

¶ Birgitta Steene, *Måndagar med Bergman: En svensk publik möter Ingmar Bergmans filmer*. Stockholm: Brutus Östlings bokförlag Symposion, 1996. 224 pp.

In her study of Swedish audience reactions to Ingmar Bergman's films, *Måndagar med Bergman*, Birgitta Steene does some groundbreaking work on film reception. The book deals with a group of Swedish spectators who attended retrospective screenings of Bergman's films at the movie theatre Fågel Blå in Stockholm (a movie theatre, by the way, well known within Bergman lore). During the season of 1993-94, Steene statistically mapped the audience. She also performed comprehensive interviews with thirty people, asking them about their views of Bergman's art, their favourite films, what attracted them to Bergman and so on.

Steene's claims that her investigation is methodologically based on reception scholars such as the Konstanz school (Jauss and Iser), Jackie Stacey and David Morley. She also deploys a qualitative American interview approach called "the uses and gratification method". As the result of her interviews, Steene reaches the conclusion that Bergman never really had a strong popular appeal in Sweden, that the particular audience she analyzed regarded itself as a minority and that, for them,

Bergman in Sweden is a neglected modern classic.

Clearly, Steene's study is highly interesting and also something of a precursor to much of today's highly fashionable reception work, performed by many different scholars (cf., for example, the last edition of the *Journal of Popular British Cinema*, vol. 2, 1999, which is typically devoted to audiences and reception in Britain). Also, Steene's knowledge and grasp of Bergman and his films are excellent, as she has indeed shown before in many books and articles.

This profound knowledge, it seems to me, culminates in an excellent chapter (pp. 89-121) in which Steene analyzes what she calls the "negative imprint", that is, the critical reception Bergman met in Sweden in the 1940s, 50s and 60s and how that has affected today's view of Bergman. Here, Steene scrutinizes the general resistance against Bergman among many well known Swedish intellectuals, such as, for instance, Olof Lagercrantz, editor in chief of *Dagens Nyheter*, who, by now infamously, characterized Bergman's *Smiles of a Summer Night* (1955) as "the poor imagination of a spotty youth, the insolent dreams of an immature soul" (my transl.) At the heart of the matter, I think, was a traditionally condescending view towards film as an artistic medium held by the ruling literary culture in Sweden, a condescension that to my generation seems slightly embarrassing since it was based on ignorance and snobbery. Steene also analyzes the 60s leftist attacks on Bergman and bourgeois, individualist ideology. This was indeed a period which many Swedes today regard as something of a national disgrace. In fact, Steene quotes one of her interviewees as saying:

It has, I suppose, to do with the fact that no one is a prophet in his own country. Even if there are many Swedes who respect Bergman in Sweden and have high regard for his art, there seems to be some kind of jealousy. There is too much of Bergman, he takes up too much space (man, 25 years) [my transl.]

This is undoubtedly true, but hardly typical for Sweden. Compare, for instance, the fates of other great auteurs like Kurosawa in Japan, Lindsay Anderson in the UK or, for that matter, D. W. Griffith in the US.

In this part of the book, Steene's analytical wit and knowledge of Bergman triumphs. Indeed, this is the chapter of the book that is most relevant to an assessment of Bergman's role in Swedish cultural history. Bergman was never politically correct and the Swedes had serious difficulties both comprehending and appreciating his success abroad.

To this reader, the most effective reception studies are performed precisely along these lines. That is, as a study of the historical reception through the cultural analysis of various discourses, such as press reactions, academic scholarship, production files and diaries, which leads to an understanding of both the meaning Bergman had to different generations and the society he worked in. Directly questioning people gathered specifically for Bergman screenings is a much more difficult task when seeking relevant information. Thus, the direct audience research and media ethnography approach of the book seem to me problematic.

Even if I do agree with Steene's critical views of traditional Marxist reception studies, with its a priori stipulation of a manipulated audience, I do not think that her alternatives stand up to the theoretical rigour required. In her methodology chapter, Steene cites various reception studies scholars. Somewhat surprisingly, she does not mention some scholars I think could have contributed considerably to her methodology, for instance Janet Staiger, who has studied the historical reception of American cinema by way of just such a rigorous cultural analysis (*Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), or Pierre Bourdieu, whose notion of "cultural capital" seems exceedingly relevant when dealing with anything that resonates with high artistic prestige - like the Bergman films.

Steene's explanation of the "uses and gratification method" in fact does not say very much about her own method. A comparison is drawn, for instance, to mass communication scholar Birgitta Höjjer, who has employed this method. But Höjjer's research (which is actually not referred to in the bibliography and not explained in the text) was focused on how people - chosen at random - understand television news. Here comprehensive interviews is the only way of finding this out. Steene tries to investigate how an audience - not so random - understands the

artistic work of a great auteur. While Höjjer's work was firmly based on cognitive psychology, Steene' is based on a 'metaphysical' understanding between the researcher and the interviewees about the greatness of Bergman.

This criticism is founded in the fact that Steene gets very little really interesting information out of her interviewees. It is all quite predictable. By omitting analytical parameters such as taking into consideration the cultural capital the audience gets from attending the Bergman screenings or the quite obvious chauvinism expressed by the interviewees (25 interviewees hail Bergman as the greatest film maker in the world, pp. 66-67), some possible insights are missed. Instead, one sometimes gets rather tedious examples of Swedish middle-brow mentality such as, for instance, the blatant anti-American sentiment in the shape of scorn of Hollywood-films. (There is nothing wrong in presenting this evidence, but it should be duly analyzed).

Steene is on theoretically dangerous ground when she discusses certain films as "quality films", or the cinema Fågel Blå as a "quality movie theatre" (pp. 66-67). The notion of "quality film" represents a jargon among Swedish film critics, and implies non-Hollywood, preferably European or Third World film).

In his *Narration in the Fiction Film* (London: Methuen, 1985), David Bordwell has given us a very good method of arriving at a similar distinction, without referring to artistic "quality", which really has nothing to do with it. Either it is a classically narrated (i.e. Hollywood) film, or an art-cinema film; the term "art" here refers to the marketing and consumption of a certain mode of narration. A Bergman film like *Wild Strawberries* (1958), which usually employs precisely an art-cinema mode of narration, and is marketed as an "authorial vision", can be artistically excellent, a quality picture. But so can certainly a mainstream classically narrated Hollywood movie be, like, for instance, Robert Zemecki's *Forrest Gump* (1994), which is certainly not marketed as an authorial vision or shown in art-houses like Fågel Blå. And it does not provide any cultural capital for its viewers. Therefore the term "art cinema" is far superior to and methodologically more justifiable than "quality film" in a scholarly discourse.

There are other slightly dubious theoretical conclusions in the book. Steene, for example, maintains:

The essence of the moment of reception is in the meeting between the viewer and the film, between context and text. The more the persona of the artist manifests itself, the more intense and exciting the meeting of artwork and viewer becomes, provided that the viewer is open for the impressions. Much indicates that Bergman's persona as an artist has this dynamic power and that this more than anything else might explain why his films have been given such a response throughout the world (p. 62).

I do not see how this general claim could account for a viewer's reaction to film. Contextual factors, like the image of an artist like Bergman could certainly have a great impact on a very small part of the audience. But as a theoretical claim, it does not account for the audience reaction to a commercially successful horror movie like *Scream* (1996), where I think the name of director Wes Craven appearing in the credits added very little to the intense reaction by audiences all over the world.

Occasionally Steene's use of terminology seems questionable, as she uses "förträngning" (p. 175), instead of "bortträngning" (repression), or "undermedvetna" (p. 133) (subconscious), instead of "omedvetna" (unconscious).

However, these critical remarks should not obscure the fact that Steene's efforts are worthwhile. Her Bergman knowledge is outstanding, as is shown on many occasions in her book. One also has to take into consideration the pioneering status of her study, and the fact that reception studies within film scholarship have developed very quickly since she did her empirical work. I very much look forward to her companion volume on the international reception of Bergman.

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