

# Travelling Girlhood:

## Feminist Discourses as Narrative Resources for the American Adaptation of the Norwegian High-School Drama *SKAM*

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### ABSTRACT

In the American adaptation of the Norwegian youth drama *SKAM* (2015-2017), the translation of feminist discourse informing the plot shifts the conflict from a social, political, and democratic level to a question of liberation from within. This shift – from the familiarized interrelational conflict of filmic melodrama to a conflict within the protagonist's inner landscape – comes with some interconnected dramaturgical implications that change the invited audience's opportunities to make sense of the plot at the same time as they complicate the interpretation process. Drawing particularly on theories of melodrama and youth fiction, our analysis indicates that the conflict level might particularly problematize the issue of engagement when the medium is filmic.

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## INTRODUCTION

From 2015 to 2017, the Norwegian online teen drama *SKAM* (English: SHAME), revolutionized the international youth television landscape with an engaging transmedia melodrama to be consumed on TV, tablets, and cellphones (Rustad). During four seasons, each of which presents the point of view of one of the protagonists, *SKAM* gives a realistic portrayal of a group of girls who become friends as they start high school in Oslo, told through melodramatic storylines and plots that were conceived in response to thorough research among actual Norwegian teenagers (Redvall). The series deploys a narrative that includes multiple channels for making sense of, solving, and discussing the plot, the characters, and the numerous intertextual references, clues, and codes provided by the text. *SKAM* was aired in ‘real time’ through daily content ‘drops’ on a website. The series quickly became a global phenomenon, measured by an international audience of millions, the creation of a transnational, fan-driven online community, and many local, European adaptations (Sundet, “From ‘Secret’”). In 2018, it was announced that Simon Fuller, a successful television producer, had bought the rights to the scripted format and that the series was chosen to launch Facebook’s new application, Facebook Watch. But how does a realist melodrama about Norwegian girlhood and the associated culturally specific problems and experiences of adolescence translate into a new context?

In this article, we present a comparative analysis of the second season of the original version of *SKAM* (*SKAM 2*) and its 2018 American adaptation (*SKAM Austin 2*). While several TV scholars have investigated the variable conditions for production, distribution, and reception of various adaptations of *SKAM* (e.g. Antonioni et al.; Bachmann; Meneghin; Sundet, “Will It Translate”), we draw attention to how, as an example of filmic young adult fiction, *SKAM* became recognizable, meaningful, and important to young audiences through its melodramatic qualities, and how it exposed conflicting morals as personalized dilemmas. Moreover, we investigate what implications translating the culturally specific messages and plots for a new context had on the drama itself, and how this process affected the invited audience positions offered by the drama. The aim of this article is thus twofold. First, to explain how the engagement created by the stories presented in *SKAM* was built into the dramaturgical structure, which in turn reflects the series’ message to young girls to seek autonomy and control over their destinies. Second, to ask how this dramaturgy, and the engagement built into it, was changed when the message was translated from one cultural context into another.

At a time when the international young adult fiction marketplace is being reshaped by changing media demands and habits of young adult readers in the wake of social media and film and television streaming (Lo), it is important to scrutinize why two filmic versions of the same story can appeal differently to different audiences. The second season of *SKAM*, which aired in 2016, is particularly interesting in this respect. It depicts a highly engaging love story

revolving around Noora, a 16-year-old feminist whose moral compass is put to the test as she falls in love with the notorious ‘fuckboy’ William. While this season generated increased online engagement with the original, Norwegian series, the adaptation had disappointing viewing figures and moderate engagement on social media (Sundet, “Will It Translate”). *SKAM Austin* was also cancelled by Facebook in the wake of the second season airing. Where previous studies have indicated that distributional and productional changes and changes in reception culture caused the flop, along with the story being told for the second time (Sundet, “Will It Translate”; Bachmann), our analysis reveals major changes in the narrative structure that may have made this version less engaging to young audiences. We suggest that the process of culturally translating the underlying theme of transformation made the adaptation less melodramatic and cinematic, especially considering how the initial melodrama presented a clear, intense, and dramatic story, marked by exaggeration and extremes (Duckels; Kapurch; Drotner). This raises the question of whether the conflict level – the plot – should be a starting point for adaptation studies, since a changed conflict level may imply different storytelling techniques, and indicate different invited audience positions, even when the storyline remains the same.

