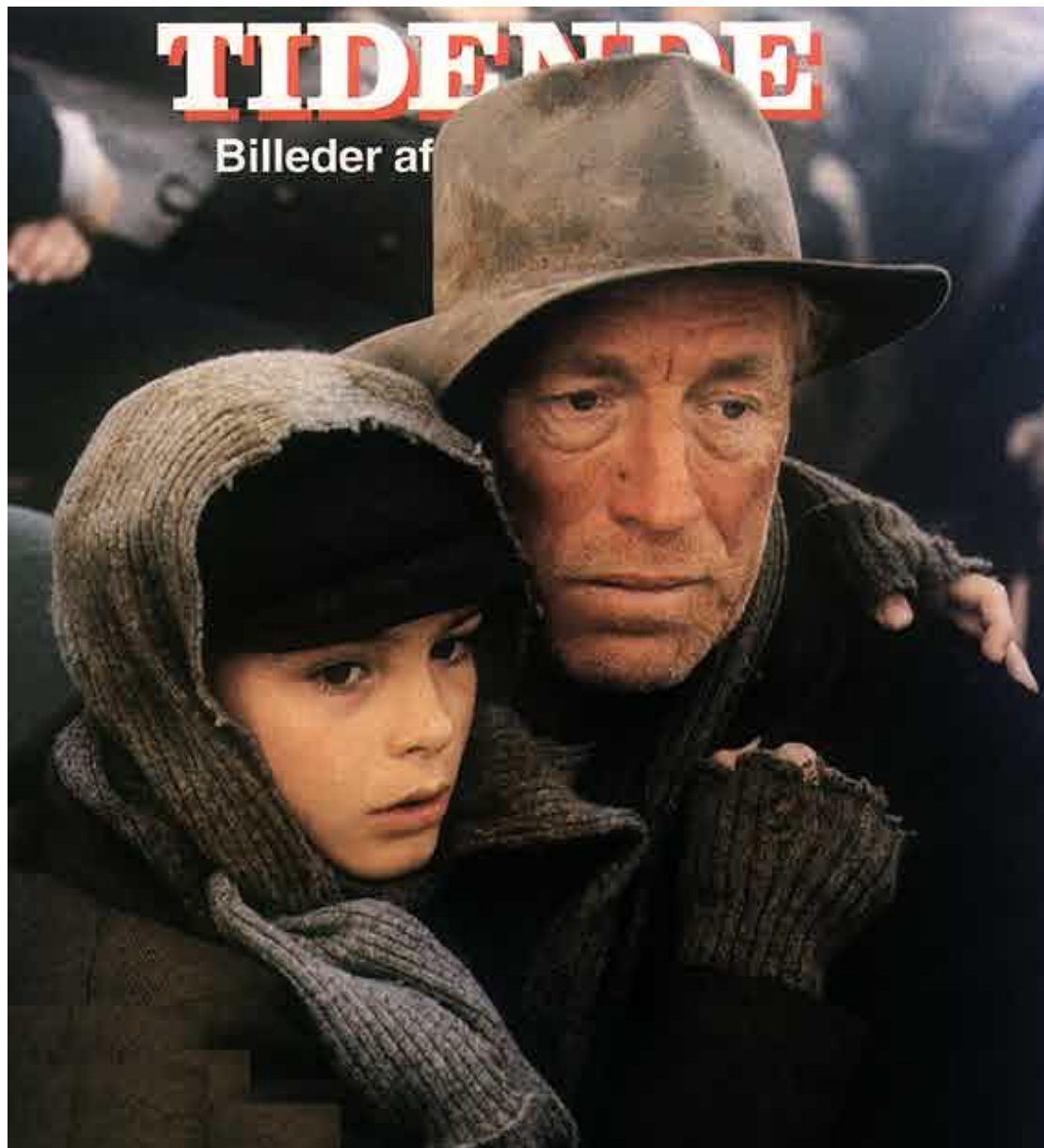
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One of the fifty best films I have ever seen – and certainly one of the truest portraits of impoverished rural childhood in all of world cinema, it deservedly won the Palme d'Or at Cannes.

Source: indeterminate website



O happy immigrants. Lasse and Pelle find their illusions of milk and honey do not survive 24 hours in their new country. An ageing illiterate farmhand must content with penury and humiliation. Source: indeterminate website

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 1996 review:

“Wonderful 19th-century drama about a humble old widower (Von Sydow) and his young son (Hvenegaard), Swedish immigrants in Denmark. They are simple folk with simple, modest dreams, yet they must valiantly struggle for survival in a world rife with everyday cruelties and injustices. The life-sustaining closeness between father and son is especially poignant. Martin Andersen Nexø's four-volume novel (only a fraction of which is depicted here) was adapted by the director. Oscar winner as Best Foreign Film. ***1/2”

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

“In the early 1900s, the young son of a Swedish immigrant worker enduring hardship on a Danish farm learns to be self-sufficient. Winner of the Palme D'Or at the Cannes Film Festival in 1988, it matches an epic scope with domestic detail in a finely acted, beautifully photographed movie. It was released on video in two versions: one subtitled, one dubbed by American actors¹. Dir.ph: Jorgen Persson. Academy Award: Best Foreign Film; Academy Award nomination: Max Von Sydow *** ”

¹ God save us!



