

**‘Cinema’s First Master’?
Reviewing the Cinema of Victor Sjöström**

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Introduction

Between June and July 2004, the National Film Theatre in London held a retrospective of the films of director Victor Sjöström subtitled ‘Cinema’s First Master’.¹ What emerged from the screenings was a body of work that spanned from 1912 to 1937 and chronicled pre-classical cinema, the ‘golden age’ of Swedish cinema, classical Hollywood cinema, and the coming of sound.² In light of this, the accolade ‘Cinema’s First Master’ may not appear inappropriate if it were not for the fact that many of Victor Sjöström’s films remain widely unseen and that little has been written about him outside of his native Sweden.

As a result, Sjöström’s cinema has been largely neglected; he has been a filmmaker more often name-checked than discussed. Yet the same could be said about fellow Swedish directors Mauritz Stiller, Georg Af Klercker or John Brunius. In regards to Scandinavian cinema as a whole, Swedish cinema has in fact been the most explored due to the relatively more high-profile reputations of Sjöström and Stiller, not to mention the later high-profile and internationally respected career of Ingmar Bergman.

In 1952 the Swedish Film Institute published a slim volume entitled *Classics of the Swedish Cinema: the Stiller and Sjöström period* that explicitly condemned the little

¹ National Film Theatre Programmes June/July 2004. All extant films were screened apart from Sjöström’s American talkie *A Lady to Love* (1930) with Edward G. Robinson and Vilma Banky. Graham Petrie in *Hollywood Destinies* states that the film no longer survives but I have been told that a print exists in the U.S.A. Turner archives.

² Pre-classical cinema: e.g. *Trädgårdsmästaren* (1912), *Ingeborg Holm* (1913); the ‘golden age’ of Swedish cinema: e.g. *Terje Vigen* (1917), *Berg-Ejvind och hans hustru* (1917), *Körkarlen* (1920); classical Hollywood cinema: e.g. *He Who Gets Slapped* (1924), *The Scarlet Letter* (1927), *The Wind* (1928); the coming of sound: *A Lady to Love* (U.S.A., 1930), *Markurells i Wadköping* (Sweden, 1931).

respect given to Swedish cinema in film history. Its author, Bengt Idestam-Almquist, wrote,

In international accounts the Swedish cinema has been described as an unexplainable, slightly tragic phenomenon, a comet which appeared unexpectedly out of the darkness, made a quick dash past the cinematic world to disappear without a trace back into eternal darkness many, many years ago, a fleeting episode of no importance, not even worth noting... The conception of Swedish films is ripe for such a revision.³

Work has been done by critics such as John Fullerton, Astrid Söderbergh Widding, Jan Olsson and Bo Florin, amongst others, as a contribution to this revision yet many obstacles lie in its way. In the Nordic countries, film has never had a high status. As a result it has only been more recently that universities have begun film research and therefore those working within the field have not obtained the core research until recently. There is also a particularly restrictive language barrier that not only prevents research originating from within a Nordic country being easily accessible internationally, but also anyone working on Nordic film research outside of Scandinavia may very possibly have no knowledge of the country's language or culture.⁴

³ Bengt Idestam-Almquist, *Classics of the Swedish Cinema: the Stiller and Sjöström period* (Stockholm: Swedish Institute/AB Svensk Filmindustri, 1952), p.8

⁴ Tytti Soila, Astrid Söderbergh Widding and Gunnar Iversen, 'Introduction' in *Nordic National Cinemas* (London: Routledge, 1998), p.6

For this dissertation I will be drawing upon English-language sources and therefore I will be only drawing upon those Swedish-language sources that have been translated into English. In fact there is only one English-language book-length study that focuses solely on Sjöström, a biography by Bengt Forslund called *Victor Sjöström: His Life and Work*. Originally published in Swedish in 1980, it was translated into English eight years later but now remains out of print. A small bilingual volume on Sjöström was published by the Swedish Film Institute in 2003 to accompany the retrospective of his work called *Regi: Victor Sjöström / Directed by Victor Seastrom* by Bo Florin. Other volumes, such as Hans Pensel's *Seastrom and Stiller in Hollywood* pairs Sjöström along with Stiller or looks at Swedish cinema more widely.

With this dissertation, therefore, I will look at the various levels of neglect that Sjöström and his films have suffered and investigate how such neglect came about. Having seen every extant film of Sjöström's (with the exception of his 1930 talkie *A Lady to Love*), I will firstly provide an overview and reassessment of his films and career, highlighting themes and devices that resonate throughout his work. As well as published books and articles on Sjöström, I will also be looking at the British trade press at the time of his films' release. From this perspective I will be looking at how his Swedish films were critically received in Britain and questioning whether this reception sheds any light upon the poor standing of Swedish silent cinema in film history.

1. 'Hocus-pocus': Victor Sjöström and the Svensk Filmindustri, 1909-1923

Magnusson, Sjöström and Svenska Biografteatern, 1909-1916

The two men who were to transform Swedish film and see it thrive were Charles Magnusson and Julius Jaenzon. Both originally made newsreel actualities; in 1905 Magnusson filmed the coronation of King Haakon of Norway whilst in 1907 Jaenzon was in America making a film about Theodore Roosevelt.⁵ In 1909 Magnusson took over management of A.B. Svenska Biografteatern (later to be named Svensk Filmindustri) where Jaenzon would join as cinematographer one year later.⁶

Svenska Biografteatern was situated in the provincial city of Kristianstad. It contained a very small studio that was located directly above Kristianstad's main cinema, the studio's glass sides allowing in daylight for filming. Here they made small-scale films

⁵ Forsyth Hardy, *Scandinavian Film* (London: The Falcon Press, 1952), p.6

⁶ Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History, an Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1994), p.65

until relocating the company to Stockholm in 1912 where a larger studio was built.⁷ It was at this larger studio that Magnusson hired the directors that would transform Svenska Bio from a small business into Sweden's primary film production company. They were Mauritz Stiller, Georg af Klercker and Victor Sjöström. All three would write, direct and act in many short films over the next few years.⁸