Unlike many of the European adaptations, *SKAM Austin* was produced with a strong ambition to maintain the ideas of the original scripted format, not only in its choice of a social media platform for online interaction and its local affiliation (Austin, Texas), but also in its ambition to preserve the initial function toward its audience by responding to their needs and wants (Sundet, “Will it Translate”; Bachmann). The original showrunner, Julie Andem, was thus hired to produce and direct the first season of *SKAM Austin* and, while keeping the overall plots and storylines of the Norwegian version, she spent pre-production time in Texas translating the framing and messages of the series for a new cultural context. Andem investigated American youth culture and interviewed Texan teenagers about their lives (Sundet, “Will It Translate”). This research led to several changes in the external framework, such as the initial stories revolving around ‘russetiden’ – the traditional Norwegian celebration of high school graduation but also a party tradition marked by strong gender hierarchies and extensive sex and alcohol abuse – being translated into American high schools’ sports traditions and the gender culture surrounding high school football teams. The translation also affected the feminist plot of the second season in a way that had dramaturgical implications: the forces of change implicated by the plot shifted in the adaptation from an outer landscape of interrelations and actions (at a political and social level) to the protagonists’ inner mental landscape and the character’s capacity to find the hidden truth of an individualized self. We tie this shift to how the American version seems to be informed by a feminist discourse that is more occupied by sexual liberation, the #metoo movement, and identity politics than the original. We also show that the change implies that the story depicted in the adaptation must rely on epic telling in addition to dramaturgical showing, and moreover – since portraying inner landscapes in a filmic medium logically

extends the use of the point of view – that the audience is presented with a focalized world rather than an external world of actions, relations, and dialog. On this basis, we suggest that *SKAM Austin* not only diverges from the original in its message about female adolescence and empowerment, but also represents a drama which to a lesser extent utilizes melodramatic potential for engagement in the conflicts portrayed.

## MELODRAMA AND YOUNG ADULT FICTION

*SKAM* was initially created by the youth channel of the Norwegian public broadcaster NRK, with the mission to reconnect with and help 16-year-old girls to better cope with contemporary pressures of being young in Norway (Krüger and Rustad; Sundet, “From ‘Secret’”). The script was shaped in response to a thorough investigation of Norwegian high school students, guided by a method originally developed to uncover the needs of young people, and stories, plotlines, and characters were constructed in response to those needs. Based on this work, different characters with different strengths, shortcomings, and desires were developed, which formed the basis for four transformation stories and the main plot for each season. As such, *SKAM* is a youth melodrama consisting of an external framework – a realist portrayal of a group of high school students’ lives and accomplishments as they start their first year at high school – but the main plots are linked to each season’s main character, whose strength of character and moral compass are tested in various ways (Skarstein).

Television scholars have already treated *SKAM* as a best-case example of how to engage young adults at times when their media lives are at once global, digital, and being played out across multiple platforms (Sundet, “Youthification”). Although the series has been publicly acclaimed for exposing relatable adolescents’ experiences of friendship, first love, identity, and struggles with associated coming-of-age issues (such as sexual orientation, eating disorders, racism, teen pregnancy, sexual assault, and revenge porn) (Krüger and Rustad), the relevance of the series to the field of young adult fiction remains unexplored. Young adult fiction is a broad category whose appeal lies in its treatment of experiences of transitioning between youth and adulthood – coming of age – from the point of view of a young protagonist, as teenagers find comfort in knowing “that one is not alone in a vast universe, that there are others ‘like me’” (Jenkins and Cart 3). Within YA Studies, literary works have often been prioritised over other media. What is often overlooked is that alternative forms of young adult fiction, particularly filmic coming-of-age stories, are likely to depict stories that intertwine the exposition of real experiences and problems with the thematization of universal and timeless dilemmas and conflicting morals in their attempts to offer routes to revelation and self-insight to young readers (Bucher and Hinton; Jenkins and Cart). This draws attention to the close link between young adult fiction and the melodramatic tradition, particularly this tradition’s inclination to pose conflicting morals as

personalized dilemmas (Brooks 42). Gabriel Duckels, for instance, argues that the melodrama is “integral to the negotiation of pressing moral issues that articulate shifts in the status quo” and that young adult melodrama “deserves more attention from children’s literature scholars as a barometer of the field’s ideological work with its own aesthetic conventions” (304). Building on the insight Katie Kapurch gained from her study of the *Twilight* franchise – that “through excess and overstatement, cultural restrictions facing female youth are exposed and critiqued” (4) – Duckels further argues that, through the rhetoric of the extreme, the melodrama’s endangered adolescence “speaks their hidden truth into a hostile world, and thus changes the world” (309). Danish youth and media scholar Kirsten Drotner similarly warns against the marginalization of melodrama in the field of young adult literature. She regards the romantic melodrama, usually with a female protagonist, to be one of the most significant sources for mediating and interpreting female emotions in Western cultures, particularly by depicting emotionally extreme situations connected to gender and sexuality.

In scrutinizing the main conflict in both versions of the second season of *SKAM* – which revolves around the impossible romance between Noora/Grace and William/Daniel<sup>1</sup> – we draw on Kapurch’s, Duckels’, and Drotner’s views of the melodrama’s potential to address problems of an ethical or existential nature through the aesthetic of exaggeration, by depicting contesting values in a clear-cut manner that is comprehensible to a young audience. This particularly concerns the degree to which the two versions exploit the possibilities of filmic melodrama – produced to be consumed on TV, tablets, and cellphones – of showing rather than telling interpersonal conflicts by depicting interaction and dialog and draws attention to how the plot is coded with regard to conflict level. Where epic fiction’s opportunities for focalizing by a narrator is the medium of the inner landscape *par excellence* (Feldman et al.), inner conflicts in filmic melodrama are typically presented as consequences of interpersonal conflicts and become prominent after the turning point in the escalation of the conflict (Evans; Harms Larsen; Skarstein).