*Desperate video marketing – the half naked blonde dead centre of the jacket artwork is a very minor character, and she doesn't get any more naked than this. Still, we **must** have a woman on the cover, eh?*

Bloomsbury Foreign Film Guide review:

“At the turn of the century, Lasse (Max Von Sydow), a widowed farmer, and his nine-year old son Pelle (Hvenegaard), leave poverty-stricken Sweden for what they hope will be a better life on the Danish Baltic island of Bornholm. But the father finds himself little more than a slave as a cowherd, while his son suffers at the rural school. Pelle decides to leave and conquer the world. Director August, refusing American money and the offer to make the film in English, settled for making only the first part (in Danish) of Nobel Prizewinner Martin Andersen Nexoe's best-selling four-volume novel. The result is a stylistically old-fashioned, beautiful-to-look-at, unsentimental but moving epic of exploitation, with a cast of characters that includes the staples of period soap – the farm owner's alcoholic wife, a cruel foreman and a seduced and abandoned servant girl. The performances from Von Sydow and Hvenegaard are

outstanding. Best Film Cannes 1988. Best Foreign Film Oscar 1988 ”

Classic Foreign Films – From 1960 to Today review:

“After film adaptation rights to *"Pelle the Conqueror"*, the four-volume autobiographical novel by Martin Andersen Nexø (1869-1954), had returned to Denmark in 1983, Danish director Bille August (1948-) set to work creating a screenplay. Since this masterpiece spans many years, it was decided to focus on the first tome, *"Childhood"*, which relates the misfortunes of Lasse Karlsson, a poor, illiterate, aging Swedish widower, and his little boy, Pelle, who migrate to Bornholm, the easternmost island in Denmark, in the late 1870s with the dream of a better life. But the reality they confront is one of insufferable hardship and exploitation. "I see this mainly as an emotional story between a lonely father and his son," August said of his third feature. "It's also a story of how people survive in an extremely cruel world." The director stressed, "Despite Lasse's humiliation, he is able to give his son so much love, which has a healing effect.... The film deals with a problem that is still relevant: how immigrants and refugees are mistreated."

While thousands of schoolboys were tested for the role of Pelle – which fell to Pelle Hvenegaard, whose mother had presciently named him after the protagonist of Andersen Nexø's tetralogy, which she had read during her pregnancy – the great international actor Max von Sydow was already cast in August's mind as Lasse when he started the scenario. Voted Best Danish Film of 1987, this extraordinary movie went on to triumph at Cannes and Hollywood. Expertly directed, marvelously acted, exquisitely photographed, the popular and memorable **"PELLE THE CONQUEROR"** is a picture of universal and epic dimensions.

The film opens on a vessel heading to Bornholm. Lasse (Max von Sydow) assures his son, Pelle (Pelle Hvenegaard), of the comfortable life they'll soon find in Denmark. When they land, the man is quickly passed over because of his age. Later, a gruff manager (Erik Paaske) of Stone Farm hires the tipling father and child for trifling wages. Installed in a section of a barn, they assume the toilsome labour of cattlemen. The boy befriends Rud (Troels Asmussen), the natural son of the lecherous owner Kongstrup (Axel Strobye) and the Sow (Lena Pia Bernhardtsson). Pelle is bullied by the trainee (Morten Jorgensen), who

whips and mortifies him. Lasse promises to punish the arrogant youth, but to the son's disappointment cringes before him. Lasse admits that he commands no respect, yet adds encouragingly, "You're still young Pelle. You can conquer the world." The boy buys brandy surreptitiously for the unhappy, alcoholic Mrs. Kongstrup (Astrid Villaume). A fiercely independent Erik (Bjorn Granath), a Swedish farmhand constantly abused by the sadistic manager, instills in Pelle his longing to leave in two years: "I'm going out to conquer the world!" The lad exclaims, "Take me with you!"

Lasse asks Karna (Anne Lise Hirsch Bjerrum), a fellow worker, for her hand in marriage; however, she replies that he's too old. Rebelling against the manager's badgering, Erik threatens him with his scythe. In the ensuing altercation, the stone weight of the water pump falls and hits the Swede on the back of his head, leaving him permanently brain damaged. Pelle makes a friend of Mrs. Olsen (Karen Wegener), whose captain husband has been gone for a year. Lasse starts courting the favorably inclined woman. At the fair Kongstrup seduces Signe (Sofie Grabol), his wife's niece, who had been staying with them. When, pregnant, she abruptly and sobbingly departs, her embittered aunt castrates the libertine. Pelle is pummeled by his disapproving schoolmates for his father's liaison with the seeming widow. Learning that Captain Olsen came back, a disheartened Lasse tries to hang himself, then gets drunk. Mrs. Kongstrup offers the position of trainee to Pelle; a delighted Lasse thinks this might lead to foreman. The boy sees the manager drag an unwilling, mentally defective Erik away in a carriage. Possibly fearing a similar fate, his thirst for adventure mounting, Pelle insists they must leave the farm immediately. Frightened and exhausted, Lasse in tears informs his beloved son that he cannot leave with him. The couple bid farewell and the stalwart Pelle embarks alone on his life's journey.

Though Lasse – a loving father – is weak-willed, young Pelle has the strength and courage to go off on his own. In a wonderfully nuanced performance, expressing a vast range of feelings, Max von Sydow incarnates the impoverished Lasse. The handsome Pelle Hvenegaard makes the hero convincing and appealing. August transferred the classic novel to the screen with great devotion and skill and demonstrated his enormous talent for rich characterisation and compelling narration.