Af Klercker was the first to be hired but quit Svenska Bio in 1913 and later went on to make films with smaller firms, such as Hasselblad, founded in 1915. Af Klercker has often been overshadowed by his contemporaries, Stiller and Sjöström, yet a rediscovery of his films proved him to be a filmmaker of uniquely visual sensibilities.⁹ Mauritz Stiller made comedies, such as *Thomas Graals Bästa Film* (Thomas Graal's Best Film, 1917) and the 'first sophisticated sex comedy'¹⁰ *Erotikon* (1920), alongside dramas such as the period tragedy, *Herr Arnes Pengar* (Sir Arne's Treasure, 1919) and *Gösta Berlings Saga* (The Story of Gösta Berling, 1924), both adaptations of work by prized Swedish novelist Selma Lagerlöf. Despite this, Stiller is nonetheless commonly noted, before all else, as the man who discovered a young Greta Garbo.¹¹

Sjöström was already a noted actor in the theatre even before Magnusson sought him out for Svenska Bio. For the earliest years of his life he had lived in New York but

⁷ Bo Florin, *Regi: Victor Sjöström / Directed by Victor Seastrom* (Swedish Film Institute, 2003), p.59; Hardy, *Scandinavian Film*, p.6; Thompson and Bordwell, *Film History, an Introduction*, p.65; Hardy states that Svenska Bio relocated in 1911 whilst Bordwell and Thompson say 1912. Florin states that they had relocated by 1912. Also Hardy states that the company moved to Stockholm whilst Bordwell and Thompson say near Stockholm.

⁸ Thompson and Bordwell, *Film History, an Introduction*, p.65

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.67

¹¹ Ibid.

returned to Sweden on his own initiative and after touring with a few theatre companies, he found himself running the Einar Fröberg repertory company in 1911. The next year he would receive a call from Charles Magnusson after which he speedily abandoned the theatre for (as Sjöström called it) the ‘hocus-pocus’ of the cinema.¹² The first film he directed for Svenska Bio was *Trädgårdsmästaren* (The Gardener, 1912), a tragedy in which a servant girl is raped by her boyfriend’s father amongst the flowers of a greenhouse only to return years later and die in the same spot. Her death amongst the flowers was described as ‘the marriage of death and beauty’¹³ by Sjöström, who played the father. The film, however, was soon banned by the Swedish censors.¹⁴

Many of the films Sjöström made between 1912 and 1917 have now been lost. An unfortunate fire in 1941, one of the most tragic of its kind, caused the majority of the Svenska Bio negatives to be destroyed, wiping out many of the films of early Swedish cinema including those of Sjöström and Stiller.¹⁵ Sjöström’s next film to have survived is *Ingeborg Holm* (1913), the story of a mother whose children are taken away after the death of her husband. *Trädgårdsmästaren* and *Ingeborg Holm* are the only two extant pre-war films of Sjöström’s. Jan Olsson tells us that in fact there is only one other extant Swedish film from 1913, a single reeler, and only one from both 1914 and 1915.¹⁶ Since

¹² Florin, *Regi: Victor Sjöström / Directed by Victor Seastrom*, p.59

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.60

¹⁴ John Fullerton, ‘Spatial and Temporal Articulation in Pre-classical Swedish Film’ in Thomas Elsaesser (ed.), *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative* (London: BFI, 1990), p.386

¹⁵ Thompson and Bordwell, *Film History, an Introduction*, p.81

¹⁶ Jan Olsson, ‘Magnified Discourse: Screenplays and Censorship in Swedish Cinema of the 1910s’ in John Fullerton (ed.), *Celebrating 1895: The Centenary of Cinema* (Sydney: John Libbey and Company Pty Ltd., 1998), p.239

examples of pre-war Swedish cinema are therefore scarce, Sjöström's two films, particularly *Ingeborg Holm*, have come to be relied heavily upon as indications of an era that is now lost.

Kristin Thompson uses *Ingeborg Holm* as an example of 'expressivity' in early silent cinema, defining expressivity as 'cinematic devices that go beyond presenting basic narrative information and add some quality to the scene that would not be strictly necessary to our comprehension of it.'¹⁷ In *Ingeborg Holm*, this expressivity articulates itself through long takes and a static camera. Thompson highlights a sequence in *Ingeborg Holm* in which the mother, Ingeborg, is saying farewell to her son as he leaves with his new foster mother. The entire scene is played out in a single take with a static shot of Ingeborg, in the foreground, with her back to the camera. Her son, in the background, is leaving at the gate. Ingeborg hides momentarily in the doorway as her son turns back to say goodbye one last time, but upon seeing that his mother is gone, turns away and leaves for good. Ingeborg emerges from the doorway and even though we do not see her face, we understand through her body language, as she supports herself on the wall before collapsing, that she is devastated.¹⁸

Sjöström's films are often noted (sometimes solely) for their powerful depiction of nature. In *Ingeborg Holm* we can already see a synthesis between the performer and their surroundings within the composition. It is therefore not only when Sjöström's films have taken the viewer out to the mountains, as in *Berg-Ejvind och hans hustru* (The

¹⁷ Kristin Thompson, 'The International Exploration of Cinematic Expressivity' in Lee Grieveson and Peter Krämer (eds.), *The Silent Cinema Reader* (London: Routledge, 2004), p.254

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.256

Outlaw and His Wife, 1917), that this synthesis between the character and their environment occurs, but also within studio interiors. Tom Gunning analyses a scene in *Ingeborg Holm* set inside the office of the poorhouse in which the mad Ingeborg, now believing a piece of wood to be her baby, is revisited by her son many years later. The same ‘expressivity’ occurs within this interior. By keeping the camera still and shifting the action within the frame, it ‘maintains our involvement, shifts our attention, modifies our relation to characters, and takes us through the stages of an emotional breakthrough as carefully as any edited sequence.’¹⁹ Sjöström achieves this through deep focus photography where the foreground and background are in focus simultaneously, a device that therefore not only occurs in his exterior scenes, where the landscape and the actors are both in focus, but also in interior scenes such as this. In *Ingeborg Holm* and a film such as *Havsgamar* (Sea Vultures, 1916) a doorway is often left open at the back of the set through which obscured space and action can be seen, a device reminiscent of the theatre of Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen in which a back room is only visible through a doorway and where important action sometimes occurs, such as the suicide of *Hedda Gabler*.²⁰ Incidentally, Sjöström would later adapt Ibsen’s poem *Terje Vigen* (1917) for the screen.