## THE FEMINIST CODING OF THE PLOTS

*SKAM 2* and *SKAM Austin 2* depict the transformation story of Noora/Grace, who must re-evaluate her prior feminist understandings in order to justify that a feminist, who aspires to be “strong and independent” (*SKAM 2*, “You lose” 00.05.03), can fall in love with a “fuckboy” (*SKAM Austin 2*, “Uninhibited” 00.03.33). The storyline in Season Two is introduced in the first season of the show, as Vilde/Kelsey, one of the four friends, has sex with William/Daniel. While Noora/Grace openly judges this relationship, claiming that Vilde/Kelsey is being fooled by a fuckboy, she is also the one who defends Vilde/Kelsey against William/Daniel when he

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1 Throughout this article, we use a forward slash between names to denote the same character in different versions.

later rejects and offends her in the schoolyard in front of everybody. This establishes Noora/Grace as a loyal friend and clear feminist, but also initiates the first interaction between Noora/Grace and William/Daniel, where she eloquently scolds him in front of their friends. William/Daniel immediately takes an interest in Noora/Grace, something that is intensified by him also being rejected, probably for the first time, as Noora/Grace makes it quite clear to everybody that he is not the sort of boy she would want to get involved with. However, the second season is introduced by Noora/Grace agreeing to meet William/Daniel for a date in exchange for him apologizing to Vilde/Kelsey, and the first turning point thus depicts Noora/Grace unwillingly meeting William/Daniel for a date, during which her interest in him is revealed. As their relationship develops in secret, the conflict is heightened by her disloyalty to Vilde/Kelsey and by her growing affection for a boy who does not share her life values. At the point of no return, Noora/Grace finally kisses William/Daniel, unaware that Vilde/Kelsey observes their passionate embrace. The second turning point occurs when Noora/Grace – who by now is deeply in love with William/Daniel but plagued by a bad conscience and uncertainty – is having a conversation with Sana/Soya, one of the five friends, who appeals to Noora/Grace to show more understanding and tolerance toward William/Daniel, and to tell Vilde/Kelsey the truth. After a series of crises, where Noora's/Grace's morals are put to several tests, the couple end up happy and Noora/Grace is reconciled with her friends.

The coding in both cases is informed by feminist values and reflects a sensitivity toward grounding coming-of-age plots in contemporary feminist debates that have marked youth fiction since the 1990s (Lipkin; Lysne), with a renewed significance in popular culture over the past decade (Keller et al.; Banet-Weiser). This manifests in the way that the value coding departs from a feminist discourse as the love story develops: in both cases, the story takes place within a fictional world deeply marked by gender hierarchies at school, where cultural and institutional restrictions clearly decide what girls (and boys) are allowed to say and do. In both versions, this culture is marked by a cruel 'bro culture', slut-shaming, and digital rape, but also a feminist zeitgeist, that encourages and salutes young women's independence, confidence, and strength. Feminism, however, also informs an alternative sphere of values being established along the way that makes a happy ending possible for the unlikely couple; that is, the underlying plot, linked to who Noora/Grace is and must become, and to their exploration of this imperative and what it should entail.

Many of the changes made in the adaptation in order to make it more relatable to its new audience seem to successfully maintain the initial feminist coding of the original version. William's character, for instance, who originally is depicted as the leader of the coolest *russebuss* (party bus) at school, was changed to Daniel, the captain of the high school football team. While this character, in both versions, is depicted as spoiled, rich, and the alpha-male at school, the adaptation also engages more explicitly with current topics in contemporary American, post-#metoo feminist discourse, such as bro culture, anti-

feminism, white feminism, and identity politics. Translation also implies a change of the underlying message and the plot, indicating alternative values and actions that eventually will complete Grace's transformation. This change reflects how feminism, despite having taken on global, digital forms, has historical meanings and uses deeply anchored in shifting local, political, and cultural contexts and discourses (Holst).

At the risk of oversimplifying the picture, the two versions signal the various historical and contemporary uses of feminism within the two production contexts of Norway and the United States. Where an emancipatory tradition, focusing on women's political and social rights and duties, seems to inform the underlying transformation theme of the original version, the American version seems slightly more informed by a feminist tradition linked to the psychoanalytic assumption about the significance of sexuality and pleasure for women's subjectivity and liberation (Lindtner, "1968"). This might mirror how Norwegian popular feminism, particularly coming-of-age dramas, has poor traditions with portraying female sexuality and diversity (Lysne), while identity politics has been important in American popular feminism since the 1980s (Hollows) and sexuality is likely being treated as a crucial site for the formation of an autonomous self (Illouz). However, it also reflects that the American version was produced in the wake of the #metoo campaign and was adjusted in response to fans' reactions to the original version (Bachmann). Prior to the airing of the second season of *SKAM Austin*, several fans and media commentators expressed an aversion to the romance between Noora and William because it was seen to romanticize William's careless and toxic behavior toward Noora. This implies a renewed sensitivity toward gendered power structures in the post-#metoo social media climate that influenced not only American discourse on feminism, but digital youth culture more generally.

