

# Creating Identity in Interaction with Business Media

Strandgaard Pedersen, Jesper; Boutaiba, Sami

*Document Version*  
Final published version

*Publication date:*  
2004

*License*  
CC BY-NC-ND

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Strandgaard Pedersen, J., & Boutaiba, S. (2004). *Creating Identity in Interaction with Business Media*.

[Link to publication in CBS Research Portal](#)

## General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

## Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us (research.lib@cbs.dk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Download date: 01. Feb. 2023



# Working Paper

**No. 2004.19**

**Sami Boutaiba  
& Jesper Strandgaard Pedersen**

**Creating Identity  
in Interaction with Business Media**

**INSTITUT FOR ORGANISATION OG ARBEJDS SOCIOLOGI**

Handelshøjskolen i København

Solbjerg Plads 3

2000 Frederiksberg

Tlf: 38 15 28 15      Fax: 38 15 28 28

Paper prepared for presentation at Department of Organization and Industrial Sociology, 'Winter Games', December 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> 2004. <sup>1</sup>

Creating Identity in Interaction with Business Media

**By**

**Sami Boutaiba,**

Copenhagen Business School  
Department of Organization and Industrial Sociology,  
Solbjerg Plads 3, 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, Block B  
DK- 2000 Frederiksberg C,  
Denmark  
(SB.ioa@cbs.dk)

**Jesper Strandgaard Pedersen,**

Copenhagen Business School  
Department of Organization and Industrial Sociology,  
Solbjerg Plads 3, 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, Block B  
DK- 2000 Frederiksberg C,  
Denmark  
(JS.ioa@CBS.dk)

---

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper has been presented at Sub-theme 19: 'Bridging Creativity and Management: Exploring Dynamic Relationships', 20<sup>th</sup> EGOS Colloquium: 'The Organization as a Set of Dynamic Relationships', Ljubljana, Slovenia July 1-3, 2004. We would like to acknowledge the helpful suggestions from our two discussants Simone Ferriani and Joeri Mol.

# Creating Identity in Interaction with Business Media

**Sami Boutaiba**

**Department of Organization and Industrial Sociology,  
Copenhagen Business School**

**Jesper Strandgaard Pedersen,**

**Department of Organization and Industrial Sociology,  
Copenhagen Business School**

“... *The difference between what you should be and what you are is something that means quite a lot to me. That’s why idealism, or the idealist, interest me as much as they do*”. Lars Von Trier (*Tranceformer: A Portrait of Lars Von Trier*) here from G. Giralt, spring 2001 ([www.arts.uwaterloo.ca.Fine/juhde/giral011](http://www.arts.uwaterloo.ca/Fine/juhde/giral011))

## **1. Introduction**

In contemporary society, it is believed that things are changing at an increasingly rapid pace. We see this in newspapers, books, or every speech we listen to that modern (business) life is a race towards new horizons, or towards newness *tout court*. No matter which standpoint one engages vis-à-vis the rhetoric of change and the accompanying need to innovate and be *creative*, it is important to reflect upon the way one presents oneself vis-à-vis important stakeholders, including the most *invested* stakeholder – oneself. It is also within the strong rhetoric of change, that we witness an often-mentioned *observation* that economic transformation and globalization continue to alter how organizations and employees view work, and that these transformations require that workers and managers understand and adjust to major changes in definitions of and approaches to work, organizational structures, and relationships within and among organizations. Social scientists like Caves (2000) and Florida (2002) argue that *creativity*, as a resource, is critical for long-term economic development and that *creative industries*, in particular, act as agents of change that help drive economic development. In fact, creative industries are experiencing rapid growth, both in Denmark (Kultur- og Erhvervspolitisk Redegørelse, 2000; Regeringen, September, 2003) and globally (Pine and Gilmore, 1999), and it is generally believed that there are important lessons to be learnt from the “cultural, creative motor”. Yet, they are little understood. Caves (2000) notes that, ‘economists have studied a number of industrial sectors for their special and distinctive features’, but have largely missed ‘the creative industries supplying goods and services that we broadly associate with cultural, artistic, or simply entertainment value’ (Caves, 2000:1).<sup>2</sup> What researchers of creative industries have yet to examine, is not only *how* organizations within the creative industries operate and *how* the organizational members define and manage work, but also *how* the very meaning of being a creative company is performed, for example in a process of narrative identity construction. Thus, the *purpose* of this study is to identify and understand the narrative

---

<sup>2</sup> According to Caves (2002), ‘creative industries’ include: book and magazine publishing, the visual arts (painting, sculpture), the performing arts (theatre, opera, concerts, dance), sound recordings, cinema and TV films, and even fashion and toys and games.

forms and processes through which creative enterprises organize and manage their symbolic communication and, in the process, attempt to balance creative-artistic and commercial interests.

In this paper, we shall focus upon Zentropa, a filmmaking company that has generally been accredited with the etiquette of 'creative agent of change' vis-à-vis the Danish film industry. Thus, Zentropa is recognized as a creative player that has made a difference and it is to this narrative of Zentropa as a creative company that we direct our attention. More specifically, we propose that it matters *what* narrative is told about a company, and *how* a specific narrative is enacted, changed, and challenged during the course of a specific development. For a company like Zentropa, for whom the modern mantra 'there is more identity in deviation than in conformity' (see e.g. Bauman, 2000; Giddens, 1991; Sennett, 1998), it seems vital to represent and identify themselves as anti-establishment and a rebel with a cause in its way of being a film company in the Danish film field. The very concern with deviation, with being different, seems to force Zentropa to engage in ongoing reflections as to their own narrative identity. In a more general vein, we contend that there is a great need to come to a better understanding of the dynamics of identity (as also pointed out by Albert et al., 2000:14) in a society that appears restless in its infatuated praise of speed, innovation, and change. These are values with consequences for the way we make sense of ourselves and relate to others. Moreover, these are values that seem embodied by the exemplary case chosen in this project, namely Zentropa, an organization that seems almost exhibitionistic in its constant involvement in dialogues in the public space. Thus, Zentropa seems an exemplary case to study the narrative concern of being innovative, as Zentropa has become widely renowned for being innovative and for having contributed to a long-overdue renewal of the Danish film industry, as important characters in the story of Zentropa have narrated themselves as a '*Maverick*' (Becker, 1982) within the high-framework filmmaking and is generally recognized as a remarkable example of *innovativeness* in Denmark (Kultur- og Erhvervsministeriet, 2000).

This paper focuses more specifically on the way in which Zentropa performs an identity in interaction with one of its very significant others, namely the written press. This paper is in particular interested in studying how organizations through different forms of interaction and communication with the business media present and get their enterprises represented. Communication is obviously not a one-way street, thus this study will focus on *the complex interaction* between the creative enterprise and the business media.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### **The Question of Identity**

Identity can be approached in different ways and with different emphasis (Pratt and Foreman, 2000). The theoretical framework for this study is in general terms rooted in theories of organizational sociology and on theories of identity construction (e.g. Albert and Whetten, 1985; Albert, Ashforth and Dutton, 2000; Pratt and Foreman, 2000; Gioia, Schultz and Corley, 2000; and Hogg and Terry, 2000) and, more specifically, theories on narrative (Carr, 1986; Czarniawska, 1999; Gabriel, 2000; Boje, 2001).

A narrative approach to identity construction and organizing has only recently been acknowledged within organization studies (Gabriel, 2000; Boje, 2001; Czarniawska, 1997). With the ambition of coming to an understanding of communicative processes in a contemporary society that understands itself as fluid, there seems to be a great need to work towards a conceptualization of an approach to

narrative that is thoroughly processual (Boutaiba, 2003). A narrative approach takes to understand how specific actors discursively position themselves vis-à-vis specific conditions of possibility and constraints within a creative industries field. Instead of assuming that organizational identity is about that which is central, enduring, and distinctive (Albert and Whetten, 1985), we concentrate our efforts on understanding the *work* and *strategic efforts* involved in the performance of specific identity-narratives. By applying a process perspective we want to achieve two goals: 1) to get away from an *essentialist* view on identity that may be read into the three defining characteristics where you easily get the impression of a *core*, of a substance that is somehow at the fundamental bottom of what an organization 'really' is, and 2) to draw attention to the performative aspect of identity construction and to the notion of narrative identity as an ongoing and never ending process of construction. In this view, the answer to what we are and who we are as an organization is to be understood in terms of the way the ongoing narration proceeds. This emphasis upon the ongoing narrative and performative character can be found in the works of various authors from very different traditions such as that of Karl Weick (1995) and Barbara Czarniawska (1999), but perhaps most elaborated in the writings of David Carr (1986) and Mikhail Bakhtin (1981).