Intrinsic to such ‘expressive’ devices is the naturalistic acting that the films display. Although there are examples of histrionic acting styles in certain sequences of Sjöström’s films, the predominant style of performance in Sjöström’s (as well as Stiller’s)

¹⁹ Tom Gunning, “‘A Dangerous Pledge’: Victor Sjöström’s Unknown Masterpiece, *Mästerman*’ in John Fullerton and Jan Olsson (eds.), *Nordic Explorations: Films Before 1930* (John Libbey and Company Pty Ltd., 1999), p.208

²⁰ Henrik Ibsen, ‘Hedda Gabler’ in *Hedda Gabler and Other Plays* (London: Penguin, 1961), p.364

films is naturalistic, containing subtle gestures and restrained movement. The camera complements this acting style by, as in *Ingeborg Holm*, being still and observant. Ben Brewster and Lee Jacobs tells us that in *Ingmarssönerna* (The Sons of Ingmar, 1919), ‘very minimal gestures - a glance off camera, or slight shake of the shoulder when a man is ostensibly crying on the ground – seem to carry a great deal of signifying weight.’²¹ In this sense, Sjöström’s films have a distinctly modern sensibility.

In *Ingeborg Holm* we already see devices that will be used to full force in Sjöström’s breakthrough films of 1917 and 1918: *Terje Vigen* (1917), *Tösen från Stormyrtorpet* (The Girl From the Marsh Croft, 1917) and *Berg-Ejvind och hans hustru* (1918). There are two 1916 Sjöström films which bridge the gap between his pre-war films and the films of the ‘golden’ age, *Havsgamer* (Sea Vultures) and the recently rediscovered *Dödskyssen* (The Kiss of Death), a mystery thriller in which Sjöström uses the effect of double exposure to act opposite himself. This effect would reoccur many times in his films, most famously in *Körkarlen* (The Phantom Chariot, 1921) and in his Hollywood films *He Who Gets Slapped* (1924) starring Lon Chaney and *The Wind* (1928) starring Lillian Gish.

The Benefits of War: The ‘Golden Age’ of Swedish Cinema, 1917-1921

The outbreak of World War I had an effect upon the Swedish film industry that was contradictory to its effect upon the rest of Europe. Tytti Soila describes it as a

²¹ Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs, *Theatre to Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.136

‘convenient’²² turn of events, explaining how Sweden, a country that kept out of military intervention, benefited from a Europe embroiled in war. As Germany closed its borders to imports (in 1916, before which they continued to import European films, particularly Danish²³), both France and Italy’s output became limited and raw materials such as film stock became scarce. Denmark, with its close relations with Germany, fell out of favour with France and Britain.²⁴ Sweden, however, maintained a high level of production, most likely due to a now greater pressure to appease demand from its domestic market. The films were successful in Sweden and Magnusson, as well as other producers, believed that they would be just as successful outside of Sweden and so kept production costs high in hope of soon resuming exportation.²⁵ As a result, Svenska Bio stocked up a back catalogue of films that would only be seen after 1918 when Sweden would finally be allowed to release these films onto an unsuspecting world.

This independence had another effect on Swedish cinema, evident in its production methods and in the films themselves. Sweden had been left to its own devices and as the rest of the world was not watching, Sweden was making films without any outside influence. This was also apparent within the workings of the studio itself. At Svenska Bio Sjöström, along with its other directors, were given a lot of freedom. Talking of both himself and Stiller, Sjöström said,

²² Tytti Soila, ‘Sweden’ in Soila, Söderbergh Widding and Iversen, *Nordic National Cinemas*, p.149

²³ Thompson and Bordwell, *Film History, an Introduction*, p.58

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.54

²⁵ Idestam-Almquist, *Classics of the Swedish Cinema: the Stiller and Sjöström period*, p.9

We also had the good fortune to work for a studio whose president, Charles Magnusson, was an intelligent man. So intelligent, in fact, that he eventually discovered that the best way to deal with us was to leave us alone, trust us and let us do what we wanted, what we thought was right. In other words, every film we made was a one-man job. That was undoubtedly a boon both for us personally and for our work.²⁶

A photograph of the set of *Hans nåds testamente* (His Lord's Will, 1919) shows a two man production crew: Henrik Jaenzon (Julius Jaenzon's brother) behind the single camera and Victor Sjöström alongside him, holding a script.²⁷ This photograph clearly suggests an artistic freedom that would surely result in the films produced being particular to their director's (and cameraman's) style. The 'one-man job' that Sjöström saw occurring in the 1910s inadvertently evokes the future *auteur* theory, making a case for Sjöström himself as an *auteur* filmmaker.

It was in this environment that the films of what came to be known as the 'golden age' of Swedish cinema emerged. This period spans from 1917 until 1921, overlapping the years during which Sweden's cinema remained unseen outside of its own borders. Of Sjöström's films, this period is seen primarily to consist of *Terje Vigen* (A Man There Was, 1917), *Tösen från Stormyrtorpet* (The Girl From the Marsh Croft, 1917), *Berg-Ejvind och hans hustru* (The Outlaw and His Wife, 1918), *Ingmarssönerna* (The Sons of Ingmar, 1919), its sequel *Karin Ingmarsdotter* (Karin Daughter of Ingmar, 1920) and the

²⁶ Florin, *Regi: Victor Sjöström / Directed by Victor Seastrom*, p.66

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.58

both critically and commercially successful *Körkarlen* (The Phantom Chariot / Thy Soul Shall Bear Witness, 1921).

