

Sad Scandinavian cinema...

...the depressing director syndrome

We have all seen it many times before. A gifted director makes a brilliant film debut, which is serious, original, and entertaining. But making popular films that attract respectable crowds and rave reviews rubs against the director's creative soul. The Scandinavian diva director, usually subsidized by tax-financed institutions and praised to the skies by the critics, realizes the true movie mission is to test an aesthetic theory or make a political point.

In this context, alienating most of your audience isn't a sign of failure. It's proof that you have taken the high and noble road. You begin to create flicks so austere and humorless that nobody, absolutely nobody in their right mind can accuse you of making a commercial film.

Sweden's Lukas Moodysson is one extremely talented director who has set his sites on this path. Moodysson made what is widely regarded as his best film at the very beginning of his career, *Fucking Åmål* (*Show me Love* in its Anglo-American incarnation). This was a dark-edged coming-of-age saga set in a small Swedish town. Audiences at home and abroad responded to it because it felt honest and true. It set a new standard for portrayals of teenagers forging an identity on the edge of adulthood, a cinematic *Catcher in the Rye*.

Moodysson followed this achievement with the light-hearted *Together* (*Tillsammans*), a colorful romp in a 70's-style commune. But the popularity of that movie was apparently too much for Moodysson,

who subsequently embarked on a journey that has since taken him to darker places. His next film, *Lilja 4-ever* tells the harrowing story of an Estonian girl lured to Sweden to work as a prostitute; she eventually commits suicide. With the aid of traditional Swedish "moral cookies" (slightly sweetened by an otherworldly salvation), we learn the lesson that men who exploit women's bodies are evil.

Moodysson's next politically correct film, *Hole in the Heart* is set in the apartment of a pornographer, where the audience is made to feel like a voyeur as it contemplates the ugly, dehumanizing side of commercial sex. All adult males are sexist slime balls, we discover, and the pursuit of celebrity by young girls kills their souls. At intervals, the audience is hammered with close-ups of blood-drenched plastic surgery on female genitalia. This is what we really want to see when we go to movies, right?

Moodysson's next flick *Container*, released in 2006, is so odd and experimental that it attracted a grand total of less than 1,000 view-





ers in home country Sweden. In Berlin, where *Container* was first screened, a large part of the audience left before they could finish their popcorn.

Sweden's sterling reputation for sad and depressing films is such that one prominent American film critic recently joked that he has to take Prozac before he sees a Swedish film.

One is tempted to give credit (or blame) for this curious state of affairs to one of Sweden's most lauded film directors, Ingmar Bergman. After a career spanning some 60 years, Bergman is regarded by many as the world's greatest living director. It is virtually impossible to study film at a university anywhere from Singapore to San

Francisco without being exposed to classics like *The Seventh Seal* (1957), *Wild Strawberries* (1957), *Persona* (1966), *Cries and Whispers* (1973), *Face to Face* and *Scenes from a Marriage* (1976).

Personal and poetic, melancholic and reflective, the Bergman oeuvre has played a key role in bringing cinema to a new, artistic level. One of my personal favorites is Bergman's *Fanny and Alexander* (1982). That isn't a sad or gray film at all, but a warm-hearted fable built upon memories of Bergman's childhood, which includes tragedy and comedy, strong personalities, and probably the most full-bodied vision of a Swedish Christmas dinner ever to be immortalized on screen.

Viewed as a whole, however, the Bergman opus is a somber af-

fair, brooding with psychological insights. But is it fair to blame one Swede for the reputation abroad that Scandinavian film is dark and introspective? I test the waters by posing the question to two young Norwegians, director Erik Richter Strand, born in 1974, and producer Eric Vogel, born in 1975: "Which Scandinavian country makes the most depressing films?"

"Finland, definitely," the director and producer reply in unison without hesitation.

One reason for this surprising response, they explain, is the heavy Finnish dramas broadcast on Norwegian TV during their entire childhoods: realistic films about alcoholism, physical abuse and

other forms of misery. "Our parents used to say, 'if you aren't good, you will be forced to watch Finnish drama,'" they recall with a laugh. (Our review of Strand/Vogel's own action-packed film, *Sons*, available at www.nordicreach.com suggests why upstart Norway could become the "next big thing" in Scandinavian film.)

No one epitomizes the heavy side of Finnish cinema better than Aki Kaurismäki, Finland's most celebrated and idiosyncratic director. In his latest film, *Lights in the Dusk* (2006), we follow the hopeless fate of night watchman Koiskinen (Janne Hyytiäinen), who is ostracized at work and victimized by blonde bombshell Mirja (Maria Jarenheimi). As the film starts, Koiskinen-the-loser has a loveless,



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grey, and meaningless existence... and then things get worse, much worse. “Lights” is the final part of a three-film trilogy, which explores themes like joblessness, alienation, and loneliness.

The Finns in general and Kaurismäki in particular are in a league of their own. “There is a feeling that life is something that you have to endure. All you can do is grit your teeth and hang on,” says Helsinki-based fashion designer Tiia Vanhatapio, when asked to explain the kinship she and many other Finns feel with Kaurismäki. Vanhatapio and many other fans see a sort of sardonic humor in the eccentric director’s hopeless scenarios and minimalist staging.