Avoiding both sentimentality and nostalgia, the director emphasised, "We wanted to show the cruelty as well as the beauty." Although the political aspects are kept in the distance, we cannot fail to perceive the terrible plight of the farmworkers, their oppression and lack of justice. August realistically evokes the period down to the flies buzzing around the sleeping Pelle.

From his striking opening of the gradual approach of a steamer through the fog, followed by tableaux of ravishing beauty, Jongen Persson's photography is simply breathtaking. Stefan Nilsson contributed a haunting score. Shots of a graceful schooner, remote and dreamlike, which recur throughout the film, serve as a visual symbol of escape; following a beating by the angry boys for his father's affair, Pelle determinedly carves one on a post in the barn. His leave-taking is splendid: in a long shot Lasse and Pelle, carrying his bundle, pace through a snowy field before sunrise – two dark silhouettes against a white background. They pause. In a close shot the father says, "Next time we see each other maybe they'll be a proper home for you, Pelle." The lad says, "Tell Karna goodbye, " and extends his hand to Lasse. When the man takes it, the boy states tersely, "Good-bye, Papa, thank you. " The parent leans over and kisses him. The son heads off. Lasse walks a few feet, turns, and waves. In a long shot accompanied by Nilsson's lovely music, we observe Pelle advancing, veering around, and waving to his father, who does the same. In another long shot the youth comes to the beach and hurries along to his destiny. Much of the emotion in this wrenching sequence the characters cannot express verbally. A poignant and deeply moving film, "**PELLE THE CONQUEROR**" is a major achievement.

HONOURS: Best Film, Cannes Film Festival (1988); Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film; in addition Max von Sydow nominated for Best Actor (1988)."

The Critics' Film Guide review:

"An illiterate Swedish immigrant worker (Max Von Sydow) and his young son (Pelle Hvenegaard) struggle to survive on an inhospitable Danish farm. Yet another critical success that was not a hit with the public. "**PELLE**"s uncommerciality lies not so much in its length (over two and a half hours) as in its almost total lack of humour. Despite a

mildly optimistic ending, the prevailing atmosphere is one of grinding pessimism and repeated blows administered by a sadistic fate. The film also contains one of the most splendidly gloomy lines in Scandinavian cinema: "Herring, herring, herring! Every single day!" Fortunately, the negativity is offset by the film's unflinching, unsentimental willingness to portray real human emotions, helped by truly remarkable ensemble acting and a magnificent performance by Max Von Sydow. **7/10** "

MIXED:

"August's film comes on at times like an overgrown soap-opera. But handsome photography and rich characterisation work their spell, and Von Sydow is the film's lantern-jawed lynchpin."

– Harlan Kennedy, **Film Review**

PRO:

"Imagine a Scandinavian Dickens novel, brought to the screen with its detail, richness of character, and passion for social reform reimagined in sweeping, urgent visual terms, and you'll have an idea of the epic amplitude of **"PELLE"**. Grand, deep-breathing, profoundly humanistic, **"PELLE"** is a magnificent achievement." – Jay Carr

"An almost perfect example of narrative cinema, lovingly made, full of emotion, sentiment and compassion."

– Sandy Lieberman, **Film Yearbook**

"One of those rare Foreign Oscar-winners that actually deserves the award." – **Rose**

Radio Times Guide to Films review:

"Although it deals with turn-of-the-century despair in Denmark, director Billie August's adaptation of the first part of Nobel-Prize winner Martin Andersen Nexø's four-volume novel is life-affirming stuff thanks to Max Von Sydow's towering performance as a slave-driven cowherd and Pelle Hvenegaard's cowering contribution as the young son who learns to stand up to adversity. So many strands of conflict are unravelled it's hard to keep track, but the sincerity of purpose and the rigour of narrative binds us to it hard and fast. This 19th century drama went on to win the Best Foreign Film Oscar and also found favour at Cannes, where it received the Palme d'Or. In Danish with English subtitles. **** "

Rating the Movies (1990) review:

"Absorbing drama about a poor Swedish widower (von Sydow) who comes to Denmark with his young son, Pelle (Hvenegaard), seeking a better life. Their lot as farmhands is bitterly hard, but they continue to strive to get ahead. The vivid vignettes of their experiences – of cruelty and compassion, disappointment and hope – make the drama engrossing despite its length. Von Sydow delivers a memorable performance. Originally filmed in Danish and Swedish. Academy Award: Best Foreign Film. Nomination: Max von Sydow, Best Actor **** "

The Time Out Film Guide review:

"The moralistic plot of August's literary adaptation (it's based on the first part of Martin Andersen Nexø's four-volume novel) revolves around the adventures of turn-of-the-century Swedish emigrants Lasse (Von Sydow) and his son Pelle (Hvenegaard), who seek their fortunes in Denmark. But life's no better abroad, with employment and lodgings secured under back-breaking conditions at a large farm. Underdog labourers find comfort in each other's company, while their rich employers in the big house can trust no-one.

Against the backdrop of the changing seasons, wide-eyed Pelle is on hand to witness relationships form and flounder. Despite occasional lapses into sentimentality, the film is saved by its performances and its uncluttered depiction of harsh, impoverished lives. Von Sydow towers above the rest of the cast with an immensely moving, tender depiction of a man cowed by age and servitude. Some dramatic intensity is nevertheless dissipated by the sheer number of conflicts contained within the two-and-a-half hours running time."

Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

"Billie August's superb drama casts Max Von Sydow as a Swedish widower who takes his young son to Denmark in the hope of finding a better life. Once there, they must endure even harder times. In Danish and Swedish with

English subtitles. Unrated, the film has nudity, violence and profanity² ***** ”

The Virgin Film Guide review:

“Billie August, the director of **"TWIST AND SHOUT"** (86), the most commercially successful Danish film ever, followed that teen drama with this Swedish/Danish co-production set in the 1890s and starring Max Von Sydow as an impoverished Swedish widower who moves to Bornholm, a Danish island in the Baltic, hoping to improve his lot in life. He takes along his seven-year old son, Hvenegaard, but instead of finding a better life, they are reduced to virtual slavery. A grim story of deprived and depraved humanity unfolds, focusing on both the oppressed and the oppressors. An Oscar-winner for Best Foreign Film, this is an often brutal tale which is boosted by a powerful performance from Von Sydow. He earned a Best Actor Oscar nomination, losing to Dustin Hoffman for **"RAIN MAN"**. *** ”

Souvenir flyer from the **Curzon Mayfair** cinema, London:

“Winner of the 1989 Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film as well as the Palme D'Or at the 1988 Cannes Film Festival, **"PELLE THE CONQUEROR"** is the moving story of Lasse (Max Von Sydow) and his son Pelle (Pelle Hvenegaard) who emigrate from Sweden to Denmark in search of new dreams and an escape from poverty. The performances of Max Von Sydow and the young Pelle Hvenegaard won them Best Actor and Best Young Actor respectively at the European Film Awards 1988. Max Von Sydow was also nominated for Best Actor at the 1989 Academy Awards.”

AMCTV.com website review:

“Winner of the Best Foreign-Language Oscar in 1989, this sweeping, heart-wrenching drama stars Max von Sydow and Pelle Hvenegaard as a poor Swedish farmer and his son Pelle who emigrate to Denmark in the 19th century in search of a better life. There they find working conditions even worse than in their homeland, and embark on a grim existence of indentured servitude that drives Pelle in search of

independence and a life of freedom. Von Sydow gleaned an Oscar nomination for his affecting nuanced performance.

In an interesting coincidence, young actor Pelle Hvenegaard of **"PELLE THE CONQUEROR"** (1987) was named by his parents after the four-volume Danish novel *"Pelle"* by Martin Anderson Nexø that is the basis for the screenplay.”

CVMC website review:

“A Swedish father and his son (Pelle Hvenegaard), roughly twelve years of age, set sail for Denmark with the hope for a better life. Once there, they find themselves little more than slaves working on a farm run by a cruel manager. The rest of the film is divided into three acts. The first involves a not so accepted romance between the manager's son and a "common" girl. Part two focuses on a strong-willed farmhand being pushed into an attempted revolt against his employer. The final act follows Pelle's dad as he courts an older widow with the hope to find love and a better life for him and his boy. All of the acts are seen through Pelle's eyes, and the lad's life and adventures are interwoven throughout. Bleak and tragic, yes, but a fantastic story full of human spirit. Max von Sydow, starring as Pelle's father, claimed this was his favourite role and does a wonderful job as a caring but cowardly old man. Directed by Billie August; based on Martin Anderson Nexø's novel. This one should not be missed!

Rated NR: adult themes [sic]; brief/moderate nudity; sexual themes; violence; brief profanity

Language: Danish (also some Swedish) (with English subtitles)

Categories: Best Buddies, Boy Films, Little to Preteen, Boy Films, Adolescent, Bullies & Teasing ”

foreignfilms.com website review:

“Lasse and his son Pelle leaves the hardships in the south of Sweden to go to the Danish island Bornholm. Getting a job at a farm is no problem, but as foreigners they are treated as lower than life. Pelle adopts quickly [sic] and learns the new language, but his father dreams of one day going back.

Awards: 1989 Academy Awards, Best Foreign Language Film; 1988 Cannes Film Festival, Palme d'Or ”

² *Only the boy himself is ever seen nude, and what is a "profanity" in Danish?*

1worldfilms.com website review:

"A young boy and his aging father emigrate to Denmark from Sweden in the 19th Century, expecting to find great riches. The father, Lassefar (Max von Sydow), promises breakfast in bed and roast pork with raisins on Sundays once they reach Denmark. The reality they discover upon reaching their destination, however, is very different. The older man, Lasse, and the young boy, Pelle (Pelle Hvenegaard) are not desirable farmhands and are cast aside by all but the lowest of farmers. The situation they finally are able to arrange is no better than the meagre existence they had known in Sweden. Slapped with this disappointment, they must still, somehow, manage to survive.

Several sub-plots are interwoven with the central plot, which is the formation of Pelle's indomitable spirit. Pelle must compensate for a father who is almost crushed by life. The film uses wide angles to achieve an affect [*sic*] of childhood wonderment and finds intriguing landscapes in this place of fragile beauty.