Outside of this group of films, but made within the same period are a more neglected and less typical series of films. *Hans nåds testamente* (His Lord's Will, 1919) is a comedy, lighter in tone than Sjöström's other films, that was more typical of the kind of films Stiller made. *Klostret i Sendomir* (The Monastery of Sendomir, 1920), in contrast, is a dark, brooding, set-bound film that rejects the open, natural spaces of Sweden's landscape for claustrophobic and perhaps even expressionistic interiors. *Vem dömer* (Love's Crucible, 1922) is similarly stylised with particularly striking compositions and photography, such as a sequence in which the heroine walks through flames to her salvation. *Monthly Film Bulletin*, in a reassessment of the film, suggested that, '*Love's Crucible* certainly deserves to be ranked as one of Sjöström's masterpieces rather than damned with the traditional faint praise for the bravura of its closing sequences'.²⁸ *Eld ombord* (Fire Onboard, 1923) was Sjöström's final Swedish film before he left for Hollywood, a sensational, but effective, sea-bound thriller. Perhaps most interesting of these 'other' films of the golden age is *Mästerman* (1920) which Tom Gunning describes as 'one of the neglected masterworks of world cinema'²⁹ highlighting the complex construction of its scenes as well as its mature technique and subtle performances.³⁰

²⁸ Tom Milne, 'Vem Dömer? (Love's Crucible)' in *Monthly Film Bulletin*, January 1978, p.15

²⁹ Gunning, "'A Dangerous Pledge": Victor Sjöström's Unknown Masterpiece, *Mästerman*', p.204

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.205

2. The Reception of Victor Sjöström's Swedish Films in Britain, 1914-1921

In order to get a sense of how Sjöström's films were distributed and received outside of Sweden, I investigated the trade paper *The Bioscope* for evidence of the British reception of Sjöström's films. Out of all the Swedish films that Sjöström made between 1912 and

1921 I could only find evidence of seven from within the pages of *The Bioscope*. It is certainly possible that more of his films were released in Britain, including some of his lost films. If this is the case then it is probably due to a combination of an unfamiliarity with the missing films, including at least one lost feature, *Det omringade huset* (1922), as well as the sometimes misleading English-language titles the films were given that have lead to a difficulty in locating and identifying certain titles from *The Bioscope* as well as other publications such as *Kinematograph Weekly* and *Pictures and Picturegoer*. Certain films, such as the comedy *Hans nåds testamente* (1919), may have seemed like too much of an anomaly alongside the more serious films exhibited in Britain and may not have been imported for not having that ‘gloomy’³¹ quality that countries outside of Sweden perceived its cinema to have.

There is certainly two very distinct periods during which Sjöström’s films were released in Britain: those released before the war and those released afterwards. It is clear from this that the films being made in the intermediate years (a prolific time for Svenska Bio) were not only delayed but released in Britain over quite a short period of time. Six out of seven of these films were released between July 1918 and February 1921. Indeed, Idestam-Almquist quotes from an American publication that states, ‘From the end of World War I and into the early ’twenties hardly a month passed that there did not appear in Stockholm or other European capitals some new celluloid masterpiece by great producers such as Sjöström, Stiller and Brunius.’³² Certainly the simultaneous release of

³¹ *The Bioscope*, 10 February 1921, p.76

³² from *Hollywood Quarterly*, Volume V, Number 2, quoted in Idestam-Almquist, *Classics of the Swedish Cinema: the Stiller and Sjöström period*, p.11

films by Stiller and Brunius, alongside Sjöström, would have maintained a continuity of Swedish films in Britain as well as constantly reaffirming its identity.

‘Margaret Day’: Sjöström’s pre-war cinema in Britain, 1914

The first instance of a Sjöström film appearing in *The Bioscope* stands alone as the only film (of which I could find evidence) to have been released into a pre-war Britain. The 22 January 1914 issue of *The Bioscope* published a page-long review of *Ingeborg Holm* (1913), its title Anglicized as ‘Margaret Day’. The unusual length of the review suggests that special attention had been paid to *Ingeborg Holm*. The reviewer establishes Scandinavian cinema’s reputation at the time, proving that Scandinavian cinema was held in high regard. They write, ‘Scandinavian film has always held its position in the very foremost rank, and is remarkable moreover, for the steady and consistent development in its dramatic interest, artistry of production, and technical excellence.’³³ The reviewer suggests how this manifests itself in *Ingeborg Holm* with its ‘many very beautiful effects of light and shade deeply tinged with that gloom which is so characteristic of northern art.’³⁴ With this statement the reviewer also confirms another reputation that Scandinavian cinema had at the time and which still echoes today (reaffirmed through the cinema of Bergman), that its films are dour and therefore laborious to watch.

³³ *The Bioscope*, 22 January 1914, p.319

³⁴ *Ibid.*

Such a preconception may have stemmed from, in this case, what the reviewer describes as the ‘pitilessly realistic’³⁵ story. Indeed, *Ingeborg Holm* is a film of stark realism that deals with social issues in an honest and perhaps uncompromising way. The style of the film partly accounts for this; the stasis of the camera, along with its wide shots and deep focus, creates a distancing effect. The story, which allows grave misfortune to fall upon its protagonist scene after scene, also goes some way in constructing the realism of the film. In this sense, *Ingeborg Holm* is perhaps quite a shocking film in its distanced depiction of events, yet the film nevertheless manages to sympathise with the character of Ingeborg. She is clearly positioned as the victim in the film, a victim of both personal misfortune and of an unjust society.