### **Narratives and Identity**

The idea that narratives matter in understanding organizations and organizing has already been emphasized in various organizational studies (Schein, 1994; Martin et al., 1983; Boland and Tankasi, 1995; Fineman and Gabriel, 1996; Czarniawska, 1998, 1999; Gabriel, 2000; Weick and Browning, 1986). For instance, Yannis Gabriel (2000) explores how the idea of *narrative genres* can be used as an interpretive device in trying to understand the way different members of organizations make sense of events in everyday organizational life. Likewise, Downing (1997) draws upon the idea of *narrative genres* in order to understand the way members from different organizational layers create different, often colliding, narratives of major organizational changes. Thus, often members from management narrate organizational changes within the *romantic genre* that cast management, and everyone willing to follow up upon the challenge *they devise*, as heroes on a demanding but potentially rewarding *quest*. Contrary to this, non-managerial members often make sense of organizational changes within the frame of a *tragic narrative* that casts management as destroyers of a status quo far better than the envisioned future.

However, approaching narrative through this literary idea of genres and the specific structural elements characteristic of these genres has not been the only way in which a narrative vocabulary has entered organizational studies. Thus, organizational scholar Barbara Czarniawska (1998, 1999) has quite persistently tried to discuss both the way organization studies can be approached as a literary genre in its own right as well as the way a narrative vocabulary can do something to our understanding of processes of organizing. Approaching organizing through narratives, Czarniawska draws upon philosopher of history, Hayden White, to emphasize an important distinction between *chronicles* and *narratives*. Thus, chronicles are articulations of sequences of events and/or actions, one following the other, without providing a sense of *why* this sequence came about in the first place. As it is, narratives *perform* this *why* through *configuring* the sequences of events into an

integrated whole. That is, narratives make sense of the raw flux of events<sup>3</sup>, thus enabling humans and human collectives to navigate in the world with some sense of direction. They do this by fusing the *point* of the story with a certain *developmental sequence* and *structure* that makes this point possible. Notwithstanding the great contribution to the understanding of how people make sense of events that *the idea of plots* actually provide us with (see also Brooks, 1984), there is also a sense in which a too strong focus upon plots and plotting risks *totalizing* (obviously the greatest achievement any organizing effort can dream of) a flow of events into *one organizing, red thread*. Even though we may readily acknowledge that Czarniawska simply evokes the idea of plot to inform the reader how people quite efficiently make sense of the events of everyday life, the great emphasis on plots as the perhaps most used *device of sensemaking* (with reference to Walter Fisher, 1987), an emphasis that is also obvious in Jerome Bruner's (1990) treatment of narrative, has the risk of turning complex sequences of events into a tightly structured point entrapped in a developmental logic that is too *singularized*. A critique forwarded by David Boje (1995, 2001), who actually translates it into a critique of management, who is often in a position to create the kind of space for their story to be *heard* and *told* and perhaps also for getting and oppressing the right kind of information to support their story. Hence Boje's call for a consideration of the value of *ante-narrative* (2001), an expression borrowed from Paul Ricoeur (1984) to point out the fact that too *smooth* and well-organized narratives are perhaps also silencing other voices in a way that calls for counter-narratives, or, more to the point, counter-fragments that creates small fissures in the otherwise smooth narrative plane 'from above'.

### **Identity and Dialogue**

In fact, Boje's point is considered a very important critique that also informs the present study, and it is a critique that already installs the idea of *multiple voices* that has also informed the very design of our study (i.e. the choice of considering journalists' accounts as well as accounts of people from Zentropa). The reason for this is simple indeed. Thus, what we investigate in this study is the way identity is narrated in everyday life, an important part of which is the ongoing interaction with the media. In this situation, it seems obvious that identities are not just narrated in an unbounded sense, from an intentionally driven managerial privileged position. Instead, the narrative identity (ies) performed are already entering a *dialogue*, perhaps even a battle, and definitely a *negotiation*, between ordinary members, between management and members, and between certain members of Zentropa and the kind of media-framing that partly conditions the way they narrate themselves. No matter what particular dialogic situation we address, it must be readily understandable that too smooth narratives are most likely to be challenged, for instance by journalist whose *métier* it is to reach for other angles (although not always living up to this standard), and to write a narrative themselves, on their own premises that is.

While the *dialogic situation* seems quite readily understandable in this context, the project engenders a possibility for a *conceptualization* of narrative identity and identity performance with wide consequences in general. As it has already been noted elsewhere (Somers and Gibson, 1994),

---

<sup>3</sup> In the present discussion, we shall not occupy ourselves with the philosophical question as to whether narratives ought to be considered as an ontological premise (Carr, 1986) or as an inevitable imposition on raw reality (White, 1973) that seems so vital for commentators on the philosophy of history.

<sup>6</sup> See also appendix 1. for an overview of Zentropa's historical development.

every act of narration is already in a dialogue with a larger cultural, narrative setting, and the specific cultural narrative setting that preoccupies us here is the one already touched upon in the introduction, namely the contemporary quest for *identity deviation*, a feature which is then, ironically, already pregnant with an element of conformity (Strandgaard Pedersen and Dobbin, 1997; Boutaiba & Strandgaard Pedersen, 2003; Alvarez et al. 2003) in a society immensely occupied with ongoing change and innovation (Sennett, 1998; Bauman, 2000; Giddens, 1991). Analyzing how the identity is narrated in interviews, in meetings, and in the media emphasizes in a very explicit manner how identity is *performed in dialogue*. Whether *asserting* or *questioning* our identity (to the extent we can make this distinction at all), we never do it in *splendid isolation*. In pursuing this line of argumentation, the project actually continues and critically contributes to the *decentering* of matters of identity that was also the subject of Shotter's and Gergen's seminal work in the book called 'Texts of Identity' (Shotter and Gergen, eds. 1989).

#### Identity maintenance and ephemeral narratives

To perform identity-work in a permanent dialogue with significant others is another way of saying that we are somehow always situated on the edge of the ongoing narration. That is, we become what we are in the process and we come to recognize ourselves as products of this very same process. In this understanding, the identity of someone or something becomes a somewhat *fragile* notion and, change is perceived as a condition of life rather than something that is specific for our epoch. Hence, even the things that apparently remain the same usually demand a great deal of work in order to, just to choose a wording close to Albert and Whetten's, maintain an *enduring* identity. In fact, it is exactly the oftentimes changing nature of this 'maintenance' work that makes it somewhat difficult to speak about identities that remain the same, refuses to change, etc. Thus, *what we do* to maintain specific etiquettes of identity *and the etiquettes we use* to say who we are (e.g. the narration of a maverick-identity) *both* matter to the understanding of matters of identity. Notably, the work needed to maintain an identity cannot be predicted, as it depends upon the various dialogic relations with those important others that participate in the definition of who and what we are by addressing certain matters as opposed to others (e.g. what topics are addressed by the press?), and by doing it in certain ways as opposed to others (e.g. what are the tactics used for coping with the ways certain matters are raised by the press).

It is this very *dialogic* and *becoming* aspect of identity that makes it so blatantly obvious why identities are so much more fragile and potentially ephemeral than we usually take them to be. This is exactly the type of discussion we intend to engage ourselves in with this project. To this purpose, we propose a notion of narrative *identity-work*. Thus, identity-work connotes the belief that there is a whole lot of work involved in performing an identity. Identity is not simply there, ready to be *unfolded*, *discovered*, or whatever metaphor one might use to suggest that the essential identity is already there, whether hidden or not. On the contrary, there is a lot of work involved in the production of identity. In fact, this is also what we aim to make obvious in our analysis of the way identity-work is performed by a specific company in the film industry, namely *Zentropa*.

### 3. Research Design

There are a number of reasons why the Danish filmmaking company Zentropa has been selected as an interesting case and they can be summarized as follows. *First*, Zentropa has in general been a very successful company and they and their products (the films) have gained a lot of attention



through reviews, comments and awards producing numerous of occasions for communication. *Second*, they have engaged in active communication with the media and have had to answer a lot of questions from various journalists, and this is material that is easily accessible. *Third*, Zentropa appears as very willing to and very focused on communicating with their surrounding world, not the least with the media, performing a very distinct identity and seems very preoccupied with the way they narrate themselves. As such, they are used to and comfortable talking and reflecting upon their own identity, which is seen as a resource in this study. *Finally*, Zentropa and its self-narrated drive towards innovating and being a rebellious ‘Maverick’ is seen to be a case in extremis of modern society’s predominant discourse on change, innovation, and of rising above the anonymous crowd. Zentropa does this (and does it well), not the least via its two main protagonists the director (founder and co-owner) Lars Von Trier and CEO (founder and co-owner) Peter Aalbæk Jensen, and we need to come to an understanding of how they do it and the kind of consequences it has for a company’s way to relate to itself and others.