Central to our analysis is the ability of the two versions to present conflicting values and feminist discourses in an engaging manner. While Noora's struggle to become autonomous with a strong integrity and an authentic identity is presented as an interpersonal conflict linked to democracy, equality, and interaction, Grace's dilemma is presented as an inner conflict linked to sexuality, desire, and psychology. These conflicts dramaturgically derive from two different levels of action: outer action and mental action (Evans; Feldman et al.). In the following analysis, we elaborate on how the change of plot – and conflict level – fuels dramaturgical implications, as the forces of change shift from Noora's outer landscape of interrelations and actions to Grace's inner, mental landscape, wherein they lie in her capacity to find the hidden truth about who she is. While outer actions are depicted through dramatic showing, the depiction of mental action is challenging in the filmic medium and demands an additional set of aesthetic techniques to fuel interpretations based on cultural and psychological theories of why people act, react, and feel in certain ways. The consequence of changing the plot in *SKAM Austin* is that it appears more as telling than showing: first, it implies that the story naturally will rely on epic telling in addition to dramaturgical showing (Evans; Feldmann et al.; Szondi); second, as we will show, portraying inner landscapes in a

filmic medium logically extends the use of point of view so that the audience is presented with a focalized world rather than an outer world of actions, relations, and dialog.

## **ANALYSIS OF THE STORY: THE PROBLEM, TENSION OF THE CONFLICT, AND THE DIALOG**

Since the change to the conflict level particularly affected the main story of the second season, our analysis focuses on this storyline. The scenes chosen for analysis follow the course of the filmic melodrama, where the point of no return separates the turning points of the elaboration and the conflict escalation toward the drama's resolution (Harms Larsen 10). The first scene chosen establishes the values that inform the conflict, particularly in the adaptation. We then examine the two turning points, paying particular attention to the deliberation of the dialog, as the Aristotelian peripety comes with a discovery of the values that ultimately frame the message of the drama. Finally, we analyze the two protagonists' essays written toward the resolution, as expressions of their moral recognition at the end of their transformation stories. Throughout this analysis we pay attention to the dramatic and epic instruments of showing and telling in order to scrutinize how the two versions utilize the clear-cut rhetoric of the filmic melodrama.

### **Grace's Problem: Exploration of Desire**

A scene that clearly communicates the value coding for the plot in *SKAM Austin 2* is the fourth clip in the third episode, "Desire". It depicts Grace staying home on a Friday night while her friends attend a party at Daniel's place. The scene, which lasts for only one minute and 36 seconds, is dense, and composed as an important establishing scene, presenting important background information about Grace. Until this scene, Grace has been portrayed together with her friends. In public she comes across as assertive, someone who avoids parties and sexist values. These traits have been equally presented in the two versions up to this point, but this scene differs from the Norwegian version in that it reveals Grace's private, conflicting feelings toward Daniel and how resisting him is tied to an inner dilemma she must solve.

The scene starts with an overview shot of Grace's house, accompanied by the female voiceover stemming from a diegetic feminist TED talk Grace is watching on YouTube: "Many centuries ago women would be in the back while the men would be out hunting for food" (*SKAM Austin 2*, "Desire" 00.00.07). This voice comments on what is narrated in the scene. As such, the scene not only shows Grace as torn between wanting to be respected, liked, and popular, and being secretly in love with the love interest of her best friend; it also relates her

inner conflict to a dilemma within feminism, especially concerning what it means to be a 'good' feminist confronted with romantic feelings and sexual desires. While the image shifts, a wide shot reveals Grace sitting alone on her living room couch with her computer in her lap, apparently watching YouTube, and the voice continues: "If a female was deemed unlikeable, then she was kicked out of the pack and forced to defend for herself" (00.00.13). The camera angle shifts to a close-up shot of Grace, who looks distracted, pulls her hair, and seemingly tries to focus on the speech while scrolling on her phone. Meanwhile the voiceover argues: "Thus to be a woman means being likeable, it's a matter of life and death. Fast forward a thousand years and we're still struggling with this idea of what it means to be a good feminist" (00.00.25). Grace's attention freezes for a moment as a picture shows Daniel at the party. In a brief montage, we see her iPhone screen, filled with snaps from Daniel's party and a message urging her to join because "Daniel's house has a sauna" (00.00.49).

