

Foreword

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John Orr was ‘old-fashioned’ in the best sense of the word. That is, he was the kind of scholar you seldom meet anymore, simply because of the mere breadth of his interests – sociology, politics, literature, film, indeed culture at large. Yet it is precisely this kind of ‘old-fashioned’ scholarship that is needed for the future, not least because of its inbuilt desire to bridge both geographical and disciplinary boundaries.

As such John Orr’s work is well known and needs no extensive reiteration here. But, given the subject of the present book, let us remind ourselves of Orr’s previous publications on film at least from the last decade, before his untimely death in 2010. Here we find topics ranging from modernity and Dogme 95 to stardom in French cinema, and essays on directors such as Peter Greenaway, Derek Jarman, Terrence Malick, and Carl Theodor Dreyer. Here we also find a number of edited collections, most notably *Post-war Cinema and Modernity* (2000), *The Cinema of Andrzej Wajda* (2003) and *The Cinema of Roman Polanski* (2006). But first and foremost we find John Orr’s own labours of love: *The Art and Politics of Film* (2000), *Hitchcock and Twentieth Century Cinema* (2005) and *Romantics and Modernists in British Cinema* (2010). The last book in this list should logically have been John Orr’s final publication, had it not been for another labour of love – Ingmar Bergman, the Swedish director (1918–2007). It was this book about his films that Orr was in the midst of writing in the autumn of 2010, and which now, as fortune has it, can be published posthumously.

Since it was our mutual interest in Ingmar Bergman’s work that brought us together, let me continue on a more personal note. John Orr and I met only once. It was on the occasion of the Ingmar Bergman Foundation’s first international conference – in Stockholm in 2005, which I, as representative of Stockholm University, had organized together with the other member institutions of the Foundation.¹ And to my delight John Orr agreed to write one of the extra chapters that we decided to commission for publication together with the conference proceedings, in a collection eventually entitled *Ingmar Bergman Revisited* (Orr 2008). The name of Orr’s contribution was grand indeed, ‘Bergman, Nietzsche

and Hollywood’, but certainly no disappointment. It was here that he began writing those parts in the present book that delve into Bergman films of the 1950s – Bergman’s ‘flair for translating the contemporary fable of classical Hollywood into European terms’, as Orr put it in an early outline.

The next time we were in contact was by mail, when John Orr inquired about some detail regarding Bergman’s film *The Silence* from 1963, about which I was in the midst of writing a book-length study at the time (Koskinen 2010). Not long thereafter Orr’s fine essay appeared, called ‘Camus and Carné Transformed: Bergman’s *The Silence* versus Antonioni’s *The Passenger*’ (Orr 2007). Again, in this piece it is possible to detect the outline of those parts in this book that deal with the intricate and fascinating relations between Ingmar Bergman and his contemporary Michelangelo Antonioni – that ‘intense preoccupation with the malaise of modern intimacy’, which, according to Orr, these two filmmakers shared.

In short, what we find in *The Demons of Modernity: Ingmar Bergman and European Cinema* is precisely what the title promises, for this is the first book-length study of Bergman’s films in a specifically European context – politically, philosophically and aesthetically. John Orr’s contention is a seemingly simple one, namely, that Bergman, even in his heyday as art film auteur, was and still is regarded as a peripheral figure, culturally isolated from the rest of Europe. Thus the aim of his book is to dispel this as a myth in order to catch sight of Bergman again and reinstate him within a wider spectrum, indeed at the very centre of European film history.

Orr’s book sets out to contextualize Bergman’s work in a comparative fashion. It does so firstly by looking at Bergman’s relationship to some individual European directors, from early Dreyer to contemporaries such as Michelangelo Antonioni and Andrei Tarkovsky (and, as Anne Orr notes in the afterword, the plan was to continue with more recent works by Michael Haneke and Lars von Trier). But the book also looks at Bergman’s critical relationship to some key movements in film history. One is the French New Wave and the ‘cinema of intimacy’ – François Truffaut, Eric Rohmer and Jean-Luc Godard. In this context, Orr hones in on the reiterated notion that Bergman’s modernism ‘followed’ Godard. But the truth is the opposite, Orr contends, and proceeds to illustrate to what extent Bergman’s work in the early 1950s in fact served as a springboard for the modernism of the French New Wave. In this manner Orr unravels the intricate connections, not one-sidedly as film histories and historiographies generally would have it, but

favouring instead the interplay and intertextuality of films that in his view made a vital contribution to European modernism in the 1960s.

John Orr had planned to look at Bergman and New German Cinema in the same vein, in a chapter entitled 'Bergman and the German Connection', from early Fritz Lang up to Margarethe von Trotta. In an outline of this unfinished chapter, Orr even calls Bergman's German-produced film *From the Life of the Marionettes* from 1979, 'a major (and unacknowledged) contribution to New German Cinema by a foreign director of a previous generation' – a surprising observation, yet perfectly head on.

John Orr manages, however, to step outside any narrow interpretation of the comparative framework, and does so through the notion of modernity, in all its complex and multifaceted aspects. Certainly, an important facet in the prism of modernity is the existential and philosophical oft-cited loss of faith – in religion, politics, and art; and that Bergman too gradually abandoned metaphysics in favour of the secular has certainly not gone unnoticed by previous scholars. But, as Orr wisely notes, in Bergman faith and its 'residues never quite evaporate: they linger in unsuspecting ways'. Very true; that lingering in fact can be said to encapsulate Bergman's entire *oeuvre*. Thus, in light of this lingering or residual effect, Orr contextualizes Bergman's development differently, detecting in his films strands of what he calls *demonic materialism* – a kind of residual demon embedded in modernity. This concept carries with it a number of advantages. Firstly it manages to nuance the (often) dualistic stances taken by previous scholars between the secular on one hand, and the metaphysical on the other. In Bergman, Orr contends, it is never a question of either/or, of unproblematic faith or purely materialistic secularity, but rather an ambivalent in-between-ness. His cinema, 'does not oppose the premise of demonic (as opposed to divine) intervention in human affairs', yet at the same time it is marked by that which Orr calls 'tragicomic yarns of human resistance to modernity'. This is an ambivalence, he contends, that separates Bergman from the metaphysical cinema of Dreyer and Tarkovsky as well as from the secular work of Godard and Antonioni, for all their similarities.

Secondly the concept of demonic materialism is informed in a fruitful way by recent film theory regarding the body, the embodied or haptic vision and role of the senses, in art as well as life.² Let me cite only one of many favourite passages from this book: 'Bergman's is a tactile cinema, a cinema of the flesh that rejects pure spirituality and brings the spectator up close and personal to the textures of

the skin, of water, of sweat and tears ... Bergman's cinema is a celebration of the density of being, of the joys (and heartbreaks) of a material world.'

This 'carnal connection' in Orr's writing not only 'modernizes' Bergman for the purposes of academic study, clarifying to what extent his work is (still) a relevant object of research. More importantly it also opens up Bergman's films for more hard-core issues of the modern world, pointing towards a little researched area in the scholarship on Bergman, namely the sociopolitics of modernity. This line of inquiry is particularly relevant given the (in)famous Swedish model of modernity – the 'enlightened bourgeois domination and an effective welfare state', to cite Orr. In fact, it is all the more relevant now that this very same model has resurfaced more recently in Stieg Larsson's globally bestselling *Millennium* books, whose 'demonic' features have been splashed over screens transnationally (not least through David Fincher's remake of *The Girl with a Dragon Tattoo* in 2011) as certainly as Bergman's were fifty years ago.

Here John Orr hones in on certain aspects of the welfare state, all those medical doctors and psychiatrists (for instance in Bergman's *Face to Face* from 1976), and the idea of the caring professionals having been reduced to 'institutionalized compassion'. It is through such details and figures, according to Orr, that Bergman obliquely offers, 'a trenchant critique of a Swedish Welfare State based on precepts of rational social engineering', in which, 'the Enlightenment project as Swedish Social democracy seems a world away', concluding that Bergman 'sees its rational malaise as deeply rooted in the curse of modernity' (Hedling 2008).