In fact, the reviewer of *Ingeborg Holm* found the film so realistic that they actually voiced their fears about the film’s possible effects on a certain class of British society:

In so far as poverty and bitter distress prevail in every community, the story of Margaret Day is of universal interest, but the system under which she suffers is so foreign to British methods and British sentiment that it cannot seriously be regarded from a sociological aspect. There is the danger, moreover, that the ignorant or thoughtless spectator may too readily assume that the tyranny to which Margaret is subjected is part and parcel of our own poor law system, and so intensify the dread of the workhouse which is so deeply ingrained in the deserving

³⁵ Ibid.

poor, and which leads them to suffer untold hardship rather than apply for the relief to which they are justly entitled.³⁶

It is interesting that the reviewer takes it upon themselves to set the record straight over the British policy, as though the film critics are moral guardians with an obligation to screen films for anything that may disturb its viewers. A similar sociological reading appears in a later review for *Körkarlen* (1920) in *The Times*, suggesting an anxiety in Britain over the direct effect of cinema upon society, particularly its effect upon the lower classes.³⁷

It is interesting to note that Sjöström's name has not yet been mentioned, suggesting that his name did not yet carry any meaning in Britain and that the position of the director was not yet regarded any higher than the production company for which he worked or the country from which his film came.

Sjöström's films in post-war Britain, 1918-1921

It would be over four years until Britain received another Sjöström picture. On 11 July 1918 *The Bioscope* ran a review of *Terje Vigen* (1917), translated as 'A Man There Was'. The reviewer, clearly enthusiastic about the film, evokes its profound tone in his own use of language, calling it a 'grim epic of the sea where liliputian emotions are substituted for grand tragedy, where the fundamental passions by which all humanity is swayed sound in

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ *The Times*, 7 February 1921, p.8

a deep, deep vibration.’³⁸ The reviewer makes a clear distinction between the kind of cinema that *Terje Vigen* is and the kind of cinema that he describes as concerned with “‘the eternal triangle’ of fickle wives and telephone intrigues’.³⁹ As we shall see, this distinction is a regular feature of the Sjöström reviews, acting as both a merit to the films themselves and as a warning to commercially-minded exhibitors. This distinction is made more pronounced at the end of the review when the reviewer writes that the film ‘needs a discriminating audience, capable of appreciating the beauty which often takes the place of outlook.’⁴⁰

Very interestingly, the fan magazine *Pictures and Picturegoer* published a prose adaptation of the film both as entertainment for the reader and as publicity for the film.⁴¹ Over two pages and one column, the tale is told in three chapters and accompanied by stills from the film. The postscript reads, ‘The play, in five acts, is presented to the public by the Nordisk Films Company, Ltd. The role of “Terje Viken” is splendidly portrayed by Victor Seastrom, the famous and talented Scandinavian actor.’⁴² Here we have the first mention of Victor Sjöström’s name, though not as director but as actor.

It is significant to note that here, in 1919, we see the Anglicised version of his name, ‘Victor Seastrom’. This name is commonly thought to have been given to Sjöström only when he had moved to Hollywood (common practice in terms of émigré directors in Hollywood). Yet his first Hollywood film, *Name the Man*, was not made nor released

³⁸ *The Bioscope*, 11 July 1918, p.23

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ *Pictures and Picturegoer*, 15-22 February 1919, pp.176-8

⁴² Ibid., p.178

until 1924, proving that this name had been given to Sjöström earlier than his move to Hollywood, most likely by the press in relation to the ‘famous and talented Scandinavian actor’ that they had evidently come across before.

The review in *The Bioscope* of *Terje Vigen* appeared in July 1918 yet the adaptation in *Picturegoer* appeared in February 1919, suggesting that the film was not seen until 1919. If this was the case, and the films were being screened long after their reviews in *The Bioscope*, then there would have been an even greater delay in the screening of Sjöström’s films in Britain, as well as a tighter clustering of the films between the years 1919 and 1921.

The 30 January 1919 edition of *The Bioscope* features a review of *Berg-Ejvind och hans hustru* (The Outlaw and his Wife, 1918), retitled as ‘Love, the Only Law’ and the 2 January 1919 edition of *The Bioscope* features two advertisements for the film that anticipates its release later in the month. Here Sjöström’s films are already being noted for their use of landscape. One advertisement reads ‘This masterpiece was produced in the wilds of “the Land of the Midnight Sun” by special permission of the Government of Iceland. The settings are glorious’,⁴³ and the reviewer of the film writes that, ‘The vast spaces and rugged majesty of the numerous mountain scenes are exhilarating and inspiring in themselves’.⁴⁴ This suggests that the films had the added attraction of the exotic and of coming from outside of Britain. This other-worldliness is depicted succinctly and appropriately in the kind of landscape scenes seen in *Berg-Ejvind och hans hustru*.

⁴³ *The Bioscope*, 2 January 1919, p.ix

⁴⁴ *The Bioscope*, 11 July 1918, p.23

Incidentally, but crucially, a strange practice of British exhibition is exposed in the review of this film. Although the film is acknowledged by the reviewer as a ‘masterpiece’, the reviewer encourages changes to not only the inter-titles, but to the actual film itself. They write:

From a purely artistic point of view, the picture is a real masterpiece. From a commercial point of view, it is not without defects, most of which, however, can fortunately be eliminated. The film is too long for a story which would be depressing and monotonous if it were not so admirably done. A great many cuts may be made with considerable advantage to its show value. A number of the subtitles also need drastic revision. The lover’s comparison of his lusty bride with “a blue mountain top rising from the mist,” would not be accepted seriously by the average picture audience, and there are other similar instances of unfortunate phraseology.⁴⁵

The reviewer’s ‘unfortunate phraseology’, when they write that a ‘great many cuts may be made’, almost sounds as though the reviewer themselves is granting permission to exhibitors for the re-editing of the film. The reviewer does not, however, go into detail as to exactly which scenes should be cut and I would expect that an exhibitor would not be qualified to make changes without detracting from the logic of the film. If the re-editing of films was common practice in Britain at this time then it is very possible that a

⁴⁵ *The Bioscope*, 30 January 1919, p.83

different version of *Berg-Ejvind och hans hustru* (or indeed any other film that exhibitors felt could do with alterations) would have been seen depending on which cinema filmgoers chose to go to. The reviewer also seems to be suggesting that the inter-title ‘a blue mountain top rising from the mist’ would be considered comic by an audience, but it is also possible that the reviewer’s true anxiety is that the line may have ‘unfortunate’ connotations, especially since he describes the character of the ‘blue mountain top’ wife as being a ‘lusty bride’.