### **Data and Methods**

The overall approach to the study of Zentropa and its interaction with the media is that of a case study and relying on multiple data sources. The data sources consist of seven in depth *interviews* with informants from Zentropa and from the media (the press), supplemented by *articles from News papers* together with other *documentary material* like: biographies and books on Peter Aalbæk Jensen and Lars Von Trier; special books (like Jacobsen, 2003 on the process of making of ‘*Dogville*’) and Videos (like ‘The Purified’ by Jargil, 200? on the Dogma Manifesto) as one type of public, *confessional practice*; together with interviews and ‘behind-the-scene’ extra-material from DVD-films.

The primary criteria for selection of *informants from Zentropa* for the interviews, was that the informants should somehow be involved in or responsible for media-contact. Following from that criteria four interviews with informants from Zentropa were conducted, taped and later transcribed. Hence, one interview has been conducted with the managing director, founder and co-owner of Zentropa, who has been highly exposed in the media and the person speaking on behalf of Zentropa in the media. A second interview has been made with a well-established and experienced male producer primarily producing films for a Danish audience. A third interview was held with a female, up-coming, younger producer primarily producing films for an international audience. These two producers are responsible for media contacts in relation to the launch of their films. Apart from these interviews we conducted an initial interview with a respondent – a resource person – who provided us with background information on Zentropa, their history, their organizing of media contacts and provided us also with suggestions for who to approach regarding interviews. With these interviews, we aimed at exploring the way people in Zentropa *make sense of* their interaction with the media. The idea behind these interviews was not only to help us understand the *narratives* within which media-interaction is understood, the idea was also to help us come to an appreciation of the more *strategic* aspect of media-interaction in Zentropa.

*Interviews with informants from the media*, have also been carried out. These interviews have been conducted with journalists specialized in film industry/cultural industry and with journalists who have written a number of articles on Zentropa and have extensive and prolonged experience in

interacting with Zentropa. Thus, based on studies of articles written on Zentropa and recommendations from informants from Zentropa, three journalists from three different, Danish daily newspapers were selected and interviews were conducted, taped and transcribed with these three informants. The three journalists represented three different Danish dailies and three different ways of perceiving and interacting with Zentropa. One journalist from Berlingske Tidende was selected, who was very sceptical towards Zentropa and had critical approach to Zentropa. This journalist tended to view Zentropa and write his articles from a business and management perspective. A second journalist from Politiken was interviewed, who was critical-supportive of Zentropa and tended to write his articles from a film industry and film production perspective. Finally, a journalist from Information, who was very supportive of Zentropa, was interviewed. This journalist saw himself more as a film critic and hence tended to write his articles on Zentropa taking a point of departure in the film products and their artistic qualities.

Through this research design the study aims at providing answers to the following specific research questions: *In pursuing an identity by means of interaction with the media, 1) What are the resources respectively Zentropa and the journalists mobilize in an attempt to create an identity for Zentropa? 2) What are the symbols and activities they make use of? 3) How do they legitimize their actions?*

#### **4. Brief account on Zentropa,**

##### *Establishment of Zentropa A/S*

Zentropa Entertainment productions company was founded in 1992 by film director Lars von Trier and producer Peter Aalbæk Jensen<sup>6</sup>. They created the company to give Lars von Trier artistic freedom to make the films he envisioned. The two met at the National Film School of Denmark in the mid 1980s, von Trier had just graduated as a director and Aalbæk Jensen was near graduation as a producer (Wilhelmsen, 2000). The new company would produce feature films and earn money from making commercials, and it would be a 50:50 partnership between von Trier and Aalbæk Jensen, with an even split of all profits and an equal stake in all decisions (Stevenson, 2002). Von Trier and Aalbæk Jensen invested almost all their profits in film equipment, and by 1994 they owned 10 million Dkk in equipment, primarily earned from von Trier's commercials, many made for German companies (Stevenson, 2002). By owning their equipment, they were able to reduce costs on their own productions and generate income by renting the equipment out. Furthermore the equipment could function as collateral in co-production arrangements.

Zentropa soon found a home in a former tobacco factory in Ryesgade in the City of Copenhagen. Soon after that several other film companies joined them, including Peter Bech Films and Nimbus Films. In the late 1990s they grew out of the facility in Ryesgade and in 1999 they moved to a disused military facility in suburban area south of Copenhagen called Avedøre, and established what now is known as the 'Film Town'. The Film Town in Avedøre had by 2002 grown into a site hosting about 20 different companies with around 200 people working on a day-to-day basis (Stevenson, 2002).

##### *The products.*

Zentropa became to begin with, in particular known through Von Trier's various projects – he came up with ideas for some of the most important (and commercially successful) films, such as, the Gold

Hearted Trilogy: "Breaking the Waves" (1996), "The Idiots" (1998), and "Dancer in the Dark" (2000) and the new Trilogy beginning with "Dogville" (2003); and television series from Zentropa such as "The Kingdom I & II" (1994 & 1997), "The Teacher's Room" (1994), "Quiet Waters" (1998-99), and "Project D-day" (2000). A part from these productions and projects Von Trier was also prime initiator together with Thomas Vinterberg in the formulation of the 'Dogma Manifesto' that outlined 10 rules for production of films in a 'wow of chastity'. The Dogma Manifesto has inspired a lot of filmmakers in Denmark and abroad, which has led to more than 30 Dogma certified films (Hjort and MacKenzie eds. 2003). Later on other producers, film directors and their films has become known and recognized through awards and box office sales (e.g. 'Italian for Beginners' directed by Scherfig; 'Bænken' and 'Arven' directed by Fly and both produced by Tardini).

#### *The company.*

Zentropa is a full-service organization when it comes to producing feature films. This means that all functions from concept development to pre-production, production and post-production and distribution are being dealt with *within* the company.

In 2002 Zentropa was the owner or co-owner of around 40-50 different companies in Denmark and abroad. Around 50% of these companies has Zentropa as the exclusive owner and covers a product line from: children's movies, documentaries, TV-productions, Internet and multi-media productions, low budget experimental films, to expensive, high profiled international productions (Darmer, Strandgaard Pedersen and Brorsen, 2003).

Today (2004) Zentropa has grown to be the largest production company in Scandinavia when measured by output. It has grown to a workforce of more than 70 employees. Between 1994 and 2001 they have produced over 50 feature films and have further increased their library by buying the rights for 'Europa' from Nordisk Film with an aim to be able to sell von Trier's films as a package (Stevenson, 2002).

### **5. The Standard story**

When you read your way through the numerous articles and books that have been written on the film director Lars Von Trier, his partner Peter Aalbæk Jensen and their co-owned film production company Zentropa, two observations can be made. The first observation is that the existing academic literature almost exclusively takes a cineastic perspective focusing on the products (the feature films) and on the artistic effort, first and foremost embodied by the film director Lars von Trier. This also means that the academic literature focusing on Zentropa as a commercial business activity is almost non-existing. The second observation is that even though an academic tale about Zentropa is not to be found, a standard story or standard narrative can be identified. This story is told with various emphasises depending on the storyteller and the context, but the versions are basically variations over the same theme. The standard narrative goes like this:

*"They story begins in 1992 when Zentropa was founded in a backyard in the centre of Copenhagen. Zentropa was a partnership between Lars Von Trier ('The Little Man' or 'Mite') and Peter Aalbæk Jensen ('The Eel') who were two old friends from the Danish film school. Both had recently flopped commercially with their previous productions ("Europa" and "Perfect World"). They formed*

*Zentropa to provide von Trier with maximal freedom to produce the films he wanted to produce – and which nobody else would dare to produce. These two partners are very different characters - von Trier is the shy, film genius, the creative force who provide the artistic input in the relationship, whereas Aalbæk Jensen is the extrovert, outspoken, ‘film Merchant’, always with a huge cohiba cigar in his hand when portrayed. Zentropa, represented by von Trier and Aalbæk Jensen, see themselves, and are seen by other people in the Danish film industry, as a ‘Rebel’ and a ‘Maverick’. They provoke and rebel against existing film conventions and the film establishment – and are successful in doing so. So successful – commercially as well as artistically - that they have turned the Danish film industry upside down, have revitalized Danish film and even become famous internationally”.*

In what follows, we shall elaborate upon the epic quality of the standard narrative written above and analyze the more specific ways in which an epic frame is, on the one hand, enacted by Zentropa and, on the other, both supported and challenged by journalists.