This sequence frames feminism as a deeply personal matter, tied to women's repressed situation within patriarchal societies and the question of whether heterosexual desire should be expressed or repressed by feminists to unfold as authentic individuals (Hollows 74). The voiceover argues that feminists "for so long" have chosen "to fight the good fight" at the expense of "personal pleasure" and asks: "How can we lead the resistance and at the same time acknowledge our own individual needs?" (*SKAM Austin 2*, "Desire" 00.00.29). The voiceover thus implies that Grace should revalue her stand against Daniel to fulfill her task of becoming an authentic human being. The voiceover even argues that women who choose resistance deny personal happiness: "Desire is shuffled into the background, seen as dirty, and the pornification of sex means to be a woman and want something, anything, is shameful. What is so natural and human... Desire is what makes life worth living" (00.00.59). The message heard is that, since sexuality is natural and, essentially, a positive force of which culture deprives women, Grace should reclaim it to develop authentic selfhood. For a moment it looks as if Grace decides to change her plans and join the party, but instead she picks up a book and starts skimming it. The scene ends with her closing the book, sighing, and staring thoughtfully into the air, but later we learn that she eventually did join the party and stayed the night at Daniel's house. The scene thus explains something important to the audience about the plot, and what we might call Grace's 'task' in Season Two. It may be interpreted as a re-evaluation of some of the feminist principles she has followed to pursue and explore her desire and herself. The book she picks up and skims hints at what this task might be: the book, *Men Explain Things to Me* (2014) by Rebecca Solnit, who became hugely popular in the late 2010s, postulates that feminisms that urge girls to avoid men and watch their own actions, relations, and appearances serve to alienate girls and boys, driving them into two separate worlds where desire is replaced with fear and shame (30-31). Young girls should instead approach boys and speak the truth about assaults, abuse, and also their own desire.

In the equivalent scene in the original version, Noora is at home with her roommate Linn on a Friday night, watching television. Linn is depicted as a contrast to Noora, who is shown as an uptight school nerd, but also someone who stands up for others. Linn, however, shows no empathy for others. She has taken a year off school and spends most of her time in the flat, sleeping, gaming, and eating candy. In this scene, the two girls are chatting while a talk show host interviews a dog enthusiast. Linn talks about the pointlessness of partying and the advantages of staying at home. Noora is silent, occupied by her Insta feed, which is packed with posts from the party at William's house. As Linn complains about the work pressure put on students and says she felt the need to "fuck that shit" (SKAM 2, "Natta Noora" (Goodnight Noora) 00.01.33, our translation) and take a year off, Noora receives a message from Eva urging her to join the party because Vilde has had a breakdown and locked herself in William's bathroom. Noora jumps up from the couch and decides to leave, seemingly to rush to her rescue.

Although both scenes depict the protagonists' conflicting feelings about the need to loosen up, two dramaturgical and aesthetic aspects of the scenes set the two versions apart. First, the fact that Grace's problem is a conflict that resides inside her is *told* by a voiceover that appears to stem from an intellectual authority. This is substantiated by the reference to Solnit, which establishes a specific interpretation of the conflict. The scene in the original version does not offer such an interpretive frame and relies instead on an everyday situation with everyday conversation and includes linear TV that might, or might not, be used as clues to a deeper understanding of Noora: as Noora stands up and decides to go and rescue her friend at the party, the TV host in the background introduces a new guest who "ten years ago used to be a fullblood rockstar who had to go to rehab and has now started a whole new life" (00.02.25). Second, the resolution of the conflict inside the protagonist in the adaptation is supported by extensive use of point of view, lingering on Grace's facial expressions and body language, while the scene in the original version shows a world of social interaction, inviting the audience to interpret the focus and identify the conflict.

## The Turning Points

The turning points have the potential to be what Peter Brooks calls "moment[s] of astonishment" (26), meaning a discovery and ethical recognition in the protagonist's trajectory of transformation. The first turning point depicts the couples' first dates. The setting for the scene in the original version is a panoramic view over Oslo, conventionally implying that clarity is within reach. William points to different locations, talking about childhood memories, a clue to his yet unrevealed childhood trauma, but is cut short by Noora, who says that trying to seduce a girl by telling her about a traumatic past is a cliché. The conversation then turns to William's behavior toward Vilde:

N: Like that time at school when you told Vilde she wasn't pretty enough for you. How can you say such things?

W: I didn't want her to be keen on me.

N: So, you couldn't have put it nicer?

W: Why should I have put it nicer?

N: So as not to hurt her.

W: Not to hurt her?! There's no point in not hurting her when I don't want her to be keen on me. It's better to be clear and leave no doubt.

N: And just destroy her self-confidence?

W: Seriously. Do you think that's how it works?

N: What?

W: It's not possible to destroy someone's self-confidence with a single comment. If so, that self-confidence must have been destroyed before. But if you look at it from my perspective, it was she that came on to me. She wanted me, she wanted to go to bed with me. I didn't promise her anything. Despite that, you're yelling at me in the middle of the school. And you think that's okay. Do you think that's fair? (*SKAM 2*, "For Vilde" (To Vilde) 00.10.14-00.11.44, our translation)

The camera lingers on Noora's face. She looks thoughtful, opens her mouth to respond several times, but does not seem to find the words. The long silence ends the conversation about Vilde.

