

Book Reviews

**Tytti Soila, Astrid Söderbergh-Widding
& Gunnar Iversen:
Nordic National Cinemas**
Routledge, London and New York, 1998

For some years now, Routledge, the publishing giant, has produced a series of monographs on national film cultures. The series, "National Cinemas", is edited by Susan Hayward.

In this series, which – thanks to the global distribution network at Routledge's command alone – has something of the status of standard works, the turn has come to the five Nordic countries. Happily, the task has been entrusted to three Nordic film scholars: Tytti Soila, Astrid Söderbergh-Widding and Gunnar Iversen. They join the rather thin ranks of Nordic scholars in the Arts who have had the opportunity to breathe the heady air of international renown.

Most international works on Nordic film have been written by 'outsiders', foreign authors, who have not been privy to the languages. Notable among them is Brian McIlroy's contribution to the British series, "Flicks Books World Cinema" from 1986. As the authors of *Nordic National Cinemas* point out under the heading, "Film Production As a National Project", these foreign observers' lack of familiarity with the Nordic languages, societies and cultures has imposed a strong filter, which has clouded international views of Nordic film culture. I agree with the trio on this point, but with the qualification that it is not universally so. One has to admit that Americans, Frenchmen and Britishers have written better books on Ingmar Bergman than we Swedes have managed to produce, mostly because the acuity of film analysis in these countries by and large is superior to ours. (Here I make explicit exception for Maaret Koskinen's dissertation on Bergman, *Spel och speglingar* [The mirror and the play-within-the-play].

Before turning to deal with the meat of the book, I must comment on the peculiarity of its overall disposition. More than one-third of the volume (90 pages) is devoted to Swedish film, and another one-fourth (60 pages) to Finnish film. Both these chapters are written by Finnish-born Tytti Soila. Gunnar Iversen's chapter on Norway fills forty pages, whereas Astrid Söderbergh-Widding of Sweden covers Denmark in only twenty, and Iceland in far less (5 pages). Iceland is perhaps too small to claim equal treatment, but Denmark? I see no explanation.

All I can say is that the book will hardly please readers in Copenhagen or Aarhus, each a principal centre of film research and well endowed with expertise on Danish film history. (I might add that no less than three more extensive works on Danish film – all either authored or edited by Peter Schepeleern – have appeared in the interval during which the National Cinemas volume was being produced.)

In their Introduction the authors lay out their methodological points of departure. They state their intention of departing from the common approach to Nordic film, viz., a reception process with the great *auteurs*, Bergman or Dreyer, in focus. Instead, they set out to write their history, taking their point of departure in the films which have won the hearts of domestic audiences. And in this, I must say, they have succeeded. Furthermore, they hope to make a contribution to the ongoing international debate on national film cultures – an analytical objective which I am less sure they have managed to fulfill other than in the sense that they have given the international research community valuable insights into several new cinema cultures.

The contributions of all three authors are laudable. Nonetheless, I will concentrate mainly on Tytti Soila's chapters on Sweden and Finland, respectively, which aside from being the longest, are also, in my view, the most interesting. And of the two, I will concentrate most on 'Sweden', a subject to

which fully one-third of the book is devoted. I also find what Soila has to say about our film tradition both original and informative, with her numerous references to the parallel evolution of modern Sweden.

Soila takes a critical look at the emergence of the Swedish welfare state up to and including, the economic debacle of the 1990s. This is wise. To try, as some Swedes have tried, to hide or ignore what many foreign observers already are well aware of in a volume of this sort would be futile, and an embarrassment.

Soila offers a detailed account of social, economic and political developments in Sweden and relates both the films and their reception to those developments. Clearly inspired by Per Olov Qvist's research on the film cultures of the 1930s (*Folkhemmet's bilder*, Lund, 1995), she discusses how the advent of Social-Democratic rule in 1932 was represented in contemporary films like Gustaf Edgren's *Karl Fredrik regerar* (1934), in which Sigurd Wallén portrays a farm worker who becomes Minister of Agriculture. If there is any lapse in Soila's history, it might be the countercultural currents – 'counter' in relation to the modernization project – she finds in many of the films of the 1930s. Nor does she mention the antisemitic themes which Qvist found in nearly every tenth film of the period. (In a recent dissertation Bengt Bengtsson traces antisemitic themes well into the 1950s, and an entire book on antisemitism in the Swedish cinema is expected later this year – in the USA (!).