## **6. The Standard Story Is Challenged**

Zentropa is a good story. Even though media journalists represent different positions and have different kinds of relations and history with Zentropa, they seem to share the idea that Zentropa is a good story. Zentropa is well aware of this too, as several of our informants inside as well as outside Zentropa emphasized. In spite of this several attempts have been made to challenge the standard story and epic narrative.

### **The Heroic Genesis – Zentropa on Zentropa**

There are good reasons to dwell a little bit upon the way Zentropa actively places themselves in an overall narrative framework that somehow provides them with their *raison d’être* and to relate their interaction with one of its very important external constituencies, namely the press, to this narrative framework.

Thus, it is not only possible to perceive of Zentropa’s developmental narrative in terms of an epic (Gabriel, 2000: 73), the CEO of Zentropa also very specifically relates the character of Zentropa to one highly celebrated and widely known protagonist amongst the long list of protagonists in Danish fairy tales, namely that of Clumsy-Hans. Clumsy-Hans is the hero of the fairy tale of the same name written by the renowned H.C. Andersen (see appendix 2 for a brief summary of the tale of Clumsy Hans).

*‘And everybody somehow appreciate that one is a bit cheeky, and they don’t care if we say we are communists when we speak to someone from Venstre and Dansk Folkeparti (the two rightwing parties in Denmark, eds.), and I can also give Louise Frevert (politician from Dansk Folkeparti and spokeswoman in matters of cultural politics, eds.) a punch on the nose and wipe in the ass. So, we can get accepted, because we are that Clumsy-Hans character that is so easy for the Dane to handle’. (interview with CEO of Zentropa, 06.01.2004: 16).*

*‘...and that is such a Clumsy-Hans myth surrounding us, also abroad, because there we are obviously very small as compared to the other companies... well, its like up on the goat and mud in the pocket,*

*you see, and then throw it in the direction of the aldermen and stuff like that, you see...And it is....well, we are a 100% US-hostile even though virtually all our films are sold to the US...there is also, well we always appear on the media, if we do something for an American magazine, then its always with the red star or the hammer and the sickle behind or something like that...well it is...and our films are also like that, but what the hell, but at the same time we have a pipeline of dollars lying there, you see, into our account, well they simply think it is hilarious'. (interview with CEO of Zentropa, Peter Aalbæk Jensen, 06.01.2004: 13)*

Broadly stated, the standard narrative of Zentropa written above roughly follows the same developmental structure as Clumsy-Hans, and it is in this sense that we may think of it as a heroic genesis. Lars Von Trier, the character often recognized as a weird and shy genius, and the merchant, Peter Aalbæk Jensen, depicted as the extremely communicating person who 'has a meaning about everything' (journalist, Berlingske Tidende, 09.03.2004: 3), start out on the very margins of the Danish film field (seemingly with little going for them, except perhaps for their talent and potential, but, hélas, both talent and potential is often only seen and recognized in retrospect), they fought for some years against the established actors in the Danish Film field using unconventional means (e.g, the manner of handling the press, as presented later in the text) and producing unconventional films, and wended up a successful film production company accredited for revitalizing Danish Film. No little achievement, most would probably agree, and it is also in this narrative form that we come closest to what we might call a wish-fulfilment dream (Frye, 1957: 186).

### **In Search of 'Truth' - Journalistic Approaches to Zentropa**

Now, Clumsy-Hans is a fairy tale and fairy tales, more than anything else, assumes a suspension of disbelief. However, while Zentropa may exhibit a developmental, narrative structure that shares important element with that of Clumsy-Hans, the suspension of disbelief of Zentropa's audience is at best *partial* and always at the risk of falling prey to a journalistic practice that, at least in its own understanding, purport to represent facts (Gabriel, 2000: 28) in the quest for telling the 'true' story. Or as journalist from Berlingske Tidende mentions contemplating whether it is important if Lars Von Trier is faking his mystical, oftentimes shy and unreachable, and neurotic character or not:

*'Well it is! From a journalistic point of view it is important to disclose, we always want the full and true story'. (interview with journalist from Berlingske Tidende, 09.03.2004: 15).*

Moreover, while the conventional reading of fairy tales straightforwardly contents itself with the passive aftermath epitomized in the 'they lived happily ever after', the narrative of Zentropa *goes on*. No quiet aftermath here, and it would only seem that journalists are, if not longing to become able to tell an entirely different story, then definitely on the lookout for smaller counter-fragments that will disturb Zentropa's attempts to cast itself as a univocal heroic character. As one of the journalists cautiously mentions in an interview:

*'...One has to be careful not to tell the typical story of Zentropa. Because the typical, the one that I can sit down and write virtually without talking to anybody, that is, once again Zentropa has succeeded through unconventional means to do blablabla ... and stuff like that, you see...? And this is a good story without edges and everything, and this we do know that they have done various stuff and*

*so on. This is why I believe it is important that, it is important in life in general but especially when it comes to Zentropa, all the time to be saying: hey, what is going on here!?* (interview with journalist from Politiken, 24.03.04: 9).

However, while the quotes already imply what we may depict as the journalistic attitude of suspicion, it is also essential to mention that none of the journalist seems to stand critical vis-à-vis Zentropa's genesis. The coming into being of Zentropa seems to be praiseworthy indeed, and it is in this sense that we may speak of a *mutual enactment* of a heroic past. When asked to tell the overall, typical story of Zentropa, the journalists refer to Zentropa as an entrepreneurial company that dares to make things happen, skilled at what they do, acts with an unprecedented effrontery, unorthodox, and a company that has done a lot for the Danish film industry in general. As with any other epic past (Bakhtin, 1981), Zentropa's past remains largely untouchable in the sense of being almost beyond critique. It is a past that appears to call for our recognition and respect, a past we have to approach with a large portion of reverence.

### **Zentropa and the Poetic Trope of Agency**

More than any other company in the Danish film field, Zentropa seems to embody the contemporary quest for identity deviation so characteristic of modern society and, perhaps more than in any other sphere in society, a distinctive mark of brilliance in an artistic field that provides Zentropa with its share of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1997). These are also the virtuous features of Clumsy-Hans, and in this respect it would seem that the epic status of their evolving narrative remains rather firmly in place. What is true for Clumsy-Hans and for the typical Zentropa-narrative, no matter which journalist we have spoken to, is that it revolves around the poetic trope of *agency*, which is characteristic for epic narratives in general (Frye, 1957: 188; Gabriel, 2000: 74). As the story goes, Zentropa has *done* something, they have *made* a significant difference, and Danish film is no longer the same. One of the very effective rhetorical means that will make us recognize agency is obviously the very act of juxtaposing, of pointing to passivity, preferably to an identified other. Elaborating slightly upon the poetic trope of agency, it seems safe to say that doing and saying the same as everybody else, is virtually a non-action, perhaps even a docile body towards which it makes perfectly good sense to be indifferent to. Action, in this line of argumentation, is about being noticed, which is also an integral part of Zentropa's emphasis upon their very 'exhibitionistic nature' (phrase from interview with CEO of Zentropa), it is about being recognized as different, and it is also this kind of polarization that is characteristic for the way people from Zentropa and people from the written press make sense of Zentropa.

### **The Role of Nordisk Film in the Mythology of Zentropa**

First and foremost, Zentropa has been narrated as the very opposite of Nordisk Film, the grand old, traditionally powerful Danish film company that is also the oldest of its kind in the world (founded 1906). As one journalist states the matter:

*'...that is, Nordisk Film that has essentially been an image with feet of clay, that have had immense difficulty keeping up with Zentropa, that is, they have pulled themselves together lately and found out that "well, its no use that we just sit around here and play the Nordisk Film that we have been for close to 100 years" ...they started back in 1906. So, in two years they can celebrate their 100 years*

*anniversary, and within the last 10 years they have been overtaken from the inside, the outside, from behind and everything, by Zentropa and a lot of the others'. (interview with journalist from Information, 25.03.04: 4).*

In the quote, we clearly see the play of polar opposites. While Zentropa is attributed the hero's power of action, Nordisk Film is deprived of this very same quality. Nordisk Film then becomes the docile body that mechanically repeats its own pattern of behaviour in a manner that will make the ironic observer smile, as seemed to be the case when the journalist from Information evokes the image of a colossus a couple of times in a row. Nordisk Film doesn't move, and we most strongly recognize the developmental narrative of Zentropa *as movement* through this comparison, through the *identification of the leviathan* on the opposite pole, that is (see also Frye, 1957: 189). In fact, as an identified other, Nordisk Film has a very distinct status in the mythology of Zentropa, as people from Zentropa are also quite eager to tell the press and general public on the frequent guided tours of their premises. Thus, right besides the main building of the old military barracks that Zentropa bought as their head quarters is an old, heavy canon allegedly pointing in the direction of Nordisk Film. While an important sign in it self, this visual statement seems part of the story-material that made it possible for Zentropa to be referring to themselves as a Maverick. Moreover it was a kind of visual imagery already connoting a battle, the *agon* of Zentropa's quest, even the kind of battle that is interpreted with some reverence in the grand cultural narratives (Gibson and Somers, 1994) in most parts of the Western world, namely the battle between the small and the big, between the marginal and the central. Listening to the stories of people from Zentropa and from the journalists with whom we have spoken, it is simply remarkable how strictly they follow the dialectical structure of the hero's quest, a structure that appears almost Manichean. This is exactly the rhetorical strength of the quest and its reliance on the battlefield as its primary, underlying metaphor. Thus, in a classic battle, one is able to look an easily recognizable opponent in the eyes, and the battle is the very collision between the absolutely good and the absolutely evil. It is also in this clash of opposites and the way in which it seems a rather reflective part of Zentropa's narrative that the self-narrative of Clumsy-Hans risks subverting itself. Clumsy-Hans was a spontaneous character, which acted intuitively. Zentropa, on the contrary, is remarkably good at telling their story, and the very appellation of Clumsy-Hans as a prominent figure in their self-narrative seems a contradiction in terms.

