

Book Reviews

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Jan Olsson

The Life and Afterlife of Swedish Biograph

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The film sequence from 1911 is short: Two boys are looking at the operator cranking his camera while a man turns the fountain faucet, and suddenly, water jets into the air at Vängåvan, the city park of Sundsvall. The sound of splashing water can be heard, high-resolution green trees rustle in the wind, and fashionable ladies in magnificent colourful hats stroll by. The sequence from Vängåvan stems from a film shot by Swedish Biograph in 1911 and later archived as SF2074 – naturally, a silent film without colour. But on YouTube, the same film, now retitled as *Sundsvall 1911*, comes to life again, algorithmically upscaled by ColorByCarl (colourisation artist Carl Hamnede). Swedish Biograph's old footage has been remastered and upscaled to 4K and 60 frames per second using various AI and software toolkits. Colour and sound have also been artificially added. Then again, ColorByCarl explicitly states that his film “is an artistic interpretation of the original footage and is by no means intended to replace the original film and its historical value” (ColorByCarl, 2022).

Despite its title, in film historian Jan Olsson's book, *The Life and Afterlife of Swedish Biograph*, not much is said about streams of upscaled silent cinema on video platforms such as YouTube. The afterlife of early cinema is, however, nowadays increasingly a digital phenomenon; ColorByCarl has almost ten thousand subscribers. More popular upscaling artists, such as Denis Shiryaev, count subscribers in the millions. His upscaled version of footage shot by Swedish

Biograph in New York (also from 1911) has been viewed more than twenty million times (likely including a number of bots). Film archivists, however, detest machine-learning algorithms; after Shiryaev uploaded his AI-enhanced version of *L'arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat*, the Institut Lumière posted a takedown request, claiