

Introduction

'Have you failed as an artist?' asked the headline of a newspaper interview with the Swedish filmmaker and actor Hasse Ekman in 1967, two years after he had made his last film and moved from Sweden to Spain (Frankl 1967). It was a very unfair question, considering the rich body of work that Ekman had produced since the late 1930s, yet from another angle it was perhaps a valid question. Whereas most of his peers in the 1940s and 1950s, such as Ingmar Bergman and Alf Sjöberg, had become well known, even globally, and highly respected, Ekman had to some extent been forgotten in Sweden and never even discovered abroad. To use a famous expression, in Sweden Ekman had become an unknown known and outside Sweden (or at least outside Scandinavia) Ekman was, and remains, an unknown unknown. Why that should be is something of a mystery because Ekman was an important filmmaker and deserves the recognition he has never had. But it is never too late to be discovered, and it is hoped that this book will create an interest in Ekman, and even lead to retrospectives of his work at film festivals and cinematheques around the world. When he was at his best – roughly speaking, from 1945 to 1955 – he was an equal to any other filmmaker, and the films speak for themselves. But for them to be able to speak they must be seen, and for them to be seen there must be awareness of their existence.

This is not a biography but a scholarly study of Ekman's films, and since it is the first such study in English, all of his films will be discussed. For the sake of convenience his career will be assessed chronologically. This is relevant because Ekman's career followed a certain trajectory, whereas thematically the films are fairly consistent from beginning to end. But the book is not just about Ekman; it is also about the country in which he was born and in which he worked: Sweden. On the one hand, Ekman was an important figure in what can be said to be the renaissance of Swedish cinema that took place in the 1940s; on the other hand, Ekman's films are often engaged in a critical dialogue with Swedish society, and in order to fully appreciate them the wider context is important.

There are two things worth pointing out about Swedish cinema history. The first is that Swedish cinema has a good reputation and has received much attention from film scholars. The silent era, often seen as a golden age, has been substantially written about, as have the 1960s and beyond. But there are still gaps,

and one gap in particular stands out. In his book *Ingmar Bergman: Magician and Prophet* (1999), Marc Gervais points out that very little is known of, and consequently written about, Swedish cinema between 1924 and 1945, the years following Victor Sjöström and Mauritz Stiller's departure to Hollywood but prior to Ingmar Bergman's début as a director, and that this is a problem (Gervais 1999: 24). To give a few examples, in David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's *Film History – An Introduction* (2003), Swedish cinema between 1924 and 1944 is not mentioned at all; neither is it mentioned in Mark Cousins's *The Story of Film* (2004), nor in David A. Cook's *A History of Narrative Film* (2004). It seems as though the historical and critical consensus is that nothing of interest happened during those years. Yet this was a time of great progress and experimentation, which is why it is relevant to call it a renaissance. In view of the international standing and importance of Swedish cinema from the 1950s onwards, it is important to investigate and discuss the context and the special circumstances that helped give Sweden, a rather small country, such a comparatively strong profile.

The second point worth making is that Swedish cinema has been almost synonymous with Bergman, yet by placing so much emphasis on Bergman, film historians have ended up with a skewed view of both Bergman and Swedish cinema. A second, more implicit, aim of this book is therefore to contribute to a much needed contextualisation of Bergman, especially those early years in the 1940s during which he gradually became a filmmaker of international standing. Whereas there is a large number of books about Bergman, in many different languages, there is very little written about Hasse Ekman in any language. He has received only a few sentences in English-language books about Swedish film history in general. But what is more remarkable is how little is written about Hasse Ekman in Swedish, and how narrow the focus is of that which has been written. For example, Ekman's career as a filmmaker lasted for twenty-five years but only the first twelve years have been discussed by historians and scholars, along with only a small selection of the films. And hardly anything is written about the last half of his career. This book is the first comprehensive discussion and analysis of Ekman's complete body of work that has ever been undertaken, in any language.

One article about Ekman, by Cecilia Axelsson, has mentioned auteur studies, but her conclusion was that Ekman's oeuvre was eclectic, that it did not have any recurring themes, that it was hard to find a common thread or a personal touch, and that he did not seem hospitable to auteur studies because he did not fit such a model (Axelsson 1995). This book makes the exact opposite argument.

As has been mentioned, Ekman was virtually forgotten after he made his last film but occasionally he has been ‘discovered’. The first ‘discovery’ of Ekman’s films came in 1982 when Bengt Forslund wrote *Från Gösta Ekman till Gösta Ekman – en bok om Hasse, far och son* (1982, From Gösta Ekman to Gösta Ekman – a Book about Hasse, Father and Son). In this piece of popular film history, Forslund’s aim was to look at the Ekman family and in particular Gösta Ekman and his grandson Gösta (Hasse’s son), a popular actor in Sweden since the 1960s. It does not cover Swedish cinema in detail or offer much insight into Ekman’s Sweden, but it says more about Hasse Ekman than any other book, except Leif Furhammar (and Jannike Åhlund)’s *En liten bok om Hasse* (1993, A Little Book about Hasse). Furhammar is a leading Swedish film historian and in this short book he discusses twelve of Ekman’s most important films. The book also has a long interview with Ekman, conducted by Jannike Åhlund. It was the second ‘discovery’ of Ekman and it came out in conjunction with a retrospective of Ekman’s films at the international film festival in Göteborg, in the south-west of Sweden. Ekman also wrote two autobiographical books. The most relevant is *Den vackra ankungen* (1955, The Handsome Duckling) in which he looked back at his film career up to that point. The other one was written when Ekman was only seventeen and is called *Hur ska det gå för mig?* (1933, What Will Happen to Me?).