Still, the global treatment she manages to carry off is impressive, as is the depth of her knowledge. (I should note that her Finnish chapter is of the same calibre and equally rich in historical parallels.) Now and then, the political context strikes a spark, as in her spirited analysis of Gustaf Molander's *Rid i natt* [Partisans, Ride Tonight] (1942) after Vilhelm Moberg's novel, which, according to Soila, is the only film made before Stalingrad which took sides against Hitler's Germany. On other occasions her interest focuses on esthetic features, such as the famous first dream sequence in Bergman's *Smultronstället* (1957) [Wild Strawberries], which was inspired by Rune Carlsten's film based on Hjalmar Söderberg's *Doktor Glas* (1942). There, Glas (played by Georg Rydeberg) ponders a clock with no hands in a shop window. As all *Wild Strawberries*-devotés will recall, handless clocks worry Isak Borg, played by Victor Sjöström, in the Bergman sequence.

Bergman is quite naturally a recurring theme in Soila's account, and most of her comments seem eminently well-founded. On one point, however,

she loses me, and that is when she claims that he is "a conservative theatre director and a supporter of literary theatre and when one sees his stage productions – and for that matter his films – it is as if Artaud, Craig, Reinhardt or Brecht never existed" (p. 204). Even if only a few lines further on Soila refers to Maaret Koskinen's studies of the chinks in his illusory aesthetic – in the form of the mirror metaphor and the play-within-the-play – there are even more obvious references to Brechtian *Verfremdung*-techniques, such as the frame story in his early film, *Fängelse* (1949) [Prison (UK)/The Devil's Wanton (USA)] or, for that matter, the first scene in his rendition of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* at the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm a few years ago.

Among the many names which flash past, I was particularly happy to encounter the nestor of Swedish film history and criticism, Professor Rune Waldekranz, whose own contribution to Swedish feature film production is also presented to an international readership for the first time.

Waldekranz was one of the young intellectuals who got involved in film in the early 1940s, as a kind of dialectical response to critics' generally low estimation of the aesthetics of Swedish films of the 1930s. As head of productions for Sandrews, Waldekranz championed the so-called art film as a means of reaching out onto the international market. He achieved his first international success as a producer with Alf Sjöberg's film adaptation of Strindberg's *Miss Julie* (1951). The film was awarded First Prize at Cannes together with Vittorio de Sica's *Miracle in Milan* (1951), which gave him the possibility to pursue his ideas further. His next success was Ingmar Bergman's *Gycklarnas afton* (1953) [Sawdust and Tinsel (UK)/The Naked Night (USA)], which garnered an award at a film festival in Sao Paolo. Waldekranz' ambitious strategy suffered a severe blow, however, with the failure of Alf Sjöberg's adaptation of Pär Lagerkvist's novel, *Barabbas* (1953).

If Soila perhaps treads in others' footsteps – e.g., Jan Olsson's, Leif Furhammar's and Qvist's – with regard to early years, her own creativity blossoms in her account of recent decades. Director Bo Widerberg's book, *Visionen i svensk film* [The idea of Swedish film] and the ensuing 'new wave' in Swedish film of the 1960s is treated at length, with a wealth of analysis and original evaluations. Widerberg's *Kvarteret Korpen* [Raven's End] (1963), Vilgot Sjöman's *Jag är nyfiken – gul* [I Am Curious – Yellow] (1967), Stefan Jarl's "Mods" trilogy (1968-1993), and Jan Troell's adaptations of Wilhelm Moberg's epic novels, *The Emigrants* and

The Settlers/The New Land (1971 and 1973), are held forth as hallmarks of the 1960s and 1970s, albeit Soila's calling Troell a "mysogynist" does seem something of an exaggeration. Even if it may be true that Troell's films, as Soila writes, have to do with "the struggle of one solitary man with an impossible task" (p. 217), Troell clearly gives the theme a negative valence. In Troell's universe, men who try to exert their authority – be it Karl Oskar in *The Settlers*, Salomon August Andrée in *Ingenjör Andrées luftfärd* (1982) or Knut Hamsun in *Hamsun* (1996), all played by Max von Sydow, or, for that matter, Jari, the asocial murderer in *Il Capitano/A Swedish Requiem* (1991) – all personify the tragedy of male self-deception.

Soila devotes a special section to Swedish women film-makers, from Anna Hofman Uddgren's adaptations of Strindberg, including *The Father* (1912), to Agneta Fagerström-Olsson, whose first feature film, *Hjälten* [The Hero] (1989) was an inverted version of Verdi's *Rigoletto* – inverted in the sense that Fagerström-Olsson apostrophizes the daughter rather than the father. Mai Zetterling's career is the subject of a longer passage; interestingly, Soila points out that Rune Waldekranz produced her debut film, *Älskande par* [Loving Couples] (1964). As for the question of gender, Soila concludes that it is Sweden's women directors who have kept the flame of formal experimentation alive since the 1980s, whereas their male colleagues have tended to produce classically structured action films and thrillers. The difference is indeed striking, but the probable reason for this may be less so: art films no longer enjoy the prestige they once did, either among film-makers or film scholars; indeed, the historiographic ambitions of the book itself are a case in point. (Among contemporary film critics in the daily press, such a tendency lingers on, however, irrespective of sex.) Still, Soila's feministic ambitions contribute to the success and originality of her history, and I agree wholly with her observation that the indicator of class today is no longer occupation, but rather sex and age; consider, for example, the difference between women born in the 1970s and men born in the 1940s.

In her discussion of the Swedish Film Institute and the Swedish system of publicly subsidizing film production Soila scores comic points, thereby joining writers like Angus Finney (*The State of European Cinema*, 1996) and Martin Dale (*The Movie Game*, 1997) who seriously question the efficiency

of public sector involvement in European film production. Soila's exposé of the arbitrary nature of the rules system is convincing, and she also links government subsidies in some instances to a form of political steering. She is right in criticizing our overall lack of historical sensibilities in this country, where many seem to think that Swedish history began with the labour movement's rise to power roughly a century ago. Having been deprived of their history, she writes, the Swedes seek compensation in a form of privatization of their background, their 'roots'. Hence their fascination with psychology, psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, and the plethora of childhood reminiscences, not least on film. The cinema adaptations of Astrid Lindgren's work project a utopian welfare state instead of the welfare state that derailed. It is highly significant, Soila observes, that this propaganda, with its revisionist images of the past – in the era many of the Lindgren films depict Sweden was in fact one of the poorest countries in Europe – is financed by the government. Allow me to say that I applaud both the frankness and intellectual acuity of Soila's observations. Which is not to say that I entirely agree with her.

On the whole, the Swedish history makes stimulating reading. Some factual statements may be open to question, for example, the notion that Victor Sjöström's *Ingeborg Holm* (1913) started a debate which led to a change in the rules pertaining to taking children into custody. I should rather say that the film was part of an ongoing discussion, which ultimately brought about new poor laws in 1918. In the same vein, I fail to see the justification for the caption, "*The Fathers restored*", which accompanies a frame out of Kjell Sundström's *Jägarna* [The Hunters]. If anything, that particular film is about the demise of masculinity in an era when men's social roles are in flux.

All in all, I should say that except for the peculiar imbalance in the structure of the volume overall, on which I commented at the start of this article, I find *Nordic National Cinemas* an extremely useful volume and an elegant piece of publicity, directed to the world at large, for those of the Nordic countries which have been given the attention they merit.

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