

EMIL STJERNHOLM:

***Gösta Werner och filmen som konst och propaganda.***

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‘We’ve heard tell of this country, of the riddle that is Sweden. But the keys to this riddle are not easy to find.’ Over a montage of snowy mountains, lush forests, functionalist architecture and cutting-edge medical technology, an American-accented voiceover cracks the code of 1960s Swedish exceptionalism as a compelling blend of welfare and industry. Commissioned and funded by *Sveriges Allmänna Exportförening* (The Swedish Export Association), and produced by the company AB Filmkontakt, the thirty-minute film *The Riddle of Sweden* (1963) was available in five different language versions for use across the world at trade fairs and meetings for the purpose of promoting Swedish business and, by extension, Sweden itself. It is the director and writer of *The Riddle of Sweden*, Gösta Werner (1908-2009), who is the central subject of Emil Stjernholm’s doctoral dissertation, published (as is usual for Swedish theses) as a book, in this case as a beautifully-produced hardback and pdf by Mediehistoriskt arkiv. Gösta Werner’s life and work themselves pose a complex ‘riddle’ which enables Stjernholm to make substantial contributions to Swedish film history as well as to several areas of media and cinema studies which are currently preoccupying these fields: non-theatrical and commissioned film, archival practice, and the history of film theory and film institutions. More broadly, the life and work of Gösta Werner allows for an exploration of Swedish cultural history, especially as regards post-war and contemporary processes of reckoning with Sweden’s response to German nazism.

As suggested by its title — which translates into English as *Gösta Werner and Film as Art and Propaganda* — a key concern in Stjernholm's work is the tension between the development of cinema as an art form and the role played by more utilitarian functions of film in advancing film as theory, practice and industry. The word 'propaganda' in the title is a subtle cue in this respect: on the one hand, it is freighted with the political connotations which the term carries today, both in Swedish and English, and is suggestive of what Stjernholm calls Werner's 'partiell stigmatisering' (p. 290) (partial stigmatisation) as a presumed Nazi sympathiser. On the other hand, until well into the 1960s, 'propaganda' was simply the term used to describe films made to inform, persuade and educate rather than primarily to entertain. Of the fifty-odd films directed by Werner, all but half a dozen were short informational films like *The Riddle of Sweden*, running the gamut from industrial process films to avant garde experimenta. Far from remaining an obscure director-for-hire, however, Werner was an influential film critic, journalist and historian for well over half a century, authoring some thirty books and countless articles and reviews, not to mention earning Sweden's first PhD in *filmvetenskap* (film studies, in 1971). Werner's career thus embodies the various ways in which the theatrical film circuit is entangled with the commissioned films and film journalism to which cinema studies has recently begun to pay attention.

Stjernholm explicitly makes the case for incorporating biographical studies of key 'aktörer' (agents) such as Gösta Werner into what has been called the 'institutional turn' in Nordic film studies. As he explains, this is not the same as reconstructing filmmaker intentionality or giving undue attention to auteurial style at the expense of institutional and political analysis (p. 13). Rather, as this book convincingly shows, some individuals are simply so instrumental — setting agendas, shaping policy, establishing and running institutions, developing theory, doing historiography and criticism, facilitating connections, mentoring talent, curating archives — that any film history which eschews the study of such figures runs the risk of misconstruing how the field operates. This turn (back) to the biographical is in itself, I think, an important

contribution to the discipline.

The study consists of an Introduction, seven chapters organised broadly chronologically, and a Conclusion, plus a number of appendices including a filmography, a biographical timeline, an overview of archival sources, and an extended abstract in English. The Introduction establishes the research questions and overall shape of the project: rather than examining Werner's films aesthetically or narratively, the project explores Werner's 'biographical legend' in relation to three historical phenomena. Firstly, the growing cinephilia of the inter-war era and the eventual crystallisation of cinema as art form and institution are framed in terms of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural and symbolic capital (p. 14-16). Secondly, Werner's pathway into and through the Swedish film establishment is traced from his encounter with German cultural propaganda before the Second World War in the context of the student film club in Lund, Lunds Studenters Filmstudio, and his professional role in editing newsreels during the war. This aspect of the filmmaker's biography thus functions as a case study in the national and international 'invention' of film and film studies in a network of wider ideological fields (p. 16-24), borrowing here from Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson's *Inventing Film Studies* (2008). Thirdly, Werner's post-war career as director of commercial features and commissioned films is cleverly underpinned by the international rise of 'auteur theory' from the 1950s onwards (p. 24-28). The Introduction also summarises the range of archives on which Stjernholm drew for the dissertation, spanning Gösta Werner's archive at Lund University, to the records of Lunds Studenters Filmstudio, to the archives of film companies Ufa and Svensk Filmindustri, each of which posed specific challenges which are usefully detailed.

Chapter 1 explores Werner's first forays into film culture from the late 1920s, including his leading roles in *Biografbladet* magazine and in the film club Lunds Studenters Filmstudio, which Stjernholm argues was less radical than it has been assumed to be. This reputation was partly built on trips to Berlin and the USSR undertaken by the students of Filmstudio between 1935 and 1938, trips which are the focus of Chapter 2. While the German and Soviet authorities appear to have exploited the students' hunger for first-hand experience of

international filmmaking practice, close examination of the ensuing screening programmes, students' writing about the trips, and the professional and artistic networks formed warrants more nuanced assessment, argues Stjernholm. The fascinating Chapter 3 explores Werner's work as editor on the Nazi newsreel *Ufa-journalen* produced for Swedish cinema screens, contextualising the German newsreels as one amongst a network of competing propaganda organs in neutral wartime Sweden. Chapter 4 considers the results of Werner's wartime work, tracing his stigmatisation as purported Nazi sympathiser, and centres on his best-known film, *Midvinterblot* (Mid-Winter Feast). Chapter 5 analyses the production and reception of six features made by Werner between 1948 and 1955, along with one unrealised film. Chapters 6 and 7 both focus on Werner's non-theatrical filmmaking, focusing respectively on projects of the immediate post-war period, and his time at Svensk Filmindustri from 1954 to the late 1960s.

By adopting this broadly chronological structure, the book hammers home the value of biography as a key to understanding wider socio-cultural histories: 'På sätt och vis speglar Werners livskurva den svenska filmkulturens utveckling genom åren — från periferi till centrum, från oetablerad till institutionaliserad' (p. 293) (In a way, the arc of Werner's life mirrors the development of Swedish film culture through the years — from periphery to centre, from unestablished to institutionalised). Of course, as Stjernholm shows, this is not just a case of the life history of one filmmaker 'mirroring' the development of cinema as art and institution; the dynamics of the micro- and macro-level histories converge precisely because of the complex entanglements of that particular agent in the field. To unpack and render visible those relations, vivid storytelling is just as essential as the painstaking archival work that underpins it. Stjernholm's work does both these things, offering keys to the riddle that is Gösta Werner, and to the riddle that is film as art and industry.

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