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***SJÖBERG, ALF** (June 21, 1903–April 17, 1980), Swedish film and theatre director and scenarist, was born in Stockholm a few years after the birth of the Swedish film industry. As a schoolboy Sjöberg's loyalties were divided between the cinema and the theatre—he acted in and even directed high school plays, at the same time filling hundreds of notebooks with “treatments” for imaginary movies.

From 1923 to 1925, Sjöberg studied at the famous drama school of the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm (where he was a contemporary of Greta Gustafsson, later better known as Greta Garbo). He was a stage actor until 1929, but retained his interest in the film and was powerfully impressed and influenced by the early works of Eisenstein, which he saw in 1928.

In 1929, after working for a time as a radio producer, Sjöberg wrote and directed his own first film, *Den starkaste* (*The Strongest*), which he made in collaboration with Axel Lindholm. It is a dramatic tale with a strong flavor of documentary about the Greenland farmers who every winter left their lands to hunt seal and bear. The story centers on one of these seasonal hunters, Ole (Anders Henrikson), and his rivalry with the stranger Gustaf (Bengt Djurberg) for the



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hand of Ingeborg (Gunn Holmquist) and for supremacy on the hunting grounds, where "right belongs to the strongest." The location work was directed by Lindholm, the studio scenes by Sjöberg, with Lindholm and Åke Dahlquist sharing the photography.

The Strongest was widely acclaimed for the excellence of its characterization, the beauty of its images, and the "mesmeric" rhythms of its editing, which in the climactic bear hunt was said to show a "grace and fluidity" worthy of Eisenstein. The film seemed to presage "a new realism, a vigorously matter-of-fact and laconic film style," and it established Sjöberg at once as a director of great promise. But *The Strongest* was one of the last silent films made in Sweden, and with the coming of sound the native cinema sank into mediocrity. Sjöberg could not or would not lend his talents to the kitsch that filled the Swedish studios throughout the 1930s, and made no more movies for ten years.

Instead he pursued his career in the theatre, where he became the most respected director of his generation. His work in that field was enriched by his interest in social and political developments, as well as in avant-garde movements in all the arts, and not only in Scandinavia. He traveled widely, visiting England, Germany, France, Russia, and Hungary. In Paris he was fascinated by the theatre of Russian emigrés, especially the Jewish Habima theatre, and in Russia itself he saw and admired Meyerhold's work. Beginning in 1931, he was the principal director at the Royal Dramatic Theatre and taught in its drama school.

By the mid-1930s there were intermittent

signs of a revival in the Swedish cinema, but most historians date the real beginning of the renaissance from Sjöberg's return to filmmaking in 1940. The picture he made then was *Med livet som insats* (*They Staked Their Lives*), a remake of a Finnish film which, under the guise of an adventure story, dealt with tyranny and resistance in an unspecified Baltic country. Completed just after the outbreak of World War II, it was premiered in January 1940. It is an intensely fatalistic film, with the resistance workers too busy quarreling among themselves in gloomy rooms to offer much hope of liberation. Edgardo Cozarinsky suggests that it struck its first Swedish audiences "as almost a foreign film. Not only because of the enduring Swedish tradition that equates political subject matter with foreign settings . . . but also because its visual elaboration, eclectic and brilliant, looked unlike any Swedish film of the period."

If Sjöberg's first picture had shown the influence of Eisenstein, *They Staked Their Lives* seemed more in the mood of French "poetic realism," reminding some critics of the Carné-Prévert films of the 1930s. Many were disappointed, finding the movie altogether less cinematic and more theatrical than *The Strongest*, but Rune Waldekranz regards it as "a challenging and provocative experiment. A film of ideas, the first one for decades. . . . With its curious blend of overemphasized camera-consciousness and stagey dramatic sequences, *They Staked Their Lives* today may appear in retrospect as an attempt to revive the film expressionism of the twenties. But in January 1940, Sjöberg's appearance as a film director was a signal of rebellion against the flat conventionalism of Swedish film production."

Den blomstertid (*Blossom Time*, 1940) tells a story about a teacher on one of Sweden's western islands, her obsession with her dead lover, and her eventual realization that life and love go on. The content is novelettish, but there was praise for Sjöberg's effective use of his island setting and of light and shade. A later critic, Edgardo Cozarinsky, detects irony in the director's handling of his material both in this film and in *Hem från Babylon* (*Home From Babylon*, 1941), whose hero, having had his fill of adventure in foreign lands, finds when he at last gets home that his patient fiancée is now eager to embrace the wandering life. "Both films deal with *Bovary*-like cases of self-delusion," Cozarinsky says; "both are ironical in espousing conventions of cheap fiction only to expose them, as it were, between quotation marks; both present Sweden as an island, diseased with the very neutrality that protects it."

A much more considerable work followed in 1942. *Himlaspelet* (*The Road to Heaven*) was adapted by Sjöberg and Rune Lindström from the latter's verse drama—a modern morality play that is or was performed annually at Leksand in the province of Dalarna, where it is set. Lindström himself appears in the film as the naive but determined young peasant Mats Ersson, whose innocent fiancée is killed as a witch. Inspired by the primitive religious paintings in the local church, Mats sets off on the "road to Heaven" to get this injustice righted by God himself, but is waylaid by the Devil and lured into the City of Desire. He wastes his life in the pursuit of pleasure and power, grows rich and heartless, but is saved on his deathbed by the Good Father (Anders Henrikson) who has always watched over him. He dies repentant and is gathered up into a flowery paradise where his lost beloved awaits him.

The play had achieved the simple piety of a piece of folk art and it seemed to most critics that this quality had been captured in the screen version, thanks partly to Lindström's extraordinary performance, partly to Sjöberg's visual borrowings from the peasant art of Dalarna (also used by Bergman, but to very different effect, in *The Seventh Seal*). In this film, wrote Rune Waldekrantz, "the folklore and the poetic atmosphere of the old Sjöström pictures arose anew, but in a modern and dynamic form"—Sjöberg has united "the realistic and allegorically stylised elements of his film language into a clear and expressive form."

Many Swedish critics regard *The Road to Heaven* as "one of the finest products of the Scandinavian cinema between 1920 and 1950," and as an assertion (in the face of the Nazi occupation) of traditional Swedish values. Forsyth Hardy said that it "helped to give spiritual status to the revival of the Swedish cinema." But in this film, as in the two that preceded it, Edgardo Cozarinsky found ironies that eluded other critics, insisting that it was in fact "utterly sceptical, its underlying world image . . . an absurd and existentialist one."

Kungajakt (*The Royal Hunt*, 1943) is another veiled attack on totalitarianism—an exciting and often funny swashbuckler set in the latter part of the eighteenth century, when Russia was seeking to overthrow the Swedish king Gustav III. "No other Swedish director," wrote Peter Cowie, "could evoke the extremes of eighteenth-century life so well as Sjöberg does in the opening sequences, with, at first, a duel being fought under a bright afternoon sun and the patronising eyes of the courtiers, and then a tavern brawl set in motion by night, with gnarled faces looming out

of the smoke and the shadows. The hunt itself is a regal centre-piece, a Watteau canvas come to life as the white horses spread over the fields to the accompaniment of Lars-Erik Larsson's martial music."

It was Sjöberg's next film that established him as an international figure, at the same time directing world attention to the revival in the Swedish cinema. Significantly enough, it was the first picture scripted by its assistant director, Ingmar Bergman. *Hets* (*Torment/Frenzy*, 1944) is set in contemporary Stockholm, where Jan-Erik (Alf Kjellin) is studying for his matriculation examinations in a school that has a good deal in common with a concentration camp. There he is harassed and humiliated by his sadistic Latin teacher, known as Caligula (Stig Järrel in his finest performance), who wears a Himmler-like mustache and reads the Nazi newspaper *Dagsposten*. Denied the sympathy of his aloof bourgeois parents, Jan-Erik shares his troubles with Bertha (Mai Zetterling), who works in a tobacconist's kiosk.

Bertha has troubles of her own—a mysterious stranger who follows her at night like a ghost. She becomes too frightened to go home, and Jan-Erik finds her wandering in a state of drunken despair. He spends the night with her and falls deeply in love. One evening he calls her flat and finds her dead, with a trembling Caligula hiding behind some coats. The authorities attribute the death to heart failure, and when Jan-Erik attempts to indict Caligula he is simply disqualified from taking his examinations. At the end of the film, lonely but free, Jan-Erik is beginning to pick up the pieces of his shattered life.