This film was released in Britain by the Charles Urban Trading Company. According to Luke McKernan’s article ‘Putting the World Before You: The Charles Urban Story’, Charles Urban, a man who had pioneered a two-strip colour process with G.A. Smith called Kinemacolor,⁴⁶ had sold off his company by 1910 and that by 1919 it was not as prosperous as it once was. The fact that one of the advertisements states that the Charles Urban Trading Company is a Manchester-based and not a London-based company⁴⁷ suggests that by that time Charles Urban was not a particularly prosperous business, suggesting in turn that the release of *Berg-Ejvind och hans hustru* was limited by the size of its distributor.

A review of *Ingmarssönerna* (The Sons of Ingmar, 1919) appeared in the 6 November 1919 *Bioscope*, its title translated as ‘Dawn of Love’. The film is about Brita, who is forced to marry Ingmar, nicknamed ‘Lill-Ingmar’ (Ingmar Jr.), a prosperous neighbour from a long line of Ingmars (remarkably evoked when Lill-Ingmar climbs a

⁴⁶ Luke McKernan, ‘Putting the World Before You: The Charles Urban Story’ in *Young and Innocent? The Cinema in Britain 1896-1930* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002), p.71

⁴⁷ *The Bioscope*, 2 January 1919, p.x

ladder to a Heaven-like world where he meets a room filled with his forefathers of generations past). Ingmar loves Brita yet she is in love with a lowly farmhand and for this reason resents Ingmar as well as the baby she is forced to have. The fulcrum of the film occurs when Brita kills her own child to scorn Ingmar. She is sent to prison for two years and when she is released she finds Ingmar, who has grown weary through time, waiting for her nonetheless. As the *Bioscope* review puts it, ‘the love her husband always had for her has kindled a flame in her own heart, and the two discover their mutual affection just in time.’⁴⁸

This review of *Sons of Ingmar* perceptively highlights an essential quality of Sjöström’s cinema. The reviewer writes, ‘when Ingmar meets Brita outside the prison door the scene is quite overwhelming in its intensity, and yet all that happens is that a woman emerges from an opening door, a waiting man picks up her bag and they go off together.’⁴⁹ Sjöström manages to make small actions and gestures resonate deeply for the viewer. There is a sense of two versions of the same film playing out at once, that of visible surface actions, such as Ingmar waiting for Brita to emerge from the prison door, and that of the invisible meanings of these surface actions, meanings that are not made clear within the scene but as a result of the scenes that came before it. This scene at the prison door occurs quite late in the film, after we have experienced the hardship that both Ingmar and Brita have undergone. That we find Ingmar waiting for Brita signifies a monumental gesture of forgiveness on his part and her acceptance of his greeting signifies that Brita has overcome a personal struggle and learnt to appreciate her husband.

⁴⁸ *The Bioscope*, 6 November 1919, p.96

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.97

It is, therefore, not what is plainly seen on screen that affects the viewer but what the viewer understands of the tragedy. It is more so the *implied* tragedy that affects the viewer; that is, what is unseen, resulting in a particularly moving whole.

The review of *Tösen från Stormyrtorpet* (The Girl From Marsh Croft, 1917), published in *The Bioscope* on May 6 1920, and for *Klostret i Sendomir* (The Monastery of Sendomir, 1920) on 24 June 1920 present us with an instance of two Sjöström films being released within two months of each other. This, in turn, would be less than a year before one of Sjöström's most successful and famous pictures, *Körkarlen*.

'The Most Remarkable Picture in the World'

The final film reviewed by *The Bioscope* remains Sjöström's most famous Swedish picture. *Körkarlen* (1921) was released in Britain as 'Thy Soul Shall Bear Witness' (but also known as 'The Phantom Chariot'). The advertisement for the film, published in the same issue as the review (on 10 February 1921), reads 'The Most Remarkable Picture in the World'⁵⁰ in block capitals across its top with a list of quotations from glowing reviews by the press printed alongside. In comparison with the relative quietness of Sjöström's other releases, there is certainly a sense that the release of *Körkarlen* is more eventful, especially when cross-referenced with a review from *The Times*. It reads, '*Thy Soul Shall Bear Witness* is a great step forward...the whole thing is a revelation'.⁵¹ There is also a sense, therefore, that *Körkarlen* appeared like a fully-formed milestone, heralding a new

⁵⁰ *The Bioscope*, 10 February 1921, pp.12-3

⁵¹ *The Times*, 7 February 1921, p.8

decade in what the *Bioscope* reviewer described as ‘the histrionic art.’⁵² The film’s intricate structure with its Chinese-box-like narrative of flashbacks, as well as its remarkable double exposure special effects, serves to make the film an instantly gratifying experience which may account for the high praise the film received on its release.

Yet, as Tom Gunning suggests, these features have ultimately proved problematic in term of Sjöström’s other films:

I think it is unfortunate that many people, if they know one silent Swedish film, this is the one. Its representative role is unfortunate, I believe, and in this respect I find it inferior to such Sjöström films as *Berg-Ejvind*, *Ingmarssönerna*, or *Mästerman*. The other films portray more complex characters, and their engagement with film language, while less flamboyant than the superimpositions and flashbacks of *Körkarlen* are, to my mind, actually more elegant and innovative. *Körkarlen* wears its technique on its sleeve, overtly displays its unquestionable mastery of superimposition and complex narrative structure.⁵³

The pleasures of the film’s special effects and clever structure along with the resulting high-profile release at the time may account for why the film became Sjöström’s most famous Swedish film.

