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Historical Dictionary of Scandinavian Cinema [book review]

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Historical Dictionary of Scandinavian Cinema

John Sundholm and others

Scarecrow Press

Lanham, MD and Plymouth

2012

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Historical Dictionaries of Literature and The Arts

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Early in the *Historical Dictionary of Scandinavian Cinema*, John Sundholm, one of the book's six authors, makes a curious remark: "Scandinavian cinema is, above all, a minor cinema of minor countries". This is an odd thing to say about a culture that birthed the controversial mavericks Lars von Trier and Nicolas Winding Refn, the versatile crowd-pleaser Lasse Hallström, and towering auteurs like Carl Theodor Dreyer and Ingmar Bergman, whose films so profoundly influenced the art of cinema that "minor" is among the last adjectives anyone would think to apply to their work. 'Minor' makes sense only if we understand it to mean lesser, as in size or extent. It's true that Scandinavia – Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland, and Iceland – produces fewer films annually than the world's major players. In 2009, the most recent year for which statistics are available, UNESCO reported that just 130.6 films were produced across all five countries. That's about 23% of the movies produced that year by the United States (554.6) and a mere 11% of the films released by Bollywood (India leads the list with 1178.2 films). However we choose to understand this 'minor cinema', its 117 year history is rich, various, and idiosyncratic enough to fill more than 450 pages with short biographies and historical summaries, making this dictionary a fine starting point for research and discovery.

This book is the latest entry in Scarecrow's *Historical Dictionaries of Literature and The Arts* series, and it offers the same features as its forebears. A chronology situates landmark events in Scandinavian cinema within the context of global affairs; a lengthy introduction provides a country-by-country overview of cinema's evolving economic, technological, and sociocultural aspects; and an extensive bibliography of English-language resources suggests directions for future inquiry. And of course there's the dictionary itself, which comprises more than 400 short entries describing directors, actors, films, genres, studios, government institutions, and cultural factors (e.g. censorship). These entries range from short paragraphs to several pages, are organized alphabetically, and are fully cross-referenced (any entry referenced by another appears in boldface type). Unusually, only one cross-reference is included in the introduction, a shame considering the essay's potential to steer readers to entries in the dictionary.

The research is top shelf, but the presentation isn't without drawbacks, notably an abundance of typographical errors. I counted nine in the introduction alone, including "Island" for Iceland, "Unites" for United, and "subsided" for subsidized. In fact all of the errors were of this nature: correctly spelled but incorrectly used words, suggesting that spell-check was applied but close

reading was not. Awkward sentence construction crops up from time to time, too. One filmmaker is said to have “formed...a thorn in state-run film policy”. Elsewhere we encounter a cluster of clauses like this one: “A further indication of the precarious situation for film, while at the same time the weakness of the film agreement was exposed, was that, mid-decade, it was discovered that the system was not self-sufficient”. We should forgive imperfect English since many (most?) of the authors are probably writing in a second language. But taken together, the errors, confusing compound sentences and indifferent punctuation suggests cursory copyediting on the part of the publisher. There are organizational issues, too. Readers searching for a film by its translated title are out of luck. They’re expected to know that *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* was originally released with the Swedish title *Mån som hatar kvinnor* in order to find its entry in the dictionary. To find that information I turned to – you guessed it – Wikipedia.

A book intended as a one-volume reference for five countries worth of content will necessarily give short shrift to some topics. But I was left wondering about the editorial criteria that determined inclusion. Take Bergman’s films, for example. *Persona* gets an outline; so does *The Seventh Seal*. But not *The Virgin Spring*, the film that won Bergman his first Academy Award in 1960. Or pornography, which operates on the margins of cinema but still exerts significant economic and cultural influence. Its relationship to mainstream cinema is invoked multiple times in the introduction and briefly discussed in an entry on censorship but does not merit its own entry. This is all the more puzzling considering the scholarly interests of contributor Mariah Larsson, whose work investigates “the intersection of film and porn studies”.

So not every reader will be served equally by the book, but then this isn’t an encyclopedia. Historical dictionaries serve up hors d’oeuvres of information, not entrees, and that’s as it should be. As such, this is a very good single-volume introduction to the history of Scandinavian cinema. Its passages are longer than dictionary entries, shorter than encyclopedic essays, and more browser friendly than either, making it well suited for general readers and lower-division undergraduates.

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