We find Noora's inability to respond indicative of a recognition that William's answers surprise her and that, at some level, his reasoning makes sense to her. The dialog leads not towards a resolution of the conflict, but towards a realization that there were reasons for William's behavior. Hence, the scene shows core aspects of social interaction and dialog; a recognition that different perspectives must be integrated into one's thinking to understand the social world. This recognition is emphasized by the opposing perspectives of the two characters, which also mark them as gender roles, rather than complex characters representing two different antithetic (humanistic or political) worldviews. The antagonistic

contrast opens an interpretative space, leaving the audience in doubt about who has the right perception of what has been going on.

In the adaptation, the setting for the first turning point evokes associations with a psychological, metaphorical, and sexual landscape. The scene is set in a forest with tall trees in front of a bat cave where Daniel has invited Grace to see the bats fly out at sundown. On their way to the cave, Daniel compliments Grace on her article on gender inequality. Grace points to patriarchy as the explanation. “It’s everywhere” (*SKAM Austin 2*, “Not a real date” 00.05.00), she says, and Daniel responds: “Well, it’s not out here,” (00.05.04). Grace answers: “It is. It’s you” (00.05.08). Daniel objects and ends the conversation with “[n]ot here” (00.05.13), indicating that Grace has the wrong perception (of him or the world). The dialog subsequently turns to Grace’s anger toward her date:

G: You treated Kelsey like crap. Had sex with her, didn’t use a condom, and threw her out like a piece of trash. What you did, that was disgusting.

D: That’s not what happened. She wanted to hook up with me, and when I asked her if she wanted to use a condom, she said it was all good.

G: Even if Kelsey didn’t want to use a condom, it’s your responsibility to take care of that.

D: She’s not a baby; she can make her own decisions.

G: Last time I checked; women couldn’t impregnate themselves. It’s on you! You had sex with her and shamed her for having feelings about it. She hasn’t had carbs since. You fuck us over and we blame ourselves. What? (00.06.32-00.07.14)

The conversation is interrupted but is later followed up by Daniel: “I hear you. I’m sorry” (00.07.52). Unlike the dialog in the original version, the adaptation presents a conflict resolution where Daniel accepts that Grace is right and he is wrong, instead of contesting her version. In doing so, Daniel does not demonstrate power or mansplaining. However, the dialog suggests that another conflict is at play – whether Grace can see Daniel clearly – turning the attention to Grace’s feminist assumptions as much as to the relationship between the characters. The dialog does not depict opposing or antagonistic positions, but rather places the characters within the same structural complex.

The second turning point has aspects of the same patterns, but we are now closer to identifying the problem. At this point, the protagonists in both versions have asked their boyfriend for space after witnessing them in a violent fight. Noora and Sana are sitting on a

window ledge in an empty classroom, with light shining on their faces, as they discuss the situation:

S: Then why are you not together with him?

N: 'Cause he's a bad person.

S: Why is he a bad person?

N: First, he's very controlling.

S: How?

N: He tells me what to feel. And what to say. What I should do.

S: And you don't dare argue?

N: Yes, I do.

S: But does he get angry if you disagree with him?

N: No, not really. It's just that I can't figure out how to object to his arguments.

S: So, what's the problem? That he's smarter than you?

N: Well, he's trying to change my opinions.

S: But your opinions are only changed if you think he's right.

N: Yes, but I'm just trying to be strong and independent. Am I supposed to change all my opinions just because of a boy?

S: You're strong and independent when you *can* change your opinions, no matter which gender changes them. And there's nothing wrong with him challenging the way you think. And if you're not afraid to say what you think, I don't think you should worry that he's controlling you.

N: But he's violent. He smashed a glass bottle over someone's head!

S: Yes, okay. But why did he do that?

N: Because he has these messed up ideas that the world is driven by war and violence. We're so totally different! I'm against war.

S: That's not why he smashed the bottle. He smashed it because he was angry and afraid. And why is that?

N: I don't know.

S: You didn't ask?

N: No.

S: Okay. I find it interesting that you're against war. War doesn't start with violence, but with misunderstandings and prejudice.

N: So?

S: So, if you say that you're for a peaceful world, then you must at least try and understand why others think and act as they do. And you must accept that others don't view the world the same way as you do. You can't think that one person holds all the answers to what's right and wrong. And if you haven't tried to understand the person you love, then I'm pessimistic on behalf of the world. And I'm not saying that you should be with him, but you can't decide that without even having tried to understand him. (*SKAM 2*, "Bare tenker på William" (Thinks only of William) 00.02.53-00.08.00, our translation)

The scene ends with a smiling Noora and, with a twinkle in her eye, exclaiming: "Who would have known! Sana has a soft side!" (00.11.05).