There are those who attribute the film's power to Bergman's script—"the first Swedish script reflecting the melancholy and rebellion of the new generation"—but it is said to have been Sjöberg who added the touches that turned a psychological study into an indictment of the totalitarian mentality, and it was certainly he who was responsible for the film's "powerfully expressionistic visual style"—"the brooding shadows of Bertha's room . . . and the silhouette of Caligula's hand stretching out across the hall"—in a way that reminded Peter Cowie of a famous image in Murnau's *Nosferatu*.

Similar stylistic devices are rather self-consciously employed in *Resan bort* (*Journey Out*, 1945), and few found much to admire in this complicated wartime story. It was followed by three of Sjöberg's most notable films, the first and slightest of which was *Iris och löjtnantshjärta* (*Iris and the Lieutenant*, 1946). This reunited the young stars of *Torment* in a contemporary story about the love affair between a parlormaid

and her employers' son, an aristocratic young Guards officer who is killed on maneuvers, leaving her pregnant. Offered the disinterested help of her lover's elder brother, Iris decides to raise her child alone and unaided.

Though the plot could scarcely be more trite, it supports what was generally recognized to be "an exceedingly subtle and moving film." The love affair was called "heartrending in its sharp intensity," filmed with "a warmth and intimate poetry that is rare with Sjöberg." The tenderness and gaiety of this relationship is effectively contrasted with the behavior of the lieutenant's high bourgeois family—"icy, unloving people, devouring one another with polite hatred," and struggling to preserve the status quo in the face of postwar disillusionment with the old order. Peter Cowie calls this "a film that has dated with the utmost charm."

Bara en mor (*Only a Mother*, 1949) was adapted by Sjöberg and Ivar-Lo Johansson from the latter's Zolaesque novel about the *statarna*—grossly exploited itinerant field workers whose condition was abolished in the 1930s. Eva Dahlbeck plays Rya-Rya, a high-spirited girl who scandalizes the community by bathing naked. Spurned by her fiancé, she is made pregnant by and married to a boorish peasant, beginning an endless cycle of childbearing that only ends when she is worked literally to death on the local estate. In the process she grows into an archetypal figure of suffering and enduring motherhood. Dahlbeck's account of this transition has been described by responsible critics as "one of the greatest performances in the history of the cinema" in its "strength and transparent beauty."

Rich in character and incident, the film echoes in its rhythms the transition that takes place in *Rya-Rya*, from the excitement of the country dance where she is seduced to the dragging, exhausted movements at the end. Disparate scenes along the way are linked by huge close-ups of Rya-Rya, and in one early and much-discussed sequence Sjöberg explores a more original means of indicating the passage of time and the heroine's changing apprehensions. "In the early part of the film," he said, "the leading actress is kept in the center of the picture and her surroundings are changed. She moves as in a dream. She has no contact with reality, until her character is changed later by another disappointment. At this point the picture technique changes and becomes naked, hard and real."

Similar experiments in his next film are developed into what Peter Cowie has called a "new cinematic language." Sjöberg himself adapted Strindberg's one-act play *Fröken Julie* (*Miss*

Julie), moving the action out of Strindberg's single claustrophobic chamber and into the rooms and gardens of the Count's country estate, photographed "with a brilliant clarity" by Göran Strindberg, the playwright's grandson. Anita Björk plays the Count's daughter, Miss Julie, an arrogant, passionate, wretched girl whose mother has shaped her as an instrument of revenge against the whole male sex.

On a bored impulse, she attends the Brueghelesque Midsummer Eve dance of her father's employees, where she dances with his groom Jean (Ulf Palme). They become lovers and the vulgar opportunist Jean, initially servile and adoring, soon turns the tables, teaching his mistress the pleasures of self-abasement. Jean relents and the lovers plan to elope, but the entwined class and sexual hatreds that propel them flare up again, and when the Count returns to reestablish the old order, Miss Julie cuts her throat.