"PELLE THE CONQUEROR" won the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film (1989); the Bodil Award for Best Actor (Max von Sydow), Best Film (Bille August), and Best Supporting Actor (Bjorn Granath as Farmhand Erik) from the Bodil Festival (1988); The Golden Palm (Bille August) from the Cannes Film Festival (1988); the European Film Award for Best Actor (Max von Sydow) (1988); the Golden Globe for Best Foreign Language Film (1989); and the Guldbagge for Best Actor (Max von Sydow) and Best Film (1988). Max von Sydow was also nominated for an Oscar for Best Actor for his work in **"PELLE THE CONQUEROR"** (1989)."

tech.mitt.edu website review:

"Filmmakers have a notorious reputation for butchering film adaptations of famous novels, and for good reason: the process of translating a story from the written page to the silver screen consists largely of throwing away the "uncinematic" elements of the novel. Few rules are iron-clad, however, and writer-director Bille August should be congratulated for making **"PELLE EROBREREN"** ("Pelle the Conqueror") a notable exception. The main reason for his success is that he devotes no less than 150 minutes to adapting the first of four

volumes of Martin Andersen Nexø's sprawling turn-of-the-century epic. While the end result is not completely satisfying, the film nevertheless is intelligently made and stands out as a fine example of the power of luxuriantly unhurried storytelling.

The film takes place in the late 19th century and is about a young boy named Pelle Karlsson (Pelle Hvenegaard) and his aging father Lasse (Max von Sydow). They have come to Denmark with the hopes of being hired as cheap labour for the harvest season. In addition, Pelle's mother has recently died, and Lasse is looking for a place to settle down in his old age.

Because Lasse's "too old and the boy's too young," in the words of a local farmer, Lasse and Pelle are among the last to be hired. Once they are hired, the two Swedes find themselves on the bottom of the farm's social hierarchy, and they end up living in the farm's chicken coop and working from dawn to dusk with little respite or pay. The film covers several years as it chronicles their harsh existence on the farm, which is named, appropriately enough, Stone Farm.

The strengths of the film quickly become apparent as the film progresses. The opening shot of a sailing ship silently emerging from a low-lying cloud of fog perfectly sets the tone of the film. It is quiet and restrained, and yet it still presents a striking image that lingers long after the film ends. The acting consistently matches the quality of Jorgen Persson's cinematography, and the guiding hand of the director can be felt from beginning to end. New characters come in and quickly become as familiar as the leads.

One of the greatest strengths is that the film does not break up the linear flow with flashbacks or flashforwards. The flow of time seems at once natural and inexorable. It imparts a sense of watching history unfold in the present, and this in turn conveys the impression of watching a future legend being born. (Young Pelle grows to fulfil his ultimate destiny as a prominent labour organiser and leader.) Much of August's film works beneath the surface, but August neither romanticises nor obscures the material he has to work with.

But where the film leaves one unsatisfied is the direction of its narrative. Nexø published his novel in four volumes between 1906 and 1910, and August has adapted only the first part, entitled "*Childhood*." This necessarily causes

the film to seem incomplete. August has already completed a screenplay from the novel's second volume, but this is, obviously, no guarantee that the film will actually be made.

What is alarming, however, is that August told The Boston Globe that he would not consider making film versions of the third and four volumes because they are "much too political." This reluctance to address the novel's social and political concerns calls into question August's artistic judgement and does a disservice to Nexø. Nexø addressed the demands of politics as well as narrative, and to deny one half of his approach, as August's comments seem to imply, is to deny the degree to which Nexø's political concerns influenced his writing and his novel.

Nexø wrote his novel after the Industrial Revolution had spurred the emergence of Danish society from 19th century feudalism, and the lower classes were organising and agitating as the class struggle heated up. What separated Nexø, who was dedicated to socialism and abhorred violence, from other socialist writers like Upton Sinclair and Jack London, is that Nexø was able to combine both the realist and mythological literary traditions into a single straightforward style. Hence he was able to portray his characters as simple, human beings while also infusing them with the aura of mythical liberators. August's accomplishment in this film is notable and praiseworthy, but he will ultimately be judged on whether and how he fulfills his responsibility to the remainder of Nexø's novel.

August can get by with his attitude because the first volume is not as overtly political as the third or fourth. To his credit, he does have the integrity to announce in advance that he will not film the third and fourth volumes, rather than watering down or neglecting Nexø's concerns. Nevertheless, it remains questionable whether August should have filmed the first volume if he had doubts about filming the remaining ones. The title "**PELLE EROBREREN**" applies collectively to the entire four volumes, and not just the first."

– Manavendra K. Thakur

wikipedia.org website review:

"**"PELLE THE CONQUEROR"** (also known as "Pelle Erobreren") is a 1987 film in Danish and Swedish which tells the story of Danish

immigrants to Sweden who try to build a new life for themselves. It stars Pelle Hvenegaard, Max von Sydow, Erik Paaske, Björn Granath and Morten Jørgensen.

The movie was adapted by Bille August, Per Olov Enquist, Janus Billeskov Jansen, Max Lundgren and Bjarne Reuter from the novel by Martin Andersen Nexø. It was directed by August.

It won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film (Denmark) and was nominated for Best Actor in a Leading Role (Max von Sydow); it also won the Golden Palm at the Cannes Film Festival and was listed in The New York Times Guide to the Best 1000 Movies Ever Made."

Miscellaneous remarks from an unidentified Danish website:

"Up to now it always was a question how much Bille August would have to PAY ME to watch one of his movies. Ranging from 300\$ to 500\$ depending of time of the month + to keep me awake, Vedbæk Pigegarde (all girl Danish brass band) playing naked non stop + Tivoli garden (all boy Danish brass band) playing naked non stop to keep the girls awake. Or visa versa.