### **Critical Journalistic Voices**

To be sure, the journalists are also very aware that they need to be somewhat attentive and cautious when it comes to Zentropa, if only for the generally suspicious attitude as to the oftentimes almost too enticing aspects of the typical narrative of Zentropa. Moreover, all the journalists with whom we spoke are well aware that the CEO of Zentropa is rather renowned for stirring up matters that may prove to have little or no substance at all. In short, journalists seem quite conscious of the fact that it demands an active effort on *their part* to avoid being (mis)used for the kind of narrative Zentropa would like to tell about themselves. In what immediately follows, we shall focus more in detail upon the way journalists engage themselves in a critical and challenging dialogue with the evolving Zentropa-narrative.

*‘Well, the angles are, the angles often have something to do with money, when it comes to film, because you need money to make films’ (interview with journalist from Politiken, 24.03.2004).*

In fact, this remark is very characteristic for the way the journalists we interviewed make sense of Zentropa. Money is an important issue in almost any sphere of activity, and this is no less true for the film industry, where the state is quite heavily involved in the funding of specific film productions. To be sure, there are a host of different motives for journalist to be writing critical articles on Zentropa. One prominent motive amongst two of the journalists (from Politiken and Berlingske Tidende) we interviewed was what we might call *saturation*. They were simply fed up with the same old story of Zentropa, the typical one that no longer had any news value at all as everybody knew it.

Another more general motive was a certain *ambition* on behalf of cultural journalism, which these same journalists tended to see as a somewhat heroic quest in it self. Cultural journalism had gone through a process of maturation and some journalists were beginning to take upon them selves to be critical, just as business journalism had done some years before them (interview with journalist from Berlingske Tidende, 09.03.2004: 1). Thus, instead of ‘holding the microphone’ and let sources say whatever they please, the heroic quest of the journalistic enterprise entails a fundamentally critical attitude vis-à-vis ‘cultural companies’ that suddenly have to answer for themselves. What seems to be at stake in this battle against ‘fan-journalism’, as one journalist critically remarks (interview with journalist from Politiken, 24.03.2004:13), is the entire question of authorship. Thus, it appears that an important part of the journalists’ sense of identity is to be able to tell their own story of Zentropa that is not dictated by the frequent rhetoric emanating from the Zentropa CEO, Peter Aalbæk Jensen. Within the larger narrative of cultural journalism as a heroic quest for truth, it simply seems a vital concern to be and remain at a critical distance of the people investigated and written about. It is probably also in this line of reasoning that we should understand a critical remark from one of the journalists regarding the behaviour of fellow journalists from other newspapers. Hence, he considered it severely problematic that some journalists jumped naked into the pool with Zentropa CEO, Peter Aalbaek Jensen, in order to get tickets to a private party Zentropa was hosting in Cannes. As he mentioned it, ‘it doesn’t get more intimate’, pointing to the biggest sin of them all, namely to come much too close to the ones that you should be able to write about in a manner faithful to the journalistic code. By jumping into the pool, these journalists had become enemies of the very progress that this same journalist believed had characterized parts of cultural journalism in Denmark in recent years. As should be obvious from this, there is more at stake than what the story is about. It does not always pertain to the content of the story, but may simply refer to the question of *authorship* more generally speaking. As the journalist from Politiken mentions:

*‘But they [Zentropa] are also good at, they are just as good as using the media. That is, Peter Aalbæk is a genius at it...you sit there each time you have a story about him and weighs it a 100 times. Not because you doubt whether it is true or not, but more like “who’s using who here?”’.*



## **Zentropa and the Money**

An example of this critical attitude that directly touched upon Zentropa as a film-company was a series of articles by the journalist from Berlingske Tidende with titles like: *'Film-money, red numbers in Danish Film'* (JP, 12.06.2001); *'Film Consultants: Clause for film consultants'* (JP, 26.04.2001); *'Dead consultants' society'* (JP, 27.08.2000); *'Film-support: Chairman wants to get rid of film flops'* (25.02.2000); *'Film-support: Zentropa is the worst seller of films'* (JP, 24.02.2000), which were articles clearly trying to articulate another story than the one usually told about Zentropa. This attempts at counter-storying (Boje, 2001) clearly differed from the standard on some dimensions. The grand narratives running through these articles are the poor ability of Danish film to sell its products to the public. The articles even indicate that Danish film is a miserable business and Zentropa is seen to embody this misère as the worst seller of them all. Meanwhile, they are also described as the company that receives the greatest financial support as compared to the number of tickets sold, so something 'smells fishy', the articles seem to imply. The target of the critique is the unfortunate, perhaps even sinister, alliance between the consultants that administer the State's funding for film and Zentropa. The story goes that the relationship between Zentropa and the film consultants is perhaps too close and of a somewhat suspect nature, considering that some of the film consultants have been recruited by Zentropa subsequent to the fixed, 4-year residential period in office administrating film funding agreements. The attack on Zentropa clearly goes beyond the mere fact that a lot of the films produced by Zentropa (and not directed by Von Trier) are not able to attract a big public. Perhaps more severe, the articles are on the brink of being an accusation of a sort of power abuse enabled by their rather quickly established position in the Danish film field and the artistic reputation of its key director Lars Von Trier. Clearly, this is a sort of accusation that critically addresses one of the elements that has filled a lot in the narrative identity Zentropa which has been advancing from its very start, namely that of being the rebel fighting against the establishment in the industry. Suddenly, the articles might imply on a more subtle level, the protagonist and the enemy have exchanged positions in Zentropa's way of going about things without anybody pointing to it. This reading clearly resonates with the fact that the journalists from both Politiken and Berlingske Tidende are very clear about the powerful position Zentropa has acquired in the Danish film industry and in society more generally speaking. Thus, the ultimate critique in the articles is the very attack on another aspect running through the identity-statement given by people from Zentropa, namely notion of some kind of socialist ideology, which, by its very definition, is supposed to be an egalitarian quest to the benefit of the many. Contrary to this, Zentropa is granted *most* of the money for the production of movies that *few* people want to see. Maybe, then, Zentropa is merely downright arrogant in its elitist understanding of its own ambition and role in society. At least, these are some of the questions raised by this series of articles. However, it is probably important to mention that as long as Von Triers films sell well and are favourably reviewed by the film critics, the success-narrative of Zentropa does appear to have some resistance vis-à-vis this critique. Thus, even though Zentropa has come to produce film for a number of other directors than Lars Von Trier, it is still the belief of journalists that Lars Von Trier is the true, creative motor in the company, even to the extent that one journalist states that Zentropa only has one *raison d'être*, namely to allow Lars Von Trier the freedom to direct the movies he would like.