Sana questions Noora's reasoning and, ultimately, her worldview, urging her to include William's perspective in her own reasoning. The dialog leads Noora to a recognition that transcends what she could be capable of on her own: we live in social world, centered around the relationship between the two lovers, but on a metaphorical level it is about living in a world of diverse and opposing perspectives. Sana denies Noora's feminist explanations and promotes an alternative way: a strong belief in arguments for reasoning and in dialog to break down conflicts by advancing understanding.

In the adaptation, Grace and Zoya are studying in a library as they similarly discuss the effect of the violent encounter:

Z: How are things with you and Daniel?

G: Over.

Z: What happened?

G: I just can't be with a violent person, or someone who thinks violence is an okay way to deal with things.

Z: Grace's golden rule for living.

G: Zoya, you saw it too.

Z: Yeah, I did.

G: So what? You don't think that what he did was wrong?

Z: I think situations like that are very complicated.

G: He smashed a glass bottle over a guy's head!

Z: Have you ever stopped to think about why he did it?

G: It doesn't matter.

Z: I think it matters. When people lash out like that, it's not because they wanna be violent. It's because they're scared. My grandmother came here when she was only twenty. She was pregnant with my mum, and my uncle was little. And it was this crazy culture shock for her. She didn't understand a word of English and she came from a place where women wear scarves, where it wasn't a thing. But here, people laughed at her. They threw trash at her. Called her a terrorist. After all that, do you know what she says? 'Everybody is going through something.'

G: Fighting goes against everything I stand for.

Z: Must be so nice...

G: What?

Z: Always being right. It's okay to be happy, Grace.

(*SKAM Austin 2*, "Always being right" 00.01.15-00.03.39)

The scene ends with Zoya saying: "It's not about you. It's about the truth" (00.04.00).

Like in the original version, the scene in the adaptation depicts a turning point in the relationship between the troubled couple, but not as a recognition of Grace's need to communicate in order to understand Daniel. Rather, the attention is directed toward Grace's feminist resistance pinpointed in the problem identifying TED talk in the clip "Desire". The answer proposed by Zoya is not understanding, but rather empathy: "Everybody is going through something". Instead of pointing to lack of dialog and understanding as the couple's personalized dilemma, Zoya addresses the nature of human beings' inner life in highly metaphorical language, promoting the wisdom that we cannot achieve full knowledge of the reasons for a person's actions. In doing so, she rejects Grace's 'golden rule' – i.e., to reason from a feminist resistance – indicating that Grace's principles stand in the way of her happiness.

These central scenes demonstrate how the adaptation adds a layer of conflict to the plot and, at the same time, reduces the extremity of the values at stake. In the original version, these values are incarnated by antagonistic characters. In the adaptation, the antithesis is changed from an interpersonal conflict between the troubled couple to an individualized conflict of the inner landscape of the protagonists, a shift of focus from questions of interrelational understanding to empathy.

### **Toward the Resolution**

After the second turning point, the protagonists in both versions are invited to write an essay. Noora is asked to write a speech to be printed in a newspaper on Norway's Constitution Day, while Grace is invited to take part in an essay writing contest. Noora chooses the topic herself, and writes about youth, freedom, and responsibility. However, Noora does not write this text alone: she is unable to finish it before the deadline, and while she sleeps, William finishes and submits it. The essay has a political tone, arguing for trust in the democratic constitution in terms of interrelational values and dialog to promote understanding.

The topic of Grace's essay is: "The most important things we can do to make a change in the world". She begins with a quote from the influential feminist and activist Verna Meyers, and it seems Grace has incorporated Zoya's suggestions regarding paying attention to other people's inner lives as she writes:

Biases are the stories we make up about people before we know who they really are. We need to move toward the things that make us uncomfortable, not away from them. It is empathy and compassion we get when we have relationships with people who are different from us. We become actors, advocates, and allies. Being comfortable in the uncomfortable is exactly what we need right now. Our generation needs to step up and fight for what we stand for as individuals. You can be an individual but become a unified front together. Standing side by side watching our world – the world we live in and fight. (*SKAM Austin 2*, “Day” 00.00.45)

While Noora’s essay is presented as an expression of a synchronized understanding between her and her co-writer William, Grace’s text is the result of her individual path toward learning more about herself. The nature of the messages from the two girls are now less specifically feminist and framed more by humanistic values of understanding (in the original version) and empathy (in the adaptation). Thus, the spheres of the values in the two stories might appear the same but are different. In Noora’s essay, human beings are analogically depicted as nation-states with borders, a metaphor for individuals’ democratic, ethical, and interrelational values that are ‘blocked’. This metaphor is developed and takes shape throughout the season, alluding to Noora’s relationship with William but also to her general worldview. She refers to the constitution and democracy in her advice on how to act in a social world. Grace, on the other hand, does not write about understanding but about empathic acceptance, and in doing so alludes to insights from identity politics. Her essay relates to a world where biases stand in the way of a sense of unity, and to biases that reside within individuals and might prevent ‘truth’. The humanistic message is that empathic acceptance is the instrument that can bind people together on a psychological and emotional level. These mechanisms concern all humans across any difference.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