Who can get more boring than a movie director who likes Ingmar Bergman, "succeeded" in shooting Andersen Nexø's "**PELLE THE CONQUEROR**" without understanding a word of it (half worth understanding in the first place) and released a movie that made half the audience leave after ten minutes, because the title promised them something completely different – "**HOUSE OF SPIRITS**", a title for a horror splatter thing?

Anybody can get an Oscar or a Golden Palm by giving the jury a handsome little boy's naked arse to look at. It's the cheapest trick in the book. BUT with "**SMILLA'S SENSE OF SNOW**" he got me for the first 45 minutes or so. I rarely like the last half of any movie, so that's nothing special. Of course I didn't plan to see it, because nothing interests me less than Greenland (too cold, too many clothes on everybody) and a boy, who dies, when the movie starts, isn't much fun either. And of course I gave him ten minutes to see if he could change my mind about him – and he did! Billie August had finally learned how to make

movies. I didn't even go to the bathroom for 45 minutes. That's better than 3 Oscars, Billie!

Pelle Hvenegaard was born in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1975 and 11 years old he landed the title role in Billie August's "**PELLE THE CONQUEROR**" (in which he is supposed to be from something like 5 to 14 – so in the first half he is too old and in the second half, he is too young!) – and why he got the part, only Billie August knows – maybe because he was the only boy in Copenhagen with the same first name as the character – maybe because he was (and still is) stunningly handsome – which by the way is wrong for the part of a brat, who is supposed to grow up and become a socialist leader – fighters are always ugly in real life.

The movie got August an Oscar, Golden Palms and lots of other shit for the mantel piece – AND Pelle an award in Berlin for best young actor – although the movie stinks – Bille August never understood a word of Andersen Nexoe's book – a man who understands Ingmar Bergman understands nothing else – and socialist Nexoe is only half worth understanding in the first place – Pelle giving his only dime for whipping another boy – NEVER – in real life, he would have given it to a girl – for quite different services!

There are "a few" things that Billie August didn't understand... firstly his lack of humour made him think that Pelle and his father dream of eating roast pork with raisins in it – they don't – but when Pelle's father negotiates a job... in those days the only demand the workers could come up with was – because that was all they got – "good food, enough food and time and peace to eat it" – and then he is harassed: "Yeah, I guess you want raisins in your pork too!"

And then there is the scene, when Pelle's pants are pulled down and he is pushed out in the yard – August sees this as abusing the boy [sic] – which it wasn't, in an old Nordic tradition. First: Pelle should have been a year or two older in this scene. And it was done so that the womenfolk on the farm could see that he had become old enough to let in, if he should come-a-knocking on their window in the middle of the night! And before showing him off in ways like this – the men had "checked" him. It really all was in his own interest – if he was a natural boy [sic] anyway! ³”

³ Yes, this man's politics seem fairly revolting, but he does indicate that certain scenes in the book may

Amazon.com retail website – a sample of customer reviews (April 2003):

“"**PELLE THE CONQUEROR**" is an utterly flawless film with regards to acting, cinematography, score, storytelling, etc. It won Best Foreign Film honours at the Academy Awards and was even nominated for Best Picture. Of course, the politics of Hollywood could never have allowed it to claim that honour, otherwise a precedence [sic] would have been set of acknowledging that foreign films might be (gasp!) better than a lot of the shit Tinseltown shovels out.

Personally, I watched the Oscars that year exclusively to cheer for "**PELLE THE CONQUEROR**" and even more specifically for Max Von Sydow, who turned in the performance of a lifetime. From the moment I began watching the film to the moment it ended, I never lost my sense of absolute immersion. It was, in truth, a gruelling experience... because like so many Scandinavian films, "**PELLE**" is not a "feel good" story and doesn't have a happy ending. It doesn't have a happy beginning or middle, either. I'm straining my memory to remember a full happy minute, actually.

Max Von Sydow is so thoroughly convincing as the widower father of 12-year-old Pelle Hvenegaard that I couldn't help but bear his anguish as all his hopes for a better life for his son get trampled. Even though I was fairly young when the film came out, Von Sydow led me to understand a poor father's burden. When I saw this movie in the theatre in 1988, I was told by a friend it was "part one" and that the subsequent film would give viewers a little more resolution as young Pelle escapes to try to reach America... I waited and waited for that sequel, because I believed in these characters and wanted a better life for them; that's how powerful the film was to me.

So why only 4 stars? Because the DVD (to date -- these things sometimes change) does not contain the whole film. 22 minutes were hacked from the original to fit into American time slots, and they were inexplicably not restored when the film went to DVD. The DVD also lacks special features such as "making of," background story, director's comments, etc. that would have been

have been misinterpreted, or else convey the wrong impression because of the age disparity – a valid point.

fascinating, especially considering this is such an epic foreign film from a country American viewers know so little about.”