Some critics felt that, by "opening up" the play, Sjöberg had vitiated its intensity, but Richard Roud thought that "what it lost in intensity it gained in breadth," and Richard Winnington called the film "a fresh work that uses Strindberg as raw material for its own design and purpose." At times, when Julie is recalling her childhood schooling in emotional warfare, Sjöberg relinquishes naturalism and brings figures from the past into the same room as her adult self. "Strindberg's single act explodes in all directions," wrote Edgardo Cozarinsky—"memories of the characters' past, as well as their dreams, and even intimations of the future, are worked into an exciting structure of flashbacks . . . , where the past is always pressing upon the present." After the acclaim that greeted Eva Dahlbeck's performance in the previous film, Sjöberg's skill as a director of actresses must be given some of the credit for the extraordinary tributes earned by Anita Björk's Julie—Richard Roud said it was "perhaps the most absolutely compelling study of controlled passion in the history of the cinema."

Miss Julie shared the Palme d'Or at Cannes with De Sica's *Miracle in Milan*. Rune Waldekranz has described it as "a national masterpiece and among the unique achievements of the cinema medium," and in 1964 the Swedish critics voted it the finest product of the nation's cinema. To a modern eye, some of its *trouvailles* seem more theatrical than cinematic, and its reputation has slumped a little, along with Sjöberg's own, but it is still regarded by most critics as the director's masterpiece.

Sjöberg's next film was planned as a prestige venture by Sandrews, its producers—an ambitious and expensive adaptation of *Barabbas*, Pär

Lagerkvist's novel about the imagined fate of the thief whose life was spared in exchange for that of Jesus Christ. Working in the Cyprus copper mines as a Roman slave, Barabbas (Ulf Palme) is converted to Christianity and is crucified along with hundreds of other martyrs. But he dies perplexed, unable to reconcile the loving gentleness of the new faith with the violence that his motherless childhood has made instinctive in him.

It seemed to Peter Cowie that Barabbas's crisis is "to a certain extent that of modern man, torn between doubt and belief, between darkness and light," and that "Sjöberg is at his best when suggesting this conflict in visual terms. . . . the exteriors, shot in Israel and Rome, afford him plenty of scope for pictorial comment." For most critics, the novel "never acquired enough flesh on the screen to dress its allegorical bones," and the movie was found ponderous, slow, and often boring. It failed at the box office and so did Sjöberg's next picture, *Karin Månsdotter* (1954), about the peasant girl who became the mistress of Erik XIV, the mad king of sixteenth-century Sweden.

Karin Månsdotter opens with an extraordinary prologue—a "broadside ballad" in color that uses titles and painted backdrops and speeded-up action to tell the fairy-tale story of the farm girl and the prince, reminding critics of both puppet shows and silent film comedies. The comedy ends when Karin realizes that she is to go to bed with the king but not to become queen, and color gives way to plain black and white for the main body of the film, drawn from Strindberg's *Erik XIV*, and shot by Sven Nykvist in various Swedish castles.

Erik (Jarl Kulle) is already petulant and unpredictable to the point of madness. Though Karin (Ulla Jacobsson) bears him two children, he has no intention of marrying her, being intent on marriage to Elizabeth I of England. He has nevertheless been seen as a kind of proto-radical in that he chose both his mistress and his chief counselor Göran Persson (Ulf Palme) from the common people. And when Elizabeth rejects his suit, he does in fact make Karin his queen. This is too much for the entrenched Swedish nobles. Persson is executed, Erik is overthrown and imprisoned, and Karin and her children sent into exile. This section of the film has been described by Cozarinsky as "an exercise in larger-than-life theatricality, a play of solitary figures which cast enormous shadows on imposing decors," evoking many comparisons with Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible*. There follows an epilogue, scripted by Sjöberg from the sad and scattered diaries of Karin's exile and final reconciliation with the

dying Erik, in which it emerges that the bewildered peasant girl has become truly a queen.

The film's fairy-tale prologue seemed to Peter Cowie "a foolish preparation for the lengthy and deeply serious recreation of history that Sjöberg is about to present," and audiences were also bewildered and offended by the film's harsh treatment of a pretty rags-to-riches story and of the whole notion of royalty. *Karin Månsdotter* failed in Sweden and has been very little seen abroad. But Edgardo Cozarinsky has described the film's critical reception as "obtuse," and praised the boldness of its structure, pointing out that the three sections are *meant* to clash dialectically in a work that he considers the finest of Sjöberg's films.