In this way Orr's close readings open up far larger political issues at the core of modernity. It is particularly in the first chapter of this book that he hits a raw nerve – Bergman's adulatory brush with National Socialism during a visit to Germany as a teenager. Interestingly though, Bergman himself, with his characteristic showmanship, made sure to take charge of the issue, not least in his self-bashing autobiography, perhaps as a way to diffuse the issue. But to Orr this brush remains *the* demon that haunts Bergman's work – a prism through which it is possible to regard 'his strange, oblique relationship to living history'. It is this experience that made his cinema one of crisis, in which Bergman constantly 'wants to pinpoint the moment at which the 'rational' bourgeois subject ... defaults'.

In this respect Orr's analysis fruitfully dovetails with a book (which has been published in Swedish only) by David Aquilon. It too is one of those rare works that attempts to contextualize Bergman's films in a historical and political discourse, in

this case by focusing on the recurring figures of text and body as cultural constants in Bergman's films, which in turn are incorporated in a discussion of the body politic at large. And although Aquilon's analysis revolves around Bergman's German productions, most notably *The Serpent's Egg* from 1977 (set in the Weimar Republic), his methodology is similar to Orr's. That is, while not shying away from the biographical and psychologically tinted readings of Bergman, both contribute to recontextualizing his films in the history of ideas and modern culture, setting up a dialogue with not only previous scholarship on Bergman but contemporary cultural and sociopolitical discourse as well (Aquilon et al. 2005).³

In focusing on modernity, Orr's book in effect also contributes to various transnational issues that have resurfaced on the agenda in film studies during the last decade (Durovicová and Newman 2010). If nothing else the concept of modernity (intrinsically transnational) helps clarify the inordinate degree to which Bergman has been regarded as a proponent and pillar of a (Swedish) national cinema, thus also becoming a playground for what Benedict Anderson famously called an 'imagined community' (Anderson 1991). In other words, Orr's approach helps to disperse geographical as well as imagined boundaries, including those residual and sometimes quite antiquated images of what is supposedly (nationally) Swedish, through certain intrinsically transnational phenomena such as genre and, indeed, modernity.

In a similar vein, Orr's approach also contributes in contextualizing and problematizing the notion of the auteur as a sort of free agent, as a curiously separate entity locked up in his own sphere of genius, seemingly freed from normal worldly constraints and various cultural discourses. Yet it is all wonderfully paradoxical. For there is no doubt that Orr is a staunch auteurist, one who revels in close reading, all the while creating trajectories across a filmmaker's works and several others as well. It goes without saying that this is risky business, since there is always a chance that such trajectories over temporal and geographical borders will result in comparisons that remain abstract and ungrounded. But although Orr performs his intertextual readings with decidedly auteurist underpinnings, the result is never abstract or set loose from larger contexts. He somehow manages to forge the details with the larger issues at hand, grounding his discussion of individual films in the ideologies, politics and dynamics of the floundering value system of a particular time.

Finally, let it be said that John Orr is simply a fine writer whose language is characterized by elegance and clarity. Indeed, at times his insights are chiselled

out as veritable bon mots of Flaubertian flair. As just one example, let me cite his idea of anointing Bergman's major figures, 'psychic gladiators, only half-protected by the emblazoned shields of faith or reason'. Very nice; and why not – instead of that hackneyed, albeit iconic figure of the Knight battling with Death, as in Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1957)?

Ultimately, what stands forth in John Orr's last book is the legacy of an avid cineaste – all those experiences, thoughts and observations made during a lifetime of watching, teaching and writing on film that have sifted through layers of time and therefore have remained. As John Orr himself puts it, referring to how Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* (1957) combines a double 'movement forward in space with the oneiric movement backward in time'.

At the same time there remain in this book oblique passages where you sense that the writer is on the verge of something more, and would have returned to it – but was cut short in his stride. These remain as kinds of symptomatic nodes in the text, all the more intriguing, and as if waiting to be unravelled. So be it: the ball has been set in motion so that anyone interested may pursue it further.

Notes

1. For more information on the beginnings of the Ingmar Bergman Foundation, see Koskinen (2010:16–18)
2. See for example, Marks (2000), Sobchack (2004) and Elsaesser and Hagener (2010).
3. This doctoral thesis was tragically cut short by the author's untimely death, and was therefore compiled by Aquilon's supervisors.

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- The Serpent's Egg, (Ormens ägg)*. 1977. Ingmar Bergman.
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