– Hagakure, FPO, AE US

“This movie is an excellent example of why many European films are so superior to American movies! This brilliantly realised and at times haunting story is hard to forget. After the death of his wife, Lasse and his young son Pelle migrate from Sweden to Denmark in search of a better life for themselves. However, things don't go quite according to plan. I highly advise viewing this film to find out just what does happen to them. The cinematography is beautiful, the music evocative, and the acting is flawless. Add this to your film library - you won't be sorry! ”

– Rich Byers, Gearhart, Oregon

“Moving Academy Award winning film about a Swedish widower and his son who emigrate to Denmark in the late 1800s to find work and a better life. What they find, though, is something else entirely. Brilliant performances by Max Von Sydow (an Oscar nominee for perhaps his greatest role as the widower) and 12-year-old Pelle Hvenegaard. This VHS version is in Danish with English subtitles. Max Von Sydow dubbed his own role in the English language version (an option on the DVD version). At turns heart-rending and uplifting. Outstanding cinematography, filmed on location on the Danish island of Bornholm. One gripe: the original European release of this film was 160 minutes long; 22 minutes were cut for US release. Why couldn't those 22 minutes have been restored on either the VHS or especially the DVD? Most highly recommended! ”

– Rriis, NY

NAMBLA Bulletin – vol 10/4 – media comment:

“..There was concern at the outset about working with Pelle Hvenegaard – selected from about 4,000 hopeful Pelles – but he turned out to be mature and patient.”

Videocassette – **Braveworld VHS TSV 10027** – sleeve notes:

“Few films receive the acclaim "**PELLE THE CONQUEROR**" has – an Academy Award for Best Foreign Film, Golden Palm at Cannes and an Oscar nomination for Max Von Sydow's powerful performance. "**PELLE THE CONQUEROR**" is the moving story of

a young boy starting out in a new land, a testament of courage where human will conquers all.”

"Completely absorbing" – **The Times**

"If you only see 10 films this year, "**PELLE THE CONQUEROR**" should be one of them"

– **Daily Telegraph**

"His each and every frame is a joy" – **Variety**

"They haven't made recent movies as big as this" – **Mail on Sunday**

"It's a must-see movie" – **What's On**

Cast:

Pelle Karlsson**Pelle Hvenegaard**
Lasse KarlssonMax Von Sydow
ManagerErik Paaske
ErikBjörn Granath
KongstrupAxel Strøbye
Mrs KongstrupAstrid Villaume
TraineeMorten Jørgensen
Rud**Troels Asmussen**
AnnaKristina Törnqvist
SchoolmasterJohn Wittig
Mrs OlsenKaren Wegener
Miss SigneSofie Gråbøl
KarnaAnne Lise Hirsch Bjerrum
Niels KøllerLars Simonsen
Ole KøllerBuster Larsen
The SowLena Pia Bernhardtsson
DoctorTroels Munk

And: Nis Bank-Mikkelsen, Vilhelm Weber, Merete Holst Hansen, Mogens Dester, Tine Stochholm, Finn Knygberg, Inge Marie From, Henrik Hansen, Jytte Strandberg, Jørgen Hansen, Nina Christoffersen, Finn Olsen, Lone Svendsen, Thyge Andersen, Birthe Jensen, Henning Franck Hansen, Thomas Hansen, Lars Petersen, Karen Bjørkøe, Espen Hegnet Knudsen, Sascha Lystrup Andersen, Jeppe Nicolaisen, Rikke Hacke, Oliver Grumme, Henriette Nielsen, Benjamin Holck Henriksen, Henriette Nolsøe, Thure Lindhardt, Ingeborg Holten, David Heilman, Daniel Roosen

[no listing – and why on earth not? – in “Children in the Movies”, “The Films of the Eighties”, “Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89”, “TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995” or “Variety Movie Guide 1993”]

Radio Times listings:

“Pelle and his father Lasse arrive in Denmark, expecting a land of plenty. But Lasse's dreams prove hollow and he and Pelle are reduced to slaving as farm hands. In Danish with English subtitles. **** ”

“Stylish turn-of-the-century drama of dreams and dashed hopes, which won an Oscar for Best Foreign Film.”

First a word to these critics: Look at the title of the film. Look at the film itself. Look at that title once again. And now look at your reviews! Max Von Sydow is an excellent actor, as none would deny, but must we stand in awe of him because he's worked with Bergman? This film is about a boy's experiences, not his father's. Hvenegaard is on screen almost continually, yet to read most of the above synopses one could be forgiven for thinking he has a minor supporting role. The "Time Out Film Guide" review (typically of their attitude to children) makes him out to be a bystander! Von Sydow's performance "towers above the rest of the cast" does it? And what of the central performance by Pelle Hvenegaard, without the benefit of Von Sydow's considerable stage and film experience? He makes "a cowering contribution" says the Radio Times dismissively. Only the cinema flyer makes mention that the boy himself won an award for his portrayal, and deservedly so. It's extremely annoying to see the critical consensus brush the film's central character aside because he's only a boy and hence of no real consequence. Reviews of "OLIVER TWIST", "DAVID COPPERFIELD" and many other child-centred classics reveal the same innate adult contempt. This is "Son of Lasse", not "Lasse Come Home". Get it?

"PELLE THE CONQUEROR" is a study of disillusionment, specifically a child becoming disabused of awe for his father. It's about coming to terms with the world as it is, and not as we would have it. This is a lesson Pelle's aging father is very slow to learn, but by the film's close the boy himself is freed of all illusions, and some of the humanity is bled out of him in the process. It is scarcely a "life-affirming" statement. Scarcely have I seen a film so bitter in its compassion for broken people. "First they pluck one feather" Lasse tells his son, "and then another, and finally you stand there like a plucked chicken in the shit."