### **To Become too Successful?**

As indicated above, when it comes to the financial aspects in the running of Zentropa as a business, which is personified in what one journalist has called the 'swelling merchant' (interview with journalist from Information, 25.03.2004: 3), something 'smells fishy', judging from the suspicious attitude of some of the journalists interviewed and some of the articles written on Zentropa. Or as journalist from Berlingske Tidende states the matter:

*'...It has been implied in a number of articles that Zentropa has a, this you can tell to Peter Aalbæk Jensen, some form of very 'creative' bookkeeping with all their companies. There is no doubt about that. The question is whether it is against the rules or not, or if they are simply ingenious and good? That story, I believe, has not been fully written as yet'.*

To a large extent, this suspicious attitude is engendered by the very success of Zentropa that, in spite of various attempts at criticism, is recognized by both journalists and people from Zentropa. The sense in which Zentropa's success has become a challenge is neatly captured in a saying from an employee who has worked for Zentropa for some years, who states that '*we (Zentropa, eds.) have been victorious to the point of killing ourselves*' (interview with employee at Zentropa, 27.11.2004: 5). Thus, it is no longer possible to point their finger at the radical other, namely Nordisk Film, which has actually become more of a partner than an enemy in their narrative self-identity. In fact, it is also in this line of argumentation that another critical voice from journalist has been raised. In what follows, we shall give a brief example of this attempt at counter-narrative that was both related to by CEO, Peter Aalbæk Jensen and written about in a specific article. This particular article is called '*The Useful Idiots*' (Berlingske Tidende, 10.11.2002), a title that plays upon the title of von Trier's film '*The Idiots*'. The general storyline resonates that of the employee, only with a much more hostile slant to it. Thus, it stages Zentropa as a company that has gone from a rebellious, philanthropic enterprise to the kind of monopoly that Zentropa used to fight against. A monopoly that uses its newly won status to put a large pressure on the actors' salaries in the name of the 'Dogma concept', and even to lie about the prospect of future royalties. The article even quotes a phrase von Trier is supposed to have uttered during the shooting of the film: '*There is a goal bigger than ourselves. That is the income of Zentropa!*' While articulated as a joke during the shooting of the film, it certainly gains a whole different meaning when placed in a story about a company that pays poor salaries to the actors hired, actors who insist upon an anonymous critique out of fear missing future employment possibilities. It is, in a certain sense, the anti-capitalistic jargon that was definitely easier to uphold in their past character as a small rebel, that comes to haunt them as a ghost from the past. In this counter-storyline, Zentropa is staged as the greedy capitalist, which both films from von Trier's hand and a great number of identity-statements from people within Zentropa seriously oppose

In the above, we have tried to illustrate what Zentropa is all about as understood by people from Zentropa and journalists from the written press. In what follows, we shall focus more particularly upon the form of interaction with the press, as this form is closely interwoven with the content of the story that was analyzed above. We refer to this section as Zentropa's rhetorical strategy, as there seems to be a very specific pattern characteristic of the way the relation with the press is handled, even though the CEO of Zentropa is keen to inform us that there is no strategy, only intuitive action.

## 7. Zentropa's Rhetorical Strategy

Even though everybody seemingly agree that Zentropa is a good story to tell and a good story which is often reproduced not least in the media and in particular in the written press, the very same epic-heroic story on Zentropa has regularly been challenged by the written press. These challenges has often had the character of so called 'media storms' wherein the company has been making headlines in newspapers and often in the form of campaigns going on for several weeks or months. In spite of these challenges from the written press to the standard epic-heroic story, Zentropa appears somehow to have survived the challenges and campaigns. An obvious question to ask is then how Zentropa has responded to these challenges? And, how can we explain that they apparently have managed to respond to these challenges? Thus, in this section we unfold how Zentropa has interacted with the media and what kind of resources they have mobilized in this interaction. Based on interviews with informants from Zentropa and with journalists from the written press, we have identified seven elements and ways of interacting with the press, which we suggest constitutes (at least part of) Zentropa's rhetorical strategy.

The seven elements which we identified are as follows: 1) *Responding to every contact*, 2) *Admitting to everything*, 3) *Turning conflicts into story material*, 4) *Pushing them over the edge*, 5) *Centralizing and personifying responsibility*, 6) *Bill boards in Zentropa* and 7) *Counter-prizes*.

In the following these seven elements and ways of interacting with the press will be outlined and explained further.

### *1) Responding to every contact*

The overall approach and general strategy that Zentropa (primarily represented by the CEO, Aalbæk Jensen) pursues in relation to the media, is to be very open and literally respond to every contact. One of the journalists we interviewed phrased stated it like this,

*" ... Aalbæk Jensen is particularly good at creating and maintaining relations with journalists. He always calls back. You can be sure that you will get a comment from him... he is entertaining, he is sharp and he is relevant, I think. Some people do not like his flamboyant style and think he over sells. I think he is terribly skilful. "*

Responding to every contact is not just to be friendly, but also to build up goodwill and social capital that can be drawn on later when needed. The CEO, founder and co-owner, Aalbæk Jensen, explains it himself in the following words,

*"... Well, it is a relation, where you give somebody something and then they later are willing to return your call and write something on it, that is if there is 'meat' on the story. It is like a trade relation, you see... and I know that when I need it, then I can draw on some larger headlines."* (interview with Aalbæk Jensen, January 2004).

So the general inclination from Zentropa is to be open and perceive the interaction as a mutual relation where you build up networks and goodwill. However, Zentropa's interaction with the media and ways of relating to the journalists holds other elements, which are presented in the sections below.

## 2) *Admitting to everything*

Another element in Zentropa's rhetorical strategy for handling the press and the challenges from the journalists on their epic narrative, is what we have termed '*Admitting to everything*'. In an interview we conducted with one of the founders and co-owners (Aalbæk Jensen) in January 2004, he explained it as follows,

*"... And then you will also notice that we are always offensive and aggressive. I mean all other companies, which are accused of a lot of things, they try to explain themselves. Whereas I always admit the 'billion dollar swindle'. Once I stopped an article, I did admit everything immediately. It is very annoying for such a young man, that has spend ... I mean those two journalists that have researched for almost two years... And when you get there then the idiot admits everything, it must be terribly frustrating for them."* (interview with Aalbæk Jensen, January 2004).

The CEO (Aalbæk Jensen) explains this approach as a 'semi-exhibitionistic' urge, where the purpose or philosophy is, by 'undressing' themselves, to make it almost impossible for other people (and in particular journalists) to 'undress' Zentropa and produce 'sensational' news stories.

## 3) *Turning conflicts into story material*

One example of turning conflicts and potential disasters - that other companies would spend a lot of time and resources to cover – into story material, is the story in relation to the production of Von Trier's Dogma film 'The Idiots' from 1998. In 1999 a story came out in the press that the CEO (Aalbæk Jensen) and the producer (Windeløv) had broken the Dogma rules and changed the lightning in post-production process of the film. In a later interview with a journalist, the CEO, explained the incident and his thoughts about it like this,

*"The first five minutes were so dark, that you could see nothing, and I had 45 people interested in buying the film. So I could not care less about the Dogma rules and as the state had provided me with an expensive education at the Film School, I mended the problem. He [Lars Von Trier] could not see it but somebody told him. He got furious and would not talk to me. But instead of sweeping the conflict under the carpet, I made sure that it became public. We are the film production company that gets most press; like you use us we use you."* (Wilhelmsen, 2000)

In a press meeting a week later on the controversy about the 'lightening problem', Von Trier and Aalbæk Jensen sat in separate corners and talked to two different crowds of journalists, acting as if they were not on talking terms, even though their conflict were settled between the two of them, according to Aalbæk Jensen in a later interview,

*"..But other organizations would try to hide this and sweep it under the carpet. Whereas we automatically make use of the story ... Well, we use this media-wise."* (interview with Aalbæk Jensen, January 2004).

Like the previous element, 2) *Admitting to everything*, thus, the idea of 3) *Turning conflicts into story material*, can be seen as an example of contra-intuitive action performed by Zentropa in relation to the media.

#### 4) *Pushing them over the edge*

In general Zentropa, represented by the CEO, founder and co-owner, Aalbæk Jensen, tends to see the interaction with the journalists and the media as a kind of ‘trades relation’ to mutual benefit (as stated previously under 1) *Responding to every contact*). However, this primarily goes for the journalists with whom they have built up some kind of trust relation. The other category of journalists, by Aalbæk Jensen termed ‘the young men with greasy skin’, are treated differently. They are typically not very friendly towards Zentropa and the strategy is to ‘*Push them over the edge*’, which means to irritate them and make them so aggressive that they come to write something that they have no evidence for and cannot substantiate, which means that their stories are often stopped by the editorial board at the newspaper in question. In an interview Aalbæk Jensen explains it in the following words,

*“Well, they are easy to tease – we give them nicknames. You find out that journalists are human beings with feelings to... and when they are out to get us ... then if you can irritate and make them so angry and aggressive that they are tempted to over-interpret something and do not check it, the way they are supposed to and cover their ass 100%, because they are angry... then sooner or later they foul up and the editorial board have to be on their backs and stop them because they have written something that is not correct.”* (interview with Aalbæk Jensen, January 2004).