These are the only books that focus on Hasse Ekman. In addition, there are a few articles in film journals and a couple of dissertations but since they add nothing new they are of minor interest (though they will be mentioned again in later chapters). However, there are various books on Swedish cinema in general in which Hasse Ekman figures. Among them is Furhammar’s seminal *Filmen i Sverige* (1991, Cinema in Sweden). It is the standard work on Swedish cinema history and Swedish cinema culture and it covers every detail from the late nineteenth century to the present day. It discusses film politics and studios, genres and directors, actors and producers, the business side and the national side. Like the above-mentioned books, it is only available in Swedish.

Among the few books in English that mention Ekman are *Nordic National Cinema* (1998) by Tytti Soila, Astrid Söderbergh Widding and Gunnar Iversen; *The Cinema of Scandinavia* (2005), edited by Tytti Soila; and *Swedish Film – An Introduction and Reader* (2010), edited by Maria Larsson and Anders Marklund. *Nordic National Cinema* begins and ends with discussions on various aspects of national cinema as such, and in between are longer essays on the film history of each of the five Nordic countries. Soila has written the essay that deals with

Swedish cinema. It moves swiftly through one hundred years of film history and even though there is not much on Ekman, she covers many angles, from production conditions to actors. *The Cinema of Scandinavia* consists of twenty-four essays, each about a specific film from one of the three Scandinavian countries and Finland. What is of most interest here is a chapter by Astrid Söderbergh Widding about *The Fire-Bird* (*Eldfågeln*, 1952), a ballet film directed by Ekman. The chapter places the film in the context of Swedish cinema in the early 1950s and the particular historical circumstances of that time. *Swedish Film – An Introduction and Reader* is an overview of Swedish cinema from its inception until the present day. In brief chapters various aspects, such as censorship, distribution, specific filmmakers and genres, are discussed. There is also a chapter on one of Ekman's most famous films, *Girl with Hyacinths* (*Flicka och hyacinter*, 1950). That chapter unfortunately lacks much historical context.

Among other books on Swedish cinema in English is *Swedish Cinema, from Ingeborg Holm to Fanny and Alexander* (1987) by Peter Cowie. It is an introduction to Swedish cinema and Swedish cinema history, from the beginnings to the early 1980s. It touches only the surface, with film history presented as a succession of one director after another, and the 1930s and 1940s together are given only fifteen pages out of a total of 150. There is also Brian McIlroy's *World Cinema 2: Sweden* (1986), which offers a concise summary of Swedish film history. There are, of course, a very substantial number of books about Ingmar Bergman but if they engage at all with Swedish cinema and society in any comprehensible manner it is in the decades after those covered in this book. Hardly any book about Bergman acknowledges the presence of Ekman, other than his performances in three of Bergman's films, with one exception: Paisley Livingston's *Cinema, Philosophy, Bergman* (2009), which mentions Ekman as a filmmaker comparable to Bergman. In *Cinema Borealis: Ingmar Bergman and the Swedish Ethos* (1971), Vernon Young dismisses Ekman with one sentence: 'Hasse Ekman made an uncertain beginning with a war film, a political film, and a gloomy drama which in point of departure resembled Noel Coward's *Brief Encounter*, filmed two years later by David Lean, before settling into a sequence of films largely inspired by deviated mental behaviour' (Young 1971: 25). This sentence gets the facts wrong and does not do Ekman justice; there is much more to Ekman than Young suggested.

Ekman was not only a filmmaker; he was also a theatre director. Here the lack of critical material is even more striking. As far as it has been possible to establish,

no books, not even general books on Swedish theatre history, deal with Ekman's theatre years. Also, since it is not possible today to witness his staging of the plays it is very difficult to discuss them. However, when appropriate his theatre career will be invoked here because it is important and cannot be ignored. It is important both because his theatre work took up a large part of his career and because he made many films that are about the theatre and the people who work in theatre. This is a recurring theme and milieu throughout Ekman's whole oeuvre.

When discussing the work of a specific filmmaker it is of course important to present the context in which he or she is working, for several reasons. In the first place it emphasises that any artist or filmmaker works in a particular time and place, and not in a vacuum. Such a context may further explain why it was that particular films were made at a particular time; that is, with ample attention to the social, economic and cultural circumstances. The context is also important for a proper understanding of Ekman's themes. An additional function of this context is to make clear that both Bergman and Ekman were part of a larger movement in Swedish cinema, which included many other filmmakers – as well as producers, cinematographers and actors – several of whom were also important and interesting, for reasons that will be explained at length. So the approach to studying the films of Hasse Ekman has been twofold: to view Ekman's films as a coherent oeuvre, and to define and explain what the key elements of this body of work are, what defines him as an auteur, and simultaneously to place him and his films in a national context. To further both these aims there will be an engagement with the writings of film critics who were Ekman's contemporaries. Since so little has been written about Ekman by film historians, these critical opinions provide important insights into how he was discussed in his own time. Invoking the critics also serves the purpose of highlighting the fact that Ekman was considered a major filmmaker, one of the very best that Sweden had, which makes the lack of scholarly interest all the more surprising.

The first chapter will discuss some theoretical assumptions regarding authorship and national cinema. The following two chapters will look at the Swedish context, the first in terms of politics and the second in terms of film culture and the film industry. The next three chapters, 4, 5 and 6, will look at Ekman's career, chronologically, and discuss themes, motifs and stylistic preferences with reference to individual films and to the context in which they were made. Chapter 7 will provide a specific discussion of Ekman's worldview and his relationship to Sweden. Several of the written works that are quoted in subsequent chapters

have only been published in Swedish and the translations here are my own. That is also the case with quoted dialogue from Swedish films. When a quotation from a written work has been translated, this will be indicated with ‘trans.’. Many of the films mentioned do not have an English or international title. Here they have all been given English titles, with the original title given the first time the film is mentioned.