Torment had installed Sjöberg as the leading figure in the renovation of the Swedish cinema, and *Miss Julie* had confirmed his right to that position, but his reputation began to decline after that as Ingmar Bergman asserted his supremacy, and *Vildfågler* (*Wild Birds*, 1955) only accelerated the process. Based on a novel by Bengt Anderberg, it tells a tragic love story faintly reminiscent of *Miss Julie* and includes some brilliant scenes and set pieces, but is finally unconvincing and sometimes ludicrous in its characterization, while its naturalistic Göteborg locations clash awkwardly with its intimations of metaphysical evil.

Sista paret ut (*Last Pair Out*, 1956), scripted by Bergman and sharing some of the preoccupations of *Torment*, had none of the latter's success and was said to wear "a weary, old-fashioned look." Sjöberg made only two films over the next ten years: *Domaren* (*The Judge*, 1960), adapted from a play by Vilhelm Moberg about a young poet ruined by his former guardian, a judge, and committed to a mental institution, but saved by the efforts of a young lawyer; and *Ön* (*The Island*, 1966), a fable about a Hamlet-like aristocrat striving to organize the inhabitants of an island in the Stockholm archipelago against government plans to turn it into a military training area. Both films were said to be smothered by "a high-flung allegorical treatment." Sjöberg made only one more picture, a record of his production at the Royal Dramatic Theatre of Strindberg's *Fadern* (*The Father*, 1969).

Michael Meyer described Sjöberg as a man "seemingly without envy." Ousted from his position as the foremost Swedish film director, he re-adopted the theatre as his principal medium of expression, staging superb productions of Shakespeare, Lorca, and Pär Lagerkvist, of Ibsen and Strindberg, of Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller. He scored "brilliant late successes" with plays by Witold Gombrowicz, and at the age of

seventy-five—a year before his death as the result of a road accident—directed a new Swedish play about a Russian revolutionary “with undiminished authority and panache.”

Lasse Bergström has pointed out that all of Sjöberg's late films center on a single character who is in conflict with society, and Rune Walderkranz agrees that “philosophically, the common denominator in Sjöberg's work is his vision of the individual's helplessness in an alien, and almost always menacing, environment.” Peter Cowie, on the other hand, can distinguish no “personal vision” in Sjöberg's work and maintains that, for that reason, he failed to create “a world to which one returns with an immediate feeling of recognition and empathy. Each of his films is a solitary achievement.”

But Edgardo Cozarinsky, writing ten years later in Richard Roud's *Cinema* (1980), suggests that “critics irritated by . . . [Sjöberg's] overelaborate compositions, his intricate patterns of lighting, his too brilliant editing . . . should see again so-called minor films (*Resan bort*, even *Hem från Babylon*) in the light of such an acclaimed modern film as the *The Conformist* (1970). Bertolucci's ironical reworking of '30s rhetoric coincides almost constantly with Sjöberg's own treatment, even to the point of achieving an almost dreamlike continuity of brief sequences. It would not be too surprising if Sjöberg's *oeuvre*, confined for today's taste to outmoded keys of sensibility and intellectual commitment, turns out to be ripe for reappraisal.”

FILMS: (with Axel Lindholm) *Den starkaste* (The Strongest/The Strongest One), 1929; *Med livet som insats* (They Staked Their Lives), 1940; *Den blomstertid* (Blossom Time/Flowering Time), 1940; *Hem från Babylon* (Home From Babylon), 1941; *Himlaspelet* (The Road to Heaven), 1942; *Kungajakt* (The Royal Hunt), 1943; *Hets* (Torment/Frenzy), 1944; *Resan bort* (Journey Out), 1945; *Iris och löjtnantshjärta* (Iris and the Lieutenant/Iris), 1946; *Bara en mor* (Only a Mother), 1949; *Fröken Julie* (Miss Julie), 1951; *Barabba* (Barabbas), 1953; *Karin Månsdotter*, 1954; *Vildfåglar* (Wild Birds), 1955; *Sista paret ut* (Last Pair Out/The Last Couple Out), 1956; *Domaren* (The Judge), 1960; *Ön* (The Island), 1964, released 1966; *Fadern* (The Father), 1969.

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