#### 5) *Centralizing and personifying responsibility (and interface)*

Zentropa has not formalized their media relation. No position as press or information officer is established. One obvious question is then of course how to handle the media contact. Zentropa has created a division of labour between the producers who are in charge of promoting their products (the films) whereas Aalbæk Jensen is responsible for promoting Zentropa. Aalbæk Jensen depicts it as follows,

*“ ... Well, everything that has to do with the company, that is me, right? And the producers know this very well too ... because there are no one that knows ... I mean, I am the only one around here that knows what is going on ... I mean, we have no formalized information [channels] internally ... everybody is just doing their jobs.”* (interview with Aalbæk Jensen, January 2004).

This centralized role as the promoter of Zentropa that is associated with the CEO, founder and co-owner (Aalbæk Jensen), means also that he personifies Zentropa and absorbs the critique from the media by presenting himself as responsible for mistakes etc. He phrases it the following way,

*“ ... When they [the employees] are the ones working, then I at least can take the beat ups and it is much easier to place the responsibility and the beat ups in one place, right? So instead one saying that the employees have shrewed up, then I say I am the one to blame.”* (interview with Aalbæk Jensen, January 2004).

### 6) Billboards in Zentropa

Another example of contra-intuitive behavior (or at least contrary to typical standard response) and example related to the abovementioned 1) *Admitting to everything* and 2) *Turning conflicts into story material*, is constituted by the billboards in Zentropa. When some journalists from the press have written a series of articles that are critical to Zentropa and their activities, these articles are not hidden away from the employees in Zentropa. On the contrary, these articles are blown up to large billboards (2 by 4 meters) and put up on the wall in the canteen in Zentropa. But whereas the two other elements ('Admitting to everything' and 'Turning conflicts into story material') primarily were externally directed to an audience outside Zentropa, the billboards are first and foremost addressing an internal audience, namely the people working in Zentropa.

### 7) Counter-prizes

Every year during the Cannes film festival, Zentropa gives out awards to journalists. Two prizes are given: 'the sour lemon' to the journalists that Zentropa perceives as being most sceptical and critical towards them and 'the-rub-shoulders' prize, where 20 Euro (formerly 100 FF) is given to the journalists who has been most supportive of Zentropa. These prizes are handed out to the journalists in question in front of their colleagues and some get very annoyed and some do not show up. Those that do not show up are, however, not safe, as Zentropa,

*" ... then sends the 'sour lemon' with B-mail from Cannes, resulting in the lemon arriving at the editorial office of the newspaper in question, totally rotten and decomposed."*

This event is by Zentropa presented as pretty harmless and just to make fun, but you may of course also perceive it as a way to discipline the journalists. The discussion about the handing out of counter-prizes is, however, a bit more complex. This is due to the fact that the journalists do not like to receive any of the prizes, but if they absolutely have to receive a prize then they are somewhat divided on the matter concerning what prize they would prefer (not) to receive. One group of journalists would hate to get the lemon, whereas another group of journalists would really not like to receive the 20 Euro. This clearly depends on the self-perception of the journalist and his or her attitude towards Zentropa.

Even though it could seem as if Zentropa and the CEO (Aalbæk Jensen) do not take the media and critical-sceptical campaigns seriously, this is, however, not the case. Aalbæk Jensen admits that it can be pretty tough to be appearing on the front pages of the newspapers. This experience has inspired him to a certain activity, which he explains as follows,

*"... 'So after I had tried that a couple of times... whenever somebody else came into the 'media-machine'... and in particular the people who have first been celebrated and cherished by the media and then suddenly get beaten up by the same media ... these people I send a cigar – no matter what the hell they are accused of or what political opinion they have – as a kind of symbol of my sympathy."*

Hence, summing up on Zentropa's rhetorical strategy it consists of a variety of actions and elements. A major element in Zentropa's rhetorical strategy has to do with building relations and maintaining networks ('Responding to every contact') in order to create goodwill and be able to

mobilize resources later when needed. The building of relations, however, is not just about creating goodwill, it sometimes holds elements that could be seen as means to discipline the representatives of the press ('Pushing them over the edge' and 'Counter-prizes'). Yet, other elements and actions in Zentropa's rhetorical strategy seem contra-intuitive or at least contrary to mainstream and conventional ways of reacting to 'bad news'. Some of these actions were primarily directed towards an internal audience in Zentropa (e.g. the Billboards) whereas other actions were primarily directed towards an external audience (e.g. 'Admitting to everything' and 'Turning conflicts into story material'). In sum, Zentropa's rhetorical strategy and way of interacting with the press in general appears to be extremely direct and unimpressed, a characteristic that also resonates the maverick-identity that seems so central in the narrative of Zentropa.

## 9. Concluding remarks

Through this research design the study aimed at providing answers to the following specific research questions: *In pursuing an identity by means of interaction with the media, 1) What are the resources respectively Zentropa and the journalists mobilize in an attempt to create an identity? 2) What are the symbols and activities they make use of? 3) How do they legitimize their actions?*

The analysis has shown, that Zentropa very consciously draws upon a specific symbolic, if not mythological, universe in the narrative they perform. The symbolic universe could be summarized as the small (anti-establishment) battling against the big (establishment), the unconventional against convention itself, the ideological against the commercial, the genuine against the strategic and strictly commercial once again. What is characteristic of this kind of rebel-narrative is the fact that it needs an opponent in relation to which Zentropa may remain a rebel. This may also be seen as the reason why Zentropa increasingly turn their attention towards the big international scene in order to maintain an understanding of them selves as a small and rebel player. Vis-à-vis Hollywood, Zentropa is more likely to be thought of as thoroughly unconventional. In Scandinavia, they have already become, if not convention, then definitely everything but a marginal player that has been an important engine in their narrative. Thus, it is also striking how the journalists with whom we have spoken appear to have noticed that Zentropa have become *less communicative* than before.

While Danish journalists do not seem to attack the heroic genesis of Zentropa, it shall be interesting to see whether the clearly more critical attention by the journalists will have any significant impact on the further development of the Zentropa-narrative and the self-perception of members in Zentropa, as these try to enact themselves vis-à-vis an international audience. As these remarks suggest, it seems that the CEO of Zentropa tries to re-enact the heroic story of Zentropa while changing parts of its rhetorical strategy. An effective rhetorical strategy requires a supportive audience, and this is what Zentropa gets when they for instance relate themselves to an American audience, which are more likely to consider Zentropa the small 'Maverick' they desperately wants to be. However, the very emphasis upon changing audience is clearly more radical than it may appear. Zentropa still has to be a legitimate artistic actor in Denmark, that is vis-à-vis the Danish press that have begun to use their own successful past and ideology as a resource against them, vis-à-vis the Danish state that provides them with funding, and their increasing number of different partners in Danish film industry, which calls for a much more complicated narrative than that of Zentropa against everybody upon which a Maverick-identity in extremis thrives upon. In short, it would seem that they are challenged:

- to develop their story so as to be able to cope with the fact that they have become that big established player on a Danish scene that they used to sneer at, and
- to contemplate the possible consequences of changing elements in its rhetorical strategy, not the least that the turn from a formerly extremely aggressive and proactive communication with the press to a communicational effort more directed at the international scene may simply create more space for journalists to dig and invent a host of counter-stories about Zentropa, and
- that they may also face a development where Zentropa will simply lose its rather prominent space in the public attention, which may in turn disappoint the exhibitionistic craving that may easily grow upon a company whose name is always mentioned in relation to Danish film, a development that may also work to the effect of making the exciting aura and crowd of 'wanna-be's' around Zentropa fade quite a bit.

Further research into Zentropa these coming years will make us wiser as to the way the a company like Zentropa will take up the challenge of developing an epic tale whose context has changed quite drastically these later years. As we have suggested, it will very much depend upon Zentropa way of coping with the above stated challenges.

## References

Albert, S. and D. Whetten (1985) Organizational Identity. In L.L.Cummings & B.M.Staw (eds.) Research in Organizational Behavior, vol.7.:263-295. Greenwich, CT:JAI Press.

Albert, S., B.E. Ashforth, and J.E. Dutton (2000) Organizational Identity and Identification: Charting New Waters and Building New Bridges. The Academy of Management Review, Vol.25, No.1. (pp.10-18).

Alvarez, J.L., Mazza, C., Strandgaard Pedersen, J and S. Svejnova (2003).Shielding Idiosyncrasy from Isomorphic Pressures: Towards Optimal Distinctiveness in European Film Making. Papers in Organisation, No. 49. Institute for Organization and Industrial Sociology. Copenhagen Business School.

Bakhtin, M (1981) The Dialogic Imagination. Austin University Press.

Bauman, Z. (2000) *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Becker, H. (1982) Art Worlds. University Presses of California, Columbia, and Princeton.

Boje, D. (2001) Narrative Methods for Organizational and Communication Research. Sage.