In our analysis of the adaptation of a Norwegian filmic melodrama for a young American audience, we have pointed to the change in the conflict level as a decisive departure from the original version. In doing so, we have drawn attention to qualities inherent in young adult dramatic fiction, especially filmic melodrama, rather than to other aspects that might explain why the adaptation failed to create the expected level of engagement in a young audience. Adding an inner conflict to the interrelational conflict of a feminist falling in love with a womanizer already in the presentation phase, the adaptation departs from the familiarized romantic melodrama (Evans; Harms Larsen; Skarstein). We have highlighted two implications: the reliance on telling in addition to showing, and the extended use of point of view. To a much lesser extent than the original version, the adaptation invites the

audience to deliberate the nature of young women's dilemmas by drawing on their own everyday experiences and theories of how the world works and what love is. By establishing the conflict as a tension between feminist resistance and desire, the adaptation uses a voiceover that tells the audience exactly how to understand Grace's dilemma. Conveyed in a diegetic TED talk and a book Grace reads, this dilemma is confirmed and repeated in the dialog in other key scenes throughout the season. As such, the adaptation frames and narrows the interpretation space and the possibilities of deliberating the values at stake, a possibility that marked the online engagement of the original (see Hornmoen et al.; Lindtner and Dahl).

Secondly, while the original presents an interrelational conflict level well fitted for the filmic medium, the inner conflict of the adaptation is depicted with an extended use of point of view. This is indicative of the overall visual style of the adaptation. In the book Grace reads in the scene "Desire", Solnit urges feminists to challenge the socially imposed categories through which they see men, and which make women fear them. Through the camera work, staging, and supra-narrative content, the adaptation clearly directs the audience's gaze toward boys in general, and Daniel in particular. Grace's task is visually shown to be to explore *who Daniel is*. Whereas the original version never clearly reveals that Noora 'sees' William until she learns about his tragic childhood, the audience of the adaptation are introduced to Daniel through Grace's point of view right from the start. The first time we see him, the girls watch him at the football field. When Grace asks, "Who is Daniel?", Kelsey tells her he is the "the best football-player in Bouldin High" and "the most gorgeous guy in all Central Texas" (*SKAM Austin 1*, "Bone structure of a God" 00.02.07-00.02.16). In the following slow-motion sequence, Grace's inner-desire for Daniel is established at the same time as her open discontent with him is revealed through cross-cutting between Grace's gaze, Daniel working out, drinking water and pouring water over himself, and Grace rolling her eyes and declaring: "that's the biggest cliché I've ever seen" (00.03.07). This kind of framing continues throughout the series. Despite Grace's recurring remarks about how Daniel is "uninteresting", has got "white, male privileges", "is not a good person" (*SKAM Austin 2*, "Not a good person" 00.01.42-00.01.51), is "fucked up", and "violent" (*SKAM Austin 2*, "Violent person" 00.01.23-00.01.26), Daniel is presented through her gaze as an object of hidden desire and sexual lust. In doing so, the adaptation complicates the task of making sense of the conflict by adding this extra layer of mediation. Moreover, whereas William is presented as a stereotypical villain – someone highly attractive, dark, handsome, yet cold and untrustworthy and a clear opposite to the blond and innocent Noora – Daniel is presented as warm, kind, respectful, and a far less opposite character to Grace, who in this adaptation appears much less innocent and more sexually active and wanting than Noora. The problem is Grace's gaze. It calls attention to how the conflict is fixed within Grace and her task to explore the nuances and complexities behind the gendered blinders through which she sees the world. While the audience of the original version is invited to deliberate William's

actions, the audience of the adaptation is invited to scrutinize Grace's ambivalent gaze and attraction towards Daniel.

In the original version, the rhetoric of extremes is staged and restaged as agonistic values incarnated in the loving couple. In the adaptation, the extremes are translated into conflicting values inside the protagonist that make the outer, interrelational action between the couple of lesser importance. Duckels and Kapurch bring young adult, girl, and queer culture into the conversation with melodrama particularly by pointing to the use of extremes that "create a space for critical renegotiations of meaning, especially because of the mode's capacity to critique the very extreme it represents" (Kapurch 4). Although both versions make use of the rhetoric of extremes as well as the capacity to critique them, the nature of the extremes in the adaptation complicates the critique when the medium is filmic, inviting the audience to study the visual style rather than the story.

Our analysis cannot draw any conclusions when it comes to actual audiences, but our study of dramaturgy indicates differences that may affect engagement and the invited audience positions. While the adaptation appears to be as aesthetically and narratively coherent and more updated in its efforts to discuss current feminist issues such as #metoo, toxic masculinity, and identity politics, the implications of the chosen conflict level make the adaptation less cinematic and less melodramatic, especially when it comes to Duckels', Kapurch's, and Drotner's remarks about melodramas uses of exaggeration and extremes.

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