Pelle and his over-the-hill father are hired at the docks, after all the more able hands have been snapped up, for a mere 100 crowns a year by the overseer of Stone Farm, owned by a lecherous philanderer - Kongstrup - and his distraught wife. All Lasse's milk-and-honey visions about life in Denmark are shattered in short order. The two of them have to sleep in the barn with the cows. Pelle, who has been promised a life of play and plenty, is put to work driving the cattle, and is given hints at this skill by Rud (Troels Asmussen), a wild misshapen by-blow of Kongstrup's who aims to make his fortune as a carnival freak. Pelle is befriended also by Erik, a burly farmhand who is the only one to stand up to the vicious overseer and his leering assistant. Erik promises to take the boy to see the world - America, China, Negroland - just as soon as his two-year term at the farm is over. They will conquer it all. It's almost embarrassingly easy, says Erik.

Caught stealing milk for a kitten, Pelle is subjected to a savage humiliation by the apprentice overseer. He's stripped and whipped about the yard, with all the farmhands looking on, laughing. It is not Lasse who rescues him, but Erik. The apprentice flees, and for shame Lasse promises Pelle to kill the apprentice when next he shows his face. Soon enough he does so, and while Pelle looks on, his father makes a feeble show of protest before hurrying to do the apprentice's bidding. In the 150 minutes of the film, Pelle gets whipped, caned and

spanked, besides nearly succumbing to pneumonia when the local boys goad him into jumping into the frozen sea. He starts school, where he's tormented again as a "stinking Swede", and is nearly taken off to prison for punching the parson's son, who taunts him with insults about Lasse at the funeral of the schoolmaster, who dies silently facing his class. Under all of this harsh instruction, and the gruelling labour of the farm, but most of all the with gradual realisation of his father's wretchedness, the boy hardens by degrees, and it is almost unbearable to watch him endure disappointment after cruel disappointment.

Many of the scenes between Von Sydow and Hvenegaard are deeply moving: an illiterate man's wonder at his young son mastering the alphabet, and particularly Pelle's birthday, when his father watches him unwrap a simple pocket knife - "a poor man's present, son" - and the boy is moved to tears by it. The relationship between them is superbly drawn, and the core of the film. Caught in a storm, Pelle chances by the house of a woman whose husband was lost at sea. Lasse calls on her in hopes of finding a new wife, who will give him coffee in bed on a Sunday morning - his vision of luxury. The two of them strike a simple bargain for companionship's sake, and Pelle's hopes are raised of a new home. But then her husband returns one day from a passing ship, and the boy, knowing the news will destroy his father, is heartbroken. Lasse takes to drink, and again we must watch as Pelle, enraged with shame and grief, tries to bring the old man to his senses.

Since arriving at the farm the boy has caught the favour of the farmer's wife, who has the name of a werewolf for her nightly howling while her husband is off bawling about the village. Ultimately she invites Pelle to be the farm's new apprentice overseer, and Lasse is beside himself with pride and satisfaction, but it is all too late. Pelle's friend Erik, who tried to butcher the overseer with a scythe, has taken a grievous blow on the head and is now a mute simpleton. The boy watches him led off the farm, and resolves to leave. His father demurs to him at first, but then breaks down at the prospect of leaving the miserable existence he has grown to accept. Pelle must run away without him. The boy looks at his father, without either pity or contempt, and in the morning they part company. The final shot echoes Truffaut's "LES QUATRES CENTS COUPS", as Pelle, free at last, runs toward the sea.

The film is rich in incident and separate threads of plot not touched on here: the milkmaid Anna, who drowns her illegitimate newborn baby and is led off by the police; the baby's father throwing his life away rescuing passengers from a sinking ship off the shore; Kongstrup's wife's revenge on him when she discovers he has seduced their niece on a visit to the farm. It is a stern and remorseless tale of woe.

Made enduring by the presence of young Pelle Hvenegaard, a simply beautiful young boy with deep, luminous eyes that watch all of this misery in silent horror. His (presumably debut) performance is little short of magnificent, and richly deserving of the award it won him. Few child actors are called upon to express so demanding a range of emotion in a single film. Yet Hvenegaard is wholly convincing in all his grief and shame, fear and bitterness. And let us not give all the credit for that to his director, Billie August. The critical reviews above have all sold him deplorably short. For my money, this is the face Visconti should have looked for when casting Tazio in "DEATH IN VENICE". Here is a natural, unselfconscious beauty which the camera sees, even if the audience do not.

If this were an American film (or British) they'd have given Pelle some fatuous budding romance, so de rigeur in rites-of-passage tales. Thankfully, it's a European film, and we're spared such sermonising. "PELLE EROBREREN" is one of the truest films on childhood ever made, and hence, though anything but an enjoyable film, heartily recommended.

East German television also produced a feature from the same source, and matching the incident in this one quite closely, called "PELLE DER EROBERER". The boy was slightly younger than Hvenegaard, and though it could not match the feature version for emotional power, particularly in Van Sydow's shadow, it was a highly creditable version on its own account. Comparisons in English-speaking film are hard to come by, but UK TV produced an equally grim film about the hard life of a young bonded apprentice to a farm called "MY BROTHER THE OX", while the children's production "OUR EXPLOITS AT WEST POLEY" touched lightly on some of the same background.

Max Von Sydow in THE NEW LAND

See subject index under **BULLYING, CIRCUS / FAIRGROUNDS / CARNIVALS, CRUELTY / NEGLECT / MALTREATMENT, FARMS & FARMING, HISTORY, RECOMMENDED TITLES, RUNAWAYS / STOWAWAYS, SLAVERY / FORCED CHILD LABOUR** and **SPECIAL FRIENDSHIPS**.