Boje, David M. (1995): Stories of the Storytelling Organization: A Postmodern Analysis of Disney as 'Tamara Land'. Academy of Management Journal, 38 (4): 997-1035.

Boland, R. and Tankasi, R (1995) 'Perspective Making and Perspective Taking in Communities of Knowing', Organization Science, 6/3: 350-72.

Boutaiba, S. & J. Strandgaard Pedersen (2003). Creating MBA Identity – Between Field and Organization. In Amdam, Kvålshaugen and Larsen (eds.) Inside the Business School: The Contents of European Business Education. Oslo/Stockholm/Copenhagen: Abstrakt, Lieber and CBS Press.

Boutaiba, S. (2003) *Becoming a company – narrative temporalities in new start-ups*, Ph.D.-dissertation, Copenhagen Business School.



- Calhoun, C. (ed.): *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*. Blackwell Publishers.
- Carr, David (1986) *Time, Narrative, and History*. Indiana University Press.
- Caves, R. (2000). *Creative Industries: Contracts Between Art and Commerce*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Czarniawska, B. (1997) *Narrating the Organization. Dramas of Institutional Identity*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Czarniawska, Barbara (1998): *A Narrative Approach to Organization Studies*. Sage Publications.
- Czarniawska, B. (1999) *Writing Management*. Oxford University Press.
- Darmer, Per, Jesper Strandgaard Pedersen og Jens Peter Brorsen, 'Zentropa – det går ufatteligt godt'. I Ole Steen Andersen (red.), 'Organisationer i forandring'. Copenhagen Business School Press.
- Downing, Stephen (1997): *Learning the Plot*. *Management Learning* 28 (1).
- Emirbayer, M. (1997) *Manifesto for a Relational Sociology*. *American Journal of Sociology*. Vol.103, No.2.(pp.281-317)
- Fineman, S. and Gabriel, Y. (1996): *Experiencing Organizations*. Sage.
- Florida, R. (2002) *The Rise of the Creative Class. And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*. New York. Basic Books.
- Frye, Northrop (1957): *Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton University Press.
- Gabriel, Y. (2000) *Storytelling in Organizations. Facts, fiction and fantasies*. Oxford University Press.
- Giddens, A. (1991) *Modernity and Self-identity*. Routledge.
- Gioia, D.A., M. Schultz and K.G. Corley (2000) *Organizational Identity, Image, and Adaptive Instability*. *The Academy of Management Review*, Vol.25, No.1. (pp.63-81).
- Glynn, M.A. and R. Abzug (2002). *Institutionalizing Identity: Symbolic Isomorphism and Organizational Names*. *Academy of Management Journal*, vol.45.no.1 (pp.267-80)
- Hjort, M. and S. MacKenzie (eds.) (2003): *Purity and Provocation – Dogma 95*. British Film Institute, BFI Publishing. London, UK.
- Hogg, M.A. and D.J. Terry (2000). *Social Identity and Self-Categorization Processes in Organizational Contexts*. *Academy of Management Review*, vol.25,no.1. (pp.121-40)
- Kultur- og Erhvervsministeriet (2000) *Kultur- og Erhvervspolitisk Redegørelse*. Danmarks Kreative Potentiale.
- Martin et al. (1983): *The Uniqueness Paradox in Organizational Stories*. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 28, 1983.
- Pratt, M.G. and P.O. Foreman (2000) *Classifying Managerial Responses to Multiple Organizational Identities*. *Academy of Management Review*, vol.25,no.1. (pp.18-42)
- Regeringen (2003) *Danmark i kultur- og oplevelsesøkonomien 5 nye skridt på vejen*.
- Ricoeur, Paul (1984): *Time and Narrative vol. I*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Schein, Edgar (1994): *Organisationskultur og Ledelse*. Valmuen.
- Sennett, R. (1998) *The Corrosion of Character*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Shotter, J. and Gergen, K. (1989, eds.) Texts of Identity. Sage.

Somers, M. and Gibson, G. (1994): Reclaiming the Epistemological "Other": Narrative and the Social Constitution of Identity. In Calhoun, C (ed.): Social Theory and the Politics of Identity. Blackwell Publishers.

Stevenson, J. (2002): Lars Von Trier – World Directors. British Film Institute. BFI publishing. London. UK

Strandgaard Pedersen, J. & F. Dobbin (1997a), "The Social Invention of Collective Actors On the Rise of the Organization". American Behavioral Scientist. Vol.40.No.4. February 1997 (pp.431-443). Sage Periodicals Press.

Strandgaard Pedersen, J. and F. Dobbin (1997b): Constructing Organizations: Neoinstitutionalism and Organizational Culture. Papers in organisation No. 21. Institute for Organization and Industrial Sociology. Copenhagen Business School. (pp.1-30).

Weick, Karl (1995) Sensemaking in Organizations. Sage.

Weick, Karl and Browning, Larry (1986): Argument and Narration in Organizational Communication. In Yearly Review of Management of the Journal of Management.

White, Hayden (1973): Metahistory. John Hopkins University Press.

Wilhelmsen, K. (2000a) 'Iscenesætteren'. Article from Internetavisen Jyllands-Posten 16/4, 2000.

#### Newspaper articles

'Dead Consultants Society', in Jyllands-Posten 27.08.2000.

'Film Consultants: Clause for film consultants', in Jyllands-Posten 26.04.2001.

'Film-money, red numbers in Danish Film', in Jyllands-Posten 12.06.2001.

'Film-support: Chairman wants to get rid of film flops', in Jyllands-Posten 25.02.2000.

'Film-support: Zentropa is the worst seller of films', in Jyllands-Posten 24.02.2000.

'The Useful Idiots', in Berlingske Tidende 10.11.2002.

# Appendix 1.

## Zentropa

- 1992 Founding of Zentropa Entertainments A/S.
- 1995 Dogma Manifesto with the 10 Dogma Rules is presented in Odeon Theatre in Paris
- 1996 ‘Breaking the Waves’ (first film in The Gold Hearted Trilogy) receives a second place ‘Grand Jury citation’ in Cannes
- 1998 ‘The Idiots’ (second film in The Gold Hearted Trilogy)  
Puzzy Power (production of pornographic movies) is established (and later closed in 2001).
- 1999 Zentropa moves to the new Film Town in Avedøre.
- 2000 ‘Tossegod’ Aps and new company structure  
Distribution contract with Nordisk Film  
Production contract with Fine Line (Time-Warner group)  
TVropa.com (Internet TV) is established  
‘Dancer in the Dark’ receives the Golden Palms in Cannes (Third film in The Gold Hearted Trilogy)  
Production contract with Sigma Films and Antoine Films in Scotland  
Dogma 95 administrative office is established (19 films certified)
- 2001 Special (‘Bodil’) film Award to Zentropa producers (Aalbæk Jensen, Tardini and Windeløv).  
ZentAmerica Entertainment (Hollywood based) is established  
Trust Films Sales marketing contract with Independent Digital Entertainment (IDE)  
Zentropa, Nimbus Film M&M Productions and Regnar Grasten Film establishes a TV sales company called ‘OS’.
- 2002 ‘Italian for Beginners’ (Scherfig) receives a Silver Bear in Berlin and ‘Little Accidents’ (Olesen) receives a Blue Angel in Berlin.  
Zentropa’s 10 year anniversary  
Zentropa produces radio theatre for DR (Danish Broadcasting)  
‘Dogumentary’ manifesto is presented
- 2003 ‘Reconstruction’ (Boe) receives a ‘Camera d’Or’ in Cannes.
- 2004 ‘Dogville’ receives Golden Bear in Berlin

## **Appendix 2.**

### **The Tale of Clumsy Hans**

Clumsy-Hans is the third son who, along with his two older brothers, who are more educated, more sophisticated, and more appreciated by both their father and people in general, sets out to win the princess' heart. Thus, the princess had announced publicly that she would take as husband the man who had the most to say for himself. Contrary to the expectations of everybody, except for Clumsy-Hans that is, who showed great confidence in his own abilities, he won the heart of the king's daughter because he didn't become paralysed by the situation like his distinguished and learned brothers. While Clumsy-Hans might not have spoken in a very distinguished manner, he simply spoke his mind, and he didn't become scared by the fact that every word he uttered in the presence of the princess would be published in tomorrow's newspaper. Instead of rehearsing phrases that might come in handy when conversing with the princess, as did his brothers, Clumsy-Hans plainly improvised and ingeniously used the unconventional paraphernalia he had brought with him (a dead crow, an old wooden shoe, and mud). In short, Clumsy-Hans was highly unconventional in his approach, a 'rebel by nature', and, nonetheless, managed to succeed by beating the conventional establishment and, no less important, to place himself on top of the established (and thus also of convention?) by marrying the king's daughter.