In each Nordic country, of course, many light-hearted films, which target the domestic market, will never be screened abroad. In 2006, for example, the top premiere in Finland was *Matti: Hell is for Heroes* by Aleksi Mäkelä, with over 460,000 admissions. That blockbuster is a portrait of ski-jumping gold medalist Matti Nykänen, whose high-flying career evaporated in a haze of alcohol, followed by a less-than-inspiring foray into pop music. The second- and third-most popular domestic flicks were *Jackpot*, a lighthearted comedy about greed, friendship, and compulsive gambling, and *FC Venus*, a comedy about wives and girlfriends of soccer geeks who start their own soccer team.

Similarly, in neighboring Sweden, the runaway hit this Christmas was *Göta Kanal 2*, a sequel to a similar folksy boat story which was also a gigantic box office hit when it was released 25 years ago, and which stars some of the same actors, including Janne “Loffe” Carlsson. Universally panned by the film critics, *Göta Kanal 2* was viewed by over 300,000 moviegoers during its first three weeks in the theatres.

Outside its own borders, Scandinavia’s ironclad reputation as the promised-land-of-sad-cinema is skewed, in other words, by the fact that for the most part, only the most gloomy, humorless productions ever make it to the foreign film festivals and art-house theatres in New York City or Berlin. The light-hearted films are seen only on the domestic market. Naturally, Finland and Sweden are not anxious to claim the title of “depressing film capital of the world”. But those countries aren’t the only candidates: When forced to identify which country makes the saddest films, Swedish Film Institute press chief Jan Göransson instead selects Denmark.

Göransson is thinking partly of Danish box office hits like *After the Wedding* (2006) by director Susanne Bier, which won the hearts of critics and moviegoers around the world. In that memorable film, Denmark’s amazing Mads Mikkelsen plays the character of Jacob Peterson, who runs an orphanage in a poverty-stricken part of India. In order to save the orphanage, he travels home to Copenhagen to meet a wealthy businessman named Jorgen (Rolf Lasgård), who sets an unusual condition for his donation: He wants the humanitarian Jacob to attend his daughter’s wedding. The wedding sets the scene for the revelation of some ugly secrets. One is reminded of the emotional knock-out punch delivered in another great 1998 Danish feature, *The Celebration*, by director Thomas Vinterberg (winner of the Special Jury Award at Caanes). In that powerful but depressing film, steamy and horrible truths are unveiled in the course of a tumultuous birthday party.

“When you think about it, none of the Dogme films were especially cheerful,” reflects the Swedish Film Institute’s press spokesman. He is referring, of course, to the pioneering Danish movement started in 1995 by Lars von Trier (*Breaking the Waves*) and Thomas Vinterberg, who created an artistic manifesto for low-budget films.

An underlying strength of the Danish film phenomenon, however, is that many of the most talented directors operate on a broad playing field. Master filmmaker von Trier, for example, has shown himself capable of making one of the most outrageous and experimental of all modern films (*The Idiots*, 1998), as well as an English-language musical drama starring an Icelandic singer (*Dancer in the Dark*, with Björk, 2000). Six years later, von Trier has tried his hand at something totally different: *The Boss of it All* is a comedy in which a failed actor (Jens Albinus) acts as a front man for an IT company.

Von Trier’s multi-faceted career path demonstrates the kind of artistic freedom and breadth of production which continues to make this part of the world a fertile ground for new cinematic impulses. The next generation of Nordic film makers, presumably less bound and overshadowed by legends like Bergman and Kaurismäki, is virtually certain to take world cinema in exciting and unexpected new directions.

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1. Emily Watson in *Breaking the waves*, Lars von Trier, 1996. Photographed by Rolf Konow. / 2. ‘Elin in bed with Johan’ (page 21), ‘Elin and Agnes laughing’ (page 22); *Fucking Åmål* (*Show me love*), Lukas Moodyson, 1998. Photographed by Aake Ottosson. / 3. Peter Engman and Lia Boysen in *När mörkret faller* (*When darkness falls*), Anders Nilsson, 2006, (page 21). Oldoz Javidi in *När mörkret faller* (page 22). Photographed by P A Svensson. / 4. Director Maria Blom while filming *Masjävlar* (*Dalecarlians*), 2004. Photographed by Per-Anders Jörgensen/Memfis Film. / 5. Mads Mikkelsen and Sidse Babet Knudsen in *Efter Brylluppet* (*After the wedding*) (page 21, Photographed by Zentropa Productions), the wedding (page 22, Photographed by Ole Kragh-Jacobsen); Susanne Bier, 2006. / 6. *Ett Hål i mitt hjärta* (*A Hole in My Heart*), Lukas Moodyson, 2004. Photographed by Per-Anders Jörgensen/Memfis Film. / 7. Julia Högeberg and Maria Lundqvist, *Den nya människan* (*The New man*) by Klaus Härö, 2007. Photographed by Per Ericsson. / 8. *Idioterne* (*The Idiots*) Lars von Trier, 1998. Photographed by Jan Schut. / 9. Bjork and Catherine Deneuve in *Dancer in the Dark*, Lars von Trier, 2000. / 10. *Direktören för det hele* (*The Boss of It All*), Lars von Trier, 2006. Photographed by Automavision. / 11. Thomas Vinterberg’s *Festen* (*The Celebration*), 1997, where at Helge’s 60th Birthday party, some unpleasant family truths are revealed. Photographed by Lars Hoegsted. / 12. Directors of *Du och Jag* (*You and Me*), 2006, Emil Larsson and Martin Jern. Photographed by Micke Zych.