⁵² *The Bioscope*, 10 February 1921, p.76

⁵³ Gunning, “‘A Dangerous Pledge’: Victor Sjöström’s Unknown Masterpiece, *Mästerman*”, p.205

Despite this praise, the film does not pass without the standard criticism from the *Bioscope* review. The reviewer writes, ‘The thesis of the story, which is essentially a morality tale, should also, we think, be made rather clearer, as it may be by some revision of the titling,’ and that, ‘The concluding titles which should summarise the message of the film do not quite aptly express its significance.’⁵⁴ We have seen this kind of ‘constructive’ criticism before in the *Bioscope* review of *Berg-Ejvind och hans hustru* although the reviewer may have missed the mark in their desire for the ‘message of the film’ to be clearly stated by the intertitles. As we saw with *Ingmarssönerna*, Sjöström’s cinema is not one of a singular reading but of implication through action onscreen that relates to action, themes, and ideas off-screen, which results in a more active and interpretive role for the viewer. The reviewer does, however, highlight a particular quality that the film ultimately achieves when they describe it as ‘an eloquent study of psychology’,⁵⁵ praise that would not be out of place in reference to Sjöström’s other films. It is perhaps partly due to the flashbacks as a memory device that gives *Körkarlen* this psychological quality, as well as the scenes with the phantom chariot that allude to a fantasy occurring inside of the protagonist’s head.

It is significant that Sjöström’s name is mentioned here for the first time as the man responsible for making the film: ‘Victor Seastrom, the Producer, repeatedly called before the curtain at the finale’,⁵⁶ reads the advertisement, suggesting that Sjöström himself was at the Alhambra theatre for the press screening of the film. The review itself

⁵⁴ *The Bioscope*, 10 February 1921, pp.76-7

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.76

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.12-3

highlights Sjöström almost as an *auteur*. It writes, ‘The performance in the leading role of Victor Seastrom (who also wrote the scenario and directed the film) has seldom been equalled, on screen or stage, as a virtuoso display of histrionic art.’⁵⁷

A particularly interesting distinction that is made throughout these *Bioscope* reviews is that of the essential difference between Sjöström’s cinema and the ‘conventional’ cinema of the time, what the review of *Terje Vigen* described as “‘the eternal triangle,” of fickle wives and telephone intrigues’.⁵⁸ Firstly, the films are often described as, in the case of *Ingeborg Holm*, ‘deeply tinged with that gloom which is so characteristic of northern art’. Secondly, as the reviewer of *Sons of Ingmar* believes, the film,

will not appeal, perhaps, in smaller theatres where purely “popular” fare is demanded, but from an artistic point of view it is a genuine triumph which will be deeply appreciated by every picture goer who cares for the higher developments of the art of the film play.⁵⁹

Also, the reviewer of *Körkarlen* suspects that,

the production will doubtless be considered gloomy, and even sordid, by some British audiences. It is not an entertainment for those who seek merely superficial

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.76

⁵⁸ *The Bioscope*, 11 July 1918, p.23

⁵⁹ *The Bioscope*, 6 November 1919, p.96

sensations, but its sincerity must compel the attention and respect of all thoughtful folk. It demands more careful handling than is accorded the ordinary programme film...It is capable of drawing an entirely new class of patron...⁶⁰

That the films are described as ‘gloomy’ or ‘sordid’ comes almost as a warning for exhibitors. Here we get a sense of a kind of early ‘art cinema’ emerging, with a clear differentiation between the aesthetics and preoccupations of Sjöström’s films and that of ‘purely “popular” fare’. What this seems to translate as in terms of the selling of the films themselves is the perception that these films are more serious, more intellectual and more high-class than other films. As we see in the review for *Körkarlen* this is used to the film’s advantage, suggesting that it will appeal to a higher class of audience and therefore raise the reputation of the theatres that screen it.

Sjöström’s films, therefore, were marketed as quality, prestige pictures that contained important social messages delivered in a serious, artful style. This perceived ‘gloomy’ quality lead to a differentiation between ‘art’ and ‘popular’ cinema, ultimately prefiguring the same divide that exists between the multiplex and the art cinema today. In the next section I will investigate how the original distribution and exhibition of Sjöström’s films has affected their reputation since then.

⁶⁰ *The Bioscope*, 10 February 1921, p.76

3. The Invisible *Auteur*: the Neglect of Victor Sjöström in Film History

In this final chapter I will briefly look at the ways in which film history has neglected Victor Sjöström before considering Sjöström in relation to other European filmmakers and to the art cinema tradition. Early film histories, such as Terry Ramsaye's *A Million and One Nights* (1926) and Paul Rotha's *The Film Till Now* (1930), greatly influenced the future perception of silent film history for many years. For example, a chapter of

Ramsaye's emphatically titled 'Griffith Evolves Screen Syntax' would have served to cement the myth of D.W. Griffith as the singular force behind 1910s cinema. In the same respect, the fact that Ramsaye does not mention Sjöström would have served to enforce his invisibility.

Paul Rotha's *The Film Till Now*, however, does mention Victor 'Seaström' and his criticism of Sjöström's Hollywood films in turn suggests a reason for them going unmentioned in Ramsaye's account. He writes that Sjöström,

with the sole exception of *The Scarlet Letter*, has made little of the material given to him by his producers. *Confessions of a Queen*, *Name the Man*, and *The Tower of Lies* were dull pictures, and not until the woodland sequence of *He Who Gets Slapped* did any of the old Seaström poetry come to the surface. This sequence of the two lovers in the sunlight, away from the circus ring in which most of the story took place, was the only redeeming incident in an otherwise uninteresting heartbreak affair of Lon Chaney.⁶¹

Rotha's critique clearly suggests that Sjöström's Hollywood films were poorly received on release. This provides a contrast between how *The Bioscope* praised Sjöström's Swedish pictures and how Rotha dismissed his Hollywood films. The terms with which Rotha justifies Sjöström's films highlight certain preconceptions about Sjöström's cinema. Rotha is clearly comparing the Hollywood films to Sjöström's Swedish work, but

⁶¹ Paul Rotha, *The Film Till Now* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1930), p.119

defining the Swedish work in terms of the ‘old Seaström poetry’; in other words, Sjöström’s depiction of nature. As a result *He Who Gets Slapped* (1924) is dismissed entirely but for an exterior scene. Sjöström’s nature sequences, which were once cited to promote his Swedish films, now restrict the acceptance of his Hollywood films. Even though Hollywood cinema by its very nature is one of constructed sets and sound stages, exterior scenes are still plainly evident in films such as *Name the Man* (1924) and *The Scarlet Letter* (1926). In *The Scarlet Letter*, however, the exterior set is a construction rather than a found location such as those in *Berg-Ejvind och hans hustru*, but as we saw earlier with the example of *Ingeborg Holm*, Sjöström’s ‘poetry’ (his ability to bind the characters’ emotional and psychological state to their surroundings) applies not only to his exteriors but also to his interiors. *The Wind* (1928), however, was a clear ‘return’ to the visions of nature we saw in his earlier films. For the film Sjöström undertook an ambitious location shoot in the Mojave desert, the final product providing the audience with the breathtaking emotional and aesthetic power of his Swedish films but within the confines of a classical Hollywood film. (Yet even in this film interiors are powerfully utilised; for example, in one memorable scene during a desert storm, the falling apart of the house where Letty (Lillian Gish) is staying mirrors the character’s own psychological breakdown.)

In a later chapter entitled ‘Films From Other Countries’ Rotha dedicates one paragraph to Swedish cinema, which he describes as ‘now almost non-existent’.⁶² This sense of a dying cinema suggests that the films were already antiquated even though it

⁶² Ibid., p.235

had not yet been a decade since *Körkarlen* (1921). Crucially, however, Rotha does mention that the serious tone of Sweden's silent films lead to a 'half-hearted acceptance of the Swedish cinema by foreign exhibitors and renters.'⁶³ Since this is a British text, then it is probably correct to assume that Rotha is talking about the films' reception in Britain. This confirms the *Bioscope* reviewers' anxieties of the films being only of interest to discerning viewers and not to a general public. The exhibitors and renters must have believed this also and as a result the films received an unenthusiastic release in Britain.

Forsyth Hardy, in his 1952 British book *Scandinavian Cinema*, quotes from C.A. Lejeune's early film history *Cinema* (1931) which contextualises Swedish cinema in relation to other European cinemas, suggesting that Sjöström's cinema arrived too soon. What Lejeune proposes is that if Sjöström's cinema had arrived during the 1920s, a time when other cinemas in Europe, such as those of Germany and Russia, were flourishing, that it would not have come into conflict with the dominant ideology of film purely as entertainment.⁶⁴ Sjöström's cinema is strangely mature, strange because it appeared almost fully formed, with an understanding of the medium far more advanced than its peers. However, if Sjöström's really is an unknown cinema, then it suggests that other invisible cinemas are entirely possible.

Gunning suggests other European directors of the 1910s who have suffered the same fate. He names German directors Franz Hofer and Max Mack, Russian director

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Caroline Alice Lejeune, *Cinema* (London: Alexander Maclehose and Co, 1931) quoted in Hardy, *Scandinavian Film*, p.14

Yevgeni Bauer, and the Swedish director Georg af Klerker.⁶⁵ I would add Stiller and the Danish director Benjamin Christensen to that list. These directors, along with an unknown number of other invisible *auteurs*, represent a loose community of European filmmakers who were making films of distinct aesthetic and/or national styles that set them apart from mainstream (Hollywood) filmmaking. This clearly mirrors the broad ideological conflict (the struggle between art and commerce) that exists between Hollywood and European cinema in modern times. The *Bioscope* reviews prove that this conflict is in fact age-old, existent from as early as the 1910s. Art cinemas, however, where such European cinema came to be ghettoised, were only developed at a later date. London's Film Society, for example, was only founded in 1925.⁶⁶ Outside of Sweden, therefore, Sjöström's cinema was somewhat homeless, never presented to its ideal audience of discerning cinemagoers but to the general public, most likely appended to a bill of commercially-minded films.

I have investigated the reception of Sjöström's Swedish cinema in Britain at the time of their original release as an example of how Sjöström's cinema was received in countries outside of Sweden. I would suggest that Sjöström's films were faced with similar problems in other European countries, as well as in America. Indeed, Bo Florin tells us that Sjöström had been well received in the U.S. which is what led to his invitation to Hollywood,⁶⁷ yet Graham Petrie tells us that the cinema-going public in

⁶⁵ Gunning, "A Dangerous Pledge": Victor Sjöström's Unknown Masterpiece, *Mästerman*, p.204

⁶⁶ Allen Eyles, 'Art House and Repertory Cinema' <<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/cinemas/sect5.html>> [accessed: 1st May 2005]

⁶⁷ Florin, 'Victor Goes West: Notes on the Critical Reception of Sjöström's Hollywood Films, 1923-1930' in Fullerton and Olsson (eds.), *Nordic Explorations: Films Before 1930* (John Libbey and Company Pty Ltd., 1999), pp.251-2

America were not aware of Sjöström's work and that, as had been suggested by some of the British *Bioscope* reviewers, the films had been re-edited. *Körkarlen*, for example, was known as *The Stroke of Midnight*, a version of the film that Petrie tells us 'successfully destroyed all the film's true originality'.⁶⁸ The problematic reception of Sjöström's films was universal, then, occurring not only within Britain but in other countries as well.

It is therefore a combination of factors that have led to the invisibility of Sjöström's cinema today, with many of these factors occurring upon the films' original release. At the same time, however, the nature of Sjöström's films themselves, with their uncompromising though inspired views, would never have aligned themselves easily with the dominant form of cinema as entertainment. These various factors only prove that the effect of the (in this case, the trade) press and seemingly inconsequential (in this case, cinematic) trends and fashions can resonate for what is now almost a century later. The concept of an *auteur* emerging before their time recalls the phrase 'Cinema's First Master' that subtitled the 2004 Sjöström retrospective. As we have seen in the *Bioscope* reviews and the early film histories, such easy generalisations are ultimately problematic. Taking note of how, in Sjöström's films, what appears simple on the surface only gains its true meaning in relation to other factors, it is best to leave such a statement unjustified and instead overturn it to make visible the endless myriad of questions and histories that lie hidden underneath.

⁶⁸ Graham Petrie, *Hollywood Destinies, European Directors in America 1922-31* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002), p.130

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