

# Shame: Ingmar Bergman's Vietnam War

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## Abstract

Ingmar Bergman's film *Skammen* [Shame] (1968), about a married couple trapped between the warring parties in a bloody civil war, triggered fierce ideological debate in Sweden. According to the harsh critics of the film, among whom the leading critic was well-known author Sara Lidman, Bergman had managed to create propaganda for the American government and its controversial war in Vietnam. In the present paper, the debate is studied historically in relation to ongoing research about the culture of the late 1960s in Sweden. The studied material consists of press clippings, Bergman scholarship, and Bergman's own recently released papers at the Ingmar Bergman Foundation Archive in Stockholm. Furthermore, questions about meaning and interpretation regarding film viewing are dealt with, taking into consideration developments in contemporary film theory.

**Keywords:** Ingmar Bergman, *Skammen*, Sara Lidman, Vietnam war, film interpretation

## Introduction

The relationship between the films of Ingmar Bergman and the affluent Swedish welfare society in which the films were conceived and received over a period spanning almost exactly 60 years has never really been a scholarly issue. Bergman's films have been studied academically from practically all possible angles; the purely ideological readings, however, have been scarce. This is because Bergman has often been considered apolitical. He was the poet of the tormented soul, certainly not an ideological demagogue.

In my ongoing research project, 'Ingmar Bergman and the Swedish Model Welfare State', I wish to address precisely this issue, trying to show that Bergman's films indeed were ideologically charged and that he certainly did represent an ideological stance to some of his contemporaries, albeit hardly a demagogical one. One of the most apparent ways to illustrate this is to study the political reactions found in the Swedish press reception of his films. Here, I wish to draw attention to the fierce debate surrounding one of Bergman's least well-known films.

## Great Expectations

On September 29 1968, Bergman's film *Skammen* [Shame] opened in Sweden. Despite the massive interest shown him in the Swedish press at the time, he was an artist whose value was a somewhat controversial issue. In her reception study of Bergman's films, Birgitta Steene concludes that this was a result of the 'zeitgeist' of the period:

With the leftist turn in 1960s culture, the early view of Bergman as the 'sturm und drang' renegade of the bourgeoisie was exchanged for the portrait of the artist with an ideological handicap; a film-maker 'deplorably' rooted in the bourgeois world from which he descended. From having been regarded as the iconoclast, who threatened to undermine the values of this bourgeoisie, he had turned into a socially estranged beholder of people's souls (Steene, 1996: 109).

One of the best examples of this controversial tendency in the limitless discourse on Bergman is the ideological discussion triggered by *Skammen* in Sweden.

The film was about the married couple Jan and Eva, two chamber musicians played by Max von Sydow and Liv Ullmann. They have withdrawn from the terrible civil war plaguing their country to a secluded place in the countryside (the film was shot on the barren island of Fårö in the Baltic, Bergman's favourite film location).<sup>1</sup> The war, however, finally catches up with them, and towards the end of the film they have to escape over the sea, from the warring parties as well as from an embryonic guerrilla movement. But before their escape, they have experienced a humiliating metamorphosis – invasion, capture, torture, marauding, infidelity, and murder: in other words, 'Shame'. Or, as Örjan Roth-Lindberg has defined the meaning of the title in his contemporary essay on the film: the protagonists', especially the female character's (Eva's) "dependence on and participation in" this crime against humanity (Roth-Lindberg, 1968: 277).

To a present-day viewer, *Skammen* is an excellent film – Robin Wood, Bergman's first English monographer even claimed that it was the director's masterpiece – and also a unique specimen in Bergman's *oeuvre* owing to its many images of a devastating war: "The subject of war was simply not part of Bergmania", writes Marc Gervais in his extensive study of Bergman (Gervais, 1999: 107).

Örjan Roth-Lindberg's previously mentioned reading of the film is actually quite close to Bergman's own thoughts, described in the exhaustive notebook he kept as he wrote the manuscript for *Skammen*; the notebook is now at the Ingmar Bergman Foundation Archive in Stockholm.<sup>2</sup> From Bergman's notes, one can deduce that he at first wanted to create the story of the couple and that the war background came to mind somewhat later; this war is also described in quite an impromptu manner. Bergman was obviously interested in telling the story of two "normal" and "ordinary" people who happen to be artists. After some thought, he named them Jan and Eva Rosenberg, as they were "sprung from the same rose" (Bergman, 1967: January 30). A few days later, he added some further detail regarding their ideological normality: "They are Social Democrats, they have always voted for the Social Democrats, as that party supports the arts", he writes (Bergman, 1967: February 26). The film was initially called "Morning Dream"; when the manuscript was finished and the film was shot in the autumn of 1967, the title was changed to "Dreams of Shame". As an internal key to interpretation of the film, the German 18<sup>th</sup> century poet Christoph Martin Wieland was quoted on the first page of the manuscript: "Everything disappears and becomes dreams" (Bergman, 1967b: 1).

The press was waiting impatiently for the film. As early as February 1968, Bergman happily declared that "I am pregnant like a rabbit" regarding the film, which was at that point on the editing table (Vinberg, 1968). And in a lavishly illustrated full page in the Swedish tabloid *Expressen* in August, Alf Montan bowed to the great *auteur*:

Ingmar Bergman, fifty this summer, is a concept today – at home and abroad one of Sweden's most recognized artists – and he is so great that he is only compared to himself and his own films. Which he has to exceed on every occasion.

Every premiere must be wretched – just like a circus artist who has to perform everything with a breakneck somersault (Montan, 1968).

This type of Bergman celebration was, as we shall see, not always entirely popular with the contemporary leftist intelligentsia. *Expressen* also allowed Bergman – under his pseudonym “Ernest Riffle” – to so to speak preclude criticism of the film in an article published a few days before the opening. Here, Bergman faked an interview with himself in which he indirectly attacked the critical institution (Bergman, 1968). Suddenly the interviewer burst out:

If you do not cooperate, I will write something terribly nasty about you and your film. If I were you, Mr. Bergman, I would beware. You are no longer at the top. You are going down. You need us. We do not need you. You are terribly old. You are nothing. You are nothing really in any regard. [...] If you are aware of the essential nothingness of your work, why do you continue? Why do you not do anything useful instead?

Bergman responded apathetically:

Why does a bird cry from fear? Yes, I know that the answer sounds sentimental; I can see how the corners of your mouth under that disgusting little moustache descend into an ironic smirk. But I have no other answer. No, I have no other answer. But if you will, you can take down the whole lot: anxiety, shame, wrath, self-contempt.

Probably, Bergman here alluded ironically to the cool reception of his film *Vargtimmen* [The Hour of the Wolf, 1967] in Sweden in the spring of 1968 (Steene, 2005: 278-279). At the same time, he undoubtedly wanted to strike back at the critics.

### Enter Vietnam

The journalist Nils-Petter Sundgren interviewed Bergman on television on the day of the opening of *Skammen* (Sundgren, 1968: 56-57). Here, Bergman claimed that the reception of *Vargtimmen* had been “dogmatic”. Regarding the inspiration for *Skammen*, Bergman mentioned the ongoing war in Vietnam:

It was an image from all these newsreels from Vietnam. I think it was a French reportage, where you could see a fantastically odd and at the same time deplorable scene. It was an old man and an old woman who walked with a cow, a farmer and his wife walking with a cow and then suddenly a helicopter started from the ground with a roar and soldiers ran up to it. The cow broke loose and the woman ran after the cow and the helicopter took off into the air and the old man stood there just perplexed, bewildered and heartbroken. In some way, more than any other atrocities one has experienced, I perceived there the misery of third parties, when everything breaks loose over their heads. It was this image of the small world that came to inspire *Skammen*.

Here, Bergman himself signalled a mode of reading the film to critics and the general audience – it should be mentioned that the word “Vietnam” does not even occur in the notebook. If Bergman himself referred to contemporary developments in Southeast Asia as the inspirational source of the film, however, it definitely came to be about the war in Vietnam. This type of intentionalistic mode of understanding a film was firmly

cemented in the general view of art at the time, not least owing to the influence of the by then thriving auteur theory, “la politique des auteurs”.

It should be noted that Bergman also emphasized this allegorical connection to the war in Vietnam in subsequent interviews, as in, for example, the interview volume *Bergman om Bergman*, published two years after the opening of *Skammen*. As in an echo from the notebook, Bergman stated: “At which point do we cross the line from being good Social Democrats to being functioning Nazis?” (Björkman, Manns, Sima, 1970: 252). Furthermore, he underlined the fact that the war in Vietnam entered the context somewhat later. About his work on the script for the film, he claimed: “I wrote it in the spring. In the spring of 1967. But we must not forget something. By then, Czechoslovakia had not been occupied and the war in Vietnam had not yet escalated. Had those things happened, the film would have looked different” (Björkman, Manns, Sima, 1970: 249). Because of this, one might deduce, there was no mention of Vietnam in the notebook. In *Images*, published twenty years later, Bergman continued, albeit more cautiously, to declare his ideological intentions behind the film: “To tell the truth, I was immoderately proud of this film. I also felt I had made a contribution to the current social debate (the Vietnam war)” (Bergman 1990:300). This would have been important to him at a time and in a social context, where he was openly accused of an all-too-egocentric focus on the eternal problem of the artist.

## The Reception

Some of the first reviews of *Skammen* in the Stockholm press were favourable. In a lavishly illustrated reportage about the premiere in *Expressen*, the film critic Lasse Bergström (Bergman’s later publisher) gave the film top marks (Bergström, 1968). Bergström also concluded that the film was not “political”.

The film critic Urban Stenström, in the conservative *Svenska Dagbladet*, was more thorough in his review, also writing from a very sympathetic perspective. He emphasized the fact that Bergman had made “an unusually accessible film”. The basic theme could be described as follows:

It is evident that Ingmar Bergman has wanted to make an universal film on the devastating effect of war on human nature or on certain human natures. There is nothing to exclude the notion that the film describes a civil war in Sweden between a fascist military dictatorship and a socialist guerrilla. The only thing is that Bergman is not interested in this. He is not for any system. He is against war (Stenström, 1968).

Obviously, the reviewer emphatically agreed with this view.

In *Dagens Nyheter* (Sweden’s biggest daily), film critic Mauritz Edström would underline this relativist stance as the film’s fundamental weakness. Here, Edström attacked the irresolute attitude in Bergman. By pretending to be unconscious of present realities, Bergman in fact assumed a firm political stance:

Therefore ‘Skammen’ is, in spite of everything, still a political film, where Bergman describes his own confusion and protests against the war. He does not go further than he is able to. [...] He cannot provide a social or political definition of evil. One gets a glimpse of Vietnam and the conquest of the Baltic States as vague patterns, but ‘Skammen’ might as well be about Angola, Latin America or Czechoslovakia. Bergman just poses with his fear and despair and tries to supply a picture that makes us wake up (Edström, 1968).

*Skammen*, however, failed to wake Edström up; Edström also had reservations about the self-pity he could discern in the film's focus on the poor artist.

Film critic Jürgen Schildt even more forcefully expressed, in the Social Democratic tabloid *Aftonbladet*, the gist of Edström's criticism. Schildt marked the film as a turning point in Bergman's *oeuvre*. The poet of the tormented inner soul had suddenly crossed the border to the social domain. The review was somewhat ironic about the fact that a year earlier Bergman had been interviewed on television, and expressed his "exasperation with all these girls who go forward in their raincoats bearing witness about Vietnam" (Schildt, 1968). According to Schildt, Bergman himself had now reached that point, as "it is about East Asia, and the driving force is the whole complex about Vietnam" (Schildt, 1968). Schildt went on to state:

In the final scenes, the escape to another country is initiated, possibly into the future. The road is by way of a sea where bloated corpses push against one another like buoys against the horizon. It is the most quiet and terrible moment of the film, and at the same time a consequence – in order to stick to the allegory – which contains the only thing we know about the state of things in Vietnam (Schildt, 1968).

Schildt concluded by claiming that he could not follow the master's summons: "Shivers, forth! Feel fear! I do not know why, but personally I refuse to obey orders" (Schildt, 1968). The most pertinent aspect of Schildt's review, however, was its mention of Bergman's remarks on "girls in raincoats", a remark that would later come to haunt the director.

All reviews had political implications. In *Expressen* and *Svenska Dagbladet*, Bergman was the great artist, while *Dagens Nyheter* and *Aftonbladet* expressed concern about Bergman's view of the war in Vietnam, that is, a view that saw the war as a struggle between two equally corrupt sides. Even if the critique was not fully articulated – perhaps overly politically inflamed film reviews were against the general policy of the papers – one could discern in both Mauritz Edström and Jürgen Schildt signs of what was to follow later on.

Certain weeklies and specialized magazines also contained critical reviews of *Skammen*. In the intellectual weekly *Vi*, literary critic Carl-Eric Nordberg found several faults with the film, despite his general admiration for Bergman. *Skammen*, he claimed, "was a liberation, a departure from familiar ground. He has turned his back on the lonely brooder and his egocentric fight with God and his struggle with faith, instead turning towards the war-torn reality of the present and a society in flames" (Nordberg, 1968: 10). In his review, Nordberg took sides against what he perceived as anachronistic and overtly romanticized in Bergman's dwelling on the role of the artist.

The fault-finding was even more overt in a personally charged and ironic article by the poet Lars Forssell in *Bonniers litterära magasin*, one of the major literary journals in Sweden. This review was personal in the sense that the malicious undertones of Forssell's relationship to Bergman were quite clear. Forssell questioned the somewhat dubious status of film. He maintained that Bergman himself had once claimed that "film was a genre of entertainment that sometimes managed to reach the realm of art", that film had a "multilayered world audience", that film could "at the same time entertain and educate outside the more unique audience of the theatre" and finally, that Bergman enjoyed a media exposure similar to that of the popular singer Thore Skogman" (Forssell, 1968: 605).<sup>3</sup> To this, Forssell added: "When he chose film as his form of expression,

the particular type of his talent must have been of importance” (Forssell, 1968: 606), a type of talent that was implicitly understood to be inferior to the muse – literature – that enlivened Forssell’s own gifts. It is difficult to read Forssell without feeling that his rhetorical strategy was to socially degrade Bergman and his art.<sup>4</sup>

More interesting in this context are Forssell’s allusions to the ongoing war in Vietnam. He concludes regarding *Skammen*:

It will drive leftist radicals nuts, since it refuses to part with any side. [...] The uncertainty triggered by the film is perhaps not a weakness, but it is irritating. One should of course think of Vietnam, but at the same time one should not think of Vietnam. It would be best NOT to think of Vietnam, in case one has taken a stand on that issue, and instead concentrate on the description of moral corruption, on both sides, that is characteristic of a civil war – but can one do that today? (Forssell, 1968: 607).

Here, Lars Forssell prefigured the severe ideological struggle regarding *Skammen* that was soon to erupt.

### The Attack

Nearly 40 years after its release, *Skammen* is perhaps most interesting for the debate it triggered in *Aftonbladet*. This debate illustrated the “zeitgeist” and said a lot about how film creates different kinds of meanings in its audience. Reception of the film came to take place against the background of strong public opinion against the American war in Vietnam, at least with a substantial part of the audience. Some participants in the debate read *Skammen* on the basis of what was not explicitly expressed in the film, whereas others concerned themselves with what was actually represented in it.

The debate was initiated a week after the premiere in a by now famous article in *Aftonbladet* by well-known author Sara Lidman. Sara Lidman was a leading figure within the Swedish Vietnam movement, having published the widely read book *Samtal i Hanoi* in 1966, based on her own trip to North Vietnam (Lidman, 1967). Lidman commented on Bergman’s relativistic stance in relation to the question of guilt:

But when the female picker of lingonberries [Liv Ullmann] claims that ‘the war has gone on for so long that it is meaningless to question which side is right or wrong’, Bergman puts into her mouth the dream of Western military industries: that the war (their war), which does not occur in Vietnam but anywhere, will go on until nobody has the sense to ask what it is about. [...] Of course, the White House did not order the film. But it creates propaganda for the American administration far better than they could have dreamed of. [...] Bergman liberates (the Swedish-) American from such torments. Western society, napalm, Ky, Quisling, Thieu, the torture, the children – all this is only something that God dreams. Ingmar Bergman claimed a year ago that the worst thing he could imagine was a Swedish girl in a raincoat singing something about Vietnam. I know one thing that is worse: the American genocide in Vietnam. After this atrocity, Bergman’s prize-winning *Shame* is competing with Sentab [a Swedish building construction company], which is building a road for the American forces in Thailand (Lidman, 1968a).

Here, Bergman’s words regarding the girl in a raincoat were literally thrown back at him. Lidman’s attack, however, needs to be regarded in relation to the ‘zeitgeist’ and the social movement aptly described by Kim Salomon in *Rebeller i takt med tiden: FNL-rörelsen*

*och 60-talets politiska ritualer* [Rebels in tune with the times: the FNL movement and the political rituals of the 1960s], a movement that, according to the author, “worked as a catalyst and created hope for a better future. But this vanished in the maze of fundamentalism” (Salomon, 1996: 324). Bergman and his pacifism, possibly inspired by the anti-nuclear-weapons movement of the 1950s and early 1960s, now encountered a much harsher and more dogmatic judge. In his historical analysis of Swedish narratives between 1969 and 1990, Martin Wiklund concludes that to the hard-line leftists (he characterizes this movement as consisting of the Marxist-Leninists, in contrast to the “softer” new left), only one approach was possible:

The war in Vietnam was the focal point in the global struggle against imperialism and therefore the central conflict to relate to. The changed perspective also changed the perspective on modern Sweden. Sweden was not perceived to take a neutral position in regard to the struggle between West and East, as in the established perspective on the Cold War. Either it was on the side of imperialism or on that of anti-imperialism (Wiklund, 2006: 187).

This point of view was, according to Wiklund, developed after 1965 (Wiklund, 2006: 185). Thus, Bergman had clearly ‘gone wrong’ when trying to gear the interpretation of his pacifist film towards the war in Vietnam. If he aspired to be part of contemporary discourse on the subject, he had just not kept in touch, even if the film was conceived as early as 1967 and was hence ‘old’ by the autumn of 1968. Taking sides was now of the utmost importance – if you were not for, you were automatically against.

Even so, the present essay is not really about the war in Vietnam or the Swedish Vietnam movement per se (I will, however, briefly return to Kim Salomon’s analyses of Sara Lidman’s engagement). Here, it is more a question about the politics of Bergman and his interpreters and also about the general mysteries of understanding film, about reason or unreason in a complex process of reception.

### **Bergman and Others Respond**

A mere two days after Lidman’s article was published, Bergman was interviewed in *Aftonbladet*: “Privately, my view of the war in Vietnam is clear. The war should have been over a long time ago and the Americans gone” (Sten, 1968). Regarding his moral outlook, he added:

As I see it, there is neither glory nor disgrace in war. All forms of war or violence, whatever they are about, are morally reprehensible and in human terms devastating. If one has to choose between violence and non-violence there is only one choice. Non-violence. However bankrupt the principle of non-violence, it is the only one. That is my point of view. I could argue with Sara Lidman word for word but am too tired (Sten, 1968).

Here, Bergman is seen to discuss the issue on Lidman’s terms: it is not really about the story of the film, which expresses exactly what Bergman says it does, but instead about the historical context, brought forward by Lidman but, as mentioned, initially invoked by Bergman himself.

Somewhat paradoxically, a certain amount of support for Bergman could be observed in the next article in *Aftonbladet*, which was written by leftist arts journalist Mario Grut:

I do agree with her that Bergman's political confusion works as conservatism in disguise. I do agree with her that it would be better if everybody was politically enlightened and worked consciously for peace and socialism. But I do not think that she does the cause any good by mixing disgrace with confusion. Nobody is a disgrace who does not consciously perform evil.

In that sense, I do not believe that Bergman is disgraceful. Maybe not woken-up. Certainly he is politically unenlightened. As Sara Lidman, others, and myself see it.

And I do not think that *Skammen* is about people in Vietnam. It is about people confronted with Vietnam and Prague and Santo Domingo and Budapest and Athens and Jerusalem (1967) and Moscow (1934) and Jakarta (1966).

It is about man confronted with war, violence, the person who wakes up one day and will panic-stricken believe all of this: all truth vanishes by power; with the force of power everything perishes: you and me, right and wrong, everything (Grut, 1968).

The author Elisabet Hermodsson agreed with Grut's patronizing of what they perceived as Bergmanian relativism (that is, in their view, naivety). She did not, however, want to go as far as Sara Lidman:

'*Skammen*' is not an urgent call in the current crisis that we all feel so seriously. But to go from there to saying that the film serves the American war of extermination in the same way as Sentab builds roads in Thailand is a bit too far. It is not a historically real war that Bergman depicts, but his own feelings about the demand for taking a stand in the present. In principle, Sara Lidman's judgement means that every author or artist is a traitor to Vietnam if they depict anything else than heroic resolution (Hermodsson, 1968).

And Sara Lidman made entirely clear that this was actually the case in her ensuing article. Regarding Bergman's view of violence as such as disgraceful, she exclaimed: "According to this view, the FNL and the Pentagon are on equal terms. I protest. The Pentagon's war is dirty, the war of the FNL is justified" (Sara Lidman, 1968b).

The only one who explicitly sided with Bergman in the *Aftonbladet* debate was arts journalist Bernt Jonsson, although his article was more of a response to Sara Lidman than an alternative reading of *Skammen*. Jonsson emphasized an "FNL-religion in Sweden with sectarian intolerance towards the unfaithful" (Jonsson, 1968). Jonsson was also emphatic about Bergman's principle of non-violence:

There is no and there never has been a justified war, and it is not until we accept this that we stand on firm ground in our criticism against the American war in Vietnam. It is the theoretical possibility of justified wars that has made this unusually dirty war possible (Jonsson, 1968).

Sara Lidman, however, quickly riposted. In strong words, she celebrated the war against that "bottomless degradation which colonialism and its contemporary representatives make people endure" (Lidman, 1968c). Furthermore, she told the heroic story of Nguyen Van Troi. Van Troi attempted to assassinate the American minister of defence Robert McNamara and was interrogated for seven weeks before being executed by firing squad. "During these 49 days and nights", Lidman exclaims melodramatically, "he did not disclose any of the names of his comrades in arms. It could be claimed that no one in Sweden is worthy of celebrating him" (Lidman, 1968c).<sup>5</sup> We were now quite far from Ingmar Bergman's film *Skammen*.

Kim Salomon's polemics regarding the Swedish Vietnam war movement is relevant in this context, Sara Lidman illustrating his point that "reality was transformed in order to fit the preconceptions. This already-made image partly contained truth, but it was also an ideological fiction" (Salomon, 1996: 269). Salomon's example here is an article by Lidman in *Aftonbladet* in 1970, where she praises the heroism of the mortally wounded FNL soldier: "He removes the bundle of rice from his waist and gives it to his comrade with the words: 'Don't forget to eat, my brother'" (Salomon, 1996: 269). Salomon compares the rhetoric to the ironies in Jaroslav Hasek's novel *The Good Soldier Svejk*: "In contrast to Hasek, Lidman is deadly serious", concludes Salomon (Salomon, 1996: 269).

Author Ulla Torpe wrote the last article in the debate in *Aftonbladet*. She supported Sara Lidman, mocking Bergman's pacifism:

Skammen will travel the world. That it has borrowed its values from Vietnam will make it financially powerful, its audience attracted. The audience is the bourgeoisie of the West. What will happen? In the people of Skammen they will see themselves, their own private problems, their own lack of engagement, their own betrayal. So far everything is all right. But later they will discover that there really was no side to betray, no party in the war to commit oneself to, since the war in the film is war as such, and that is always terrible (Torpe, 1968).<sup>6</sup>

Thereby, the debate was concluded in *Aftonbladet*.

### **Bourgeois Reactions**

The conservative and liberal press also reacted to *Skammen*, albeit from less ideologically charged perspectives. The author and artist Torsten Bergmark wrote the most ambitious article on the film in the daily press, somewhat paradoxically from a position within the extreme left. In *Dagens Nyheter*, on the same day that Lidman's first article appeared in *Aftonbladet*, Bergmark praised what he labelled Bergman's "change of position" (Bergmark, 1968). Like many other writers, Bergmark distanced himself from the private mythology of Bergman with all its dwelling on the problems of the poor artist, and instead cheered Bergman's social commitment. To Bergmark, this commitment necessarily implied an acceptance of the "disparagement of art" (that is, as art was an expression of the ruling classes, one must for reasons of solidarity accept "the proletarianization of art") (Bergmark, 1968). Oddly, Bergmark did not comment on the connection to the war in Vietnam.

Neither did the author and documentary filmmaker Erwin Leiser in *Expressen*. He complained about the lack of a moral standpoint in the film, however: "For my part, I cannot accept the idea that it does not matter which party you side with" (Leiser, 1968). The ending of the article is in line with Sara Lidman: "I do not believe that Ingmar Bergman stands 'nowhere', therefore I regret that 'Skammen' is set nowhere. It would have been stronger if the relations between the characters had corresponded to political realities instead of to private projections of fear" (Leiser, 1968). That Leiser was referring to Vietnam was made clear by the line "Life goes on in the villages that have been bombed a hundred times" (Leiser, 1968). Possibly, his defensive and cautious attitude could be related to the fact that the arts editor of *Expressen*, Bo Strömstedt, who certainly did not share the values of the left, was the one who himself came to finish off the entire debate:

What I wish to attack is the self-satisfaction, lack of generosity and human feeling which now – in the name of an abstract version of humanity – threaten to transform our discussion into a morass of Jesuitism, a jungle of pestilence where no living, visible man can move. The contagion is spreading like flies – and will eventually reach those whom one would least of all wish to be affected by it. With a shrug I can see – in the *Aftonbladet* ‘inquiry’ about ‘Skammen’ – the entire curia of little conceited cardinals who excommunicate the heretic who does not adhere to the catechism (Strömstedt, 1968).

In this way, the Bergman side, if such a structure existed, had the last word, in spite of the fact that it had been spurned during the debate.

### Scholarly Discussions

In academia, however, the argument continued in the vast literature on Bergman. In a similar way, the views expressed here were determined by the individual scholar’s ideological preferences. In the decidedly leftist *Ingmar Bergman och den borgerliga ideologin*, Maria Bergom-Larsson maintained, “the views expressed by Bergman show a fundamental lack of insight and political analysis. Therefore, *Skammen* came to adhere to American propaganda” (Bergom-Larsson, 1976: 154). A very different point of view was articulated by the severe Bergman critic Vernon Young who castigated Bergman, both for portraying war as such as meaningless (in line with the Lidman approach) and for being bold enough to refer to the war in Vietnam:

When reporters asked him if a parallel with the Vietnamese might be drawn, he did not say no; he thought it might have that application. An honest answer would have retorted ‘Of course not! I know nothing of those people, the sound of their prayers, the taste of their rice, their powers of resistance or their timeless expectations’. To take credit for such an analogy is paltry and undiscerning (Young, 1971: 246).

Although Young’s criticisms concerned Bergman, they were also applicable to many of his assailants, that is, Sara Lidman was also talking about a situation, that of the fighting Vietnamese farmer, that she really knew very little about.

On the other hand, Paisley Livingston, author of one the most highly regarded monographs on Bergman, comments on Sara Lidman’s and Maria Bergom-Larsson’s points of view:

Such a critique is unacceptable and fails to grasp the film’s larger context: that of a world prepared for absolute warfare. [...] Bergman’s film is one of the few war films, which is not a mythical text, that is, which does not obscure the fundamental reciprocity of violence and the senseless identity of oppositional parties. The film directly confronts the impossibility of distinguishing between good and bad forms of barbarism when barbarism implies the destruction of all (Livingstone, 1982: 224).<sup>7</sup>

Mikael Timm makes similar points:

What is politically interesting in Bergman’s films is not that he takes sides in conflicts but that he shows both the difficulty and the necessity of caring about fellow human beings. The protagonists of *Skammen* contribute to their own destruction by shutting out the world. If there is any message in Bergman’s films, it is that

extreme individualism (egoism) always leads to catastrophe. The Bergman films that fail are the ones that do not feel for others. That the critics of the 1970s never saw this says more about the 'zeitgeist' than about the films (Timm, 1994: 94).

In spite of the fact that my own views, both regarding *Skammen* and the poetics of film interpretation, are closer to Paisley Livingston and Mikael Timm than to Sara Lidman, Vernon Young and Maria Bergom-Larsson, and morally closer to Bernt Jonsson than to Ulla Torpe, I will round off this essay by somewhat paradoxically arguing for Sara Lidman's way of interpreting a film.

### The Perversions of Interpretation

In a classic but still relevant study of film interpretation practices, David Bordwell discusses four types of meaning: 1. Referential, 2. Explicit, 3. Implicit, 4. Symptomatic (Bordwell, 1989: 8-10). By referential and explicit meaning, Bordwell means literal meaning in the sense that *Skammen* is about war (referential) and that in this war everyone is wicked (explicit). Regarding this type of meaning, everyone involved in the debate about *Skammen* agrees. The other types of meaning, implicit and symptomatic, are what create conflict. Bergman himself as well as Mario Grut, Bernt Jonsson and Elisabet Hermodsson read *Skammen* in symbolic terms as an expression of pacifism (implicit). There are no meaningful wars and the only possible principle is the one of non-violence. Sara Lidman (and Ulla Torpe) emphasize symptomatic meaning, regarding which Bordwell writes, "In constructing meanings of types 1-3, the viewer assumes that the film 'knows' more or less what it is doing. But the perceiver may also construct repressed or symptomatic meanings that the work divulges 'involuntarily'" (Bordwell, 1989: 9).

*Skammen* was without a doubt an expression of Bergmanian pacifism, a theme enhanced by all the paratexts – for instance, public utterances by the director himself – that surrounded the film. Creating such a story in a time characterized by a controversial war, in respect of which many Swedish intellectuals took an active stand for one of the parties, was to Sara Lidman, by way of the internal logic of symptomatic interpretation, in itself an expression of a decisive point of view. In its relativistic view of the war in Vietnam, the film was a biased account, which served the interests of the American invaders. Is this a reasonable reading of the film? No, David Bordwell would say (and he would surely be able to produce a very impressive argument for it). Paisley Livingston, Mikael Timm, Mario Grut, Bernt Jonsson and Elisabet Hermodsson would presumably all agree. Yes, on the contrary, would be the answer supplied by Sara Lidman, Ulla Torpe, Maria Bergom-Larsson and even Vernon Young.

I also agree with symptomatic interpretation, as I believe that this is one of the most common modes of understanding fictional narratives, particularly if the narrative actively invites this kind of reading by referring to a well-known contemporary context. Film, for example, is often a veritable battlefield of symptomatic and ideological production of meaning. This is expressed by cognitive processes, which affirm, challenge, or even undermine the ideology of the individual film viewer. It is often here that the most interesting discussion about narratives can be found.

The ontology of symptomatic interpretation also adheres to Janet Staiger's intricate theory about "perverse spectators". Staiger claims:

I believe that contextual factors, more than textual ones [...], account for the experiences that spectators have watching films and television and for the uses to

which those experiences are put in navigating our everyday lives. These contextual factors are social formations and constructed identities of the self in relation to historical conditions. These contexts involve intertextual knowledge [...], personal psychologies, and social dynamics (Staiger, 2000: 1).

In this way, Sara Lidman's reading of *Skammen* can be understood within the confines of a given historical and social situation, in spite of the fact that the intentions of the author (Bergman), disclosed by the process described in the notebook, were entirely different. Staiger's way of describing this phenomenon – "perverse spectators" – means that this has nothing to do with right or wrong, just that the interpretation deviates from something, which is nearly always the case. Staiger also adds: "The term perverse also keeps me from necessarily assuming that deviance is politically progressive. Sometimes it is, sometimes it is not" (Staiger, 2000: 2). According to this logic, I think it is safe to describe Sara Lidman as a perverse spectator.

## Conclusion

But I cannot entirely support Sara Lidman's romantic point of view and her completely uncritical way of celebrating what she perceived to be the struggle of the Vietnamese people for freedom. Far from supporting the American war in Vietnam, I would still claim that the political reasons for the war presumably were too complex for Swedish arts journalism at the time to grasp. (Nor were the historical consequences of the American withdrawal in the mid-1970s entirely unproblematic, with the creation of a communist dictatorship and the fighting of new wars resulting in economic disaster.) Kim Salomon generally emphasizes the two-faced appearance of the Swedish movement against the war in Vietnam. On the one hand, one protested against the war in Vietnam; on the other, there were domestic ambitions regarding Sweden: "That the dictatorship of the proletariat and the classless society were goals for many leading persons was something that only the Marxist-Leninists knew" (Salomon, 1996: 307).

To a person with hindsight, the ideological self-satisfaction and blatant naivety evinced in some of the articles are striking. In his history of the Swedish Welfare State, Göran Hägg writes amusingly about the leftist ideas "that became dominant within mass media and in the circulation of opinion. Very close to these small groups were cultural personalities like Göran Sonnevi, Göran Palm, Sara Lidman and Jan Myrdal. [...] Within the cultural elite, the commitment to leftist socialism became a kind of collective ideology, to which everyone at least paid lip service" (Hägg, 2005: 253). Bergman himself has bitterly summarized the period in his autobiography *Laterna Magica*:

It is possible some brave researcher will one day investigate how much damage was done to our cultural life by the 1968 movement. It is possible, but hardly likely. Today, frustrated revolutionaries still cling to their desks in editorial offices and talk bitterly about 'the renewal that stopped short'. They do not see (and how could they!) that their contribution was a deadly slashing blow at an evolution that must never be separated from its roots. In other countries where varied ideas are allowed to flourish at the same time, tradition and education were not destroyed. Only in China and Sweden were artists and teachers scorned (Bergman, 1988: 199).

Today – 20 years after the publication of *The Magic Lantern* – there is certainly much historical revisionism regarding the 'zeitgeist' of the 1960s. On the other hand, where

*Skammen* is concerned it is difficult to prove any intellectual damage other than the humiliation Bergman may have felt owing to the harsh criticism of the film. In a three-page interview by Bo Strömstedt in *Expressen* in 1969, Bergman complained about the “lack of generosity in the Swedish reaction towards ‘Skammen’, and of the provincialism of Sweden” (Strömstedt, 1969).

That criticism, however, he had to endure, even if it is ironic that the interpretation of *Skammen* came to be so symbolically charged, especially as Bergman happily wrote regarding his struggle with the final part of the manuscript: “Today work has been fine and I believe that I have found a way that is not symbolic and that does not seem to be too silly” (Bergman, 1967: May 4). The symbolism was already there in the vast sea of spectators, though, just like the corpses at the end of *Skammen*. And then, of course, the remark about the raincoat was of no help.

The story about the reception of *Skammen*, however, should make it absolutely clear that the films of Ingmar Bergman were understood and read in ideological terms, particularly, I would claim, in the 1960s, but also in the 1970s. By the latter decade, though, Bergman had managed to find a way that was clearly politically appealing to the Swedish leftists, as illustrated by the overwhelming reception of his television series *Scener ur ett äktenskap* [Scenes from a Marriage, 1973], which coincided exactly with the initial steps of a large-scale feminist movement, an increase in divorce rates, and the influx of highly professional women on the job market. In fact, at this time Bergman was at his “political” peak as a Swedish artist. The tax scandal of 1976 changed all this. But that is another story.

## Notes

1. The ideological connotations of the Fårö landscape as a kind of existential critique of modern Sweden is dealt with in Erik Hedling (2006). The landscape depiction in *Skammen* has the same thematic implications.
2. The notebook was written between December 1966 and August 1967. I am grateful to the Foundation for letting me consult this manuscript and also to librarian Margareta Nordström for help with interpreting Bergman’s handwriting.
3. Thore Skogman was an extremely popular Swedish singer whose cultural capital was particularly slight.
4. To anyone familiar with film history, Forssell’s ideas appear to be pure nonsense. Bergman was a leading champion of what has been labelled the European Art Cinema, the kind of auteur-driven cinema that reached the same type of middle class audience as modernist literature or the theatre. The auteur cinema filled a cultural space, which was not already occupied by Hollywood; in material terms, it was for this very reason that the Art Cinema appeared in the 1950s. This kind of discussion of the sociology of reception is, however, outside the scope of the present essay. Reasons for a disrespectful view of film culture in Swedish literary circles are thoroughly discussed in Hedling (2001).
5. The attempted assassination of McNamara and US Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge occurred in May 1963. Van Troi was executed in public in Saigon in October 1964. He became a martyr and the object of a cult, both in Vietnam and among FNL sympathizers in Europe.
6. In both *Aftonbladet* and in Birgitta Steene’s bibliography (Steene, 2005:284), the name of the author is spelled Ulla Thorpe. I am, however, taking for granted that the author is the author and literary scholar Ulla Torpe, which is why I spell the name accordingly. Regarding Torpe’s article, one could comment on the naive view of film as a medium. *Skammen* was certainly no potential blockbuster, even if it is true that its audience would probably have been “bourgeois” in the sense that it consisted of people from the middle class.
7. Film critic Jan Aghed was one of Sara Lidman’s backers. In his review of Livingston’s book, he writes regarding the quoted lines: “This argument is of course crazy against the background of the obvious

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military reality and the tone of the debate in which Bergman chose to direct a metaphysical and abstract drama of invasion, civil war, and guerrilla war inspired by, according to what he himself confessed in a television interview, a newsreel from Vietnam” (Aghed, 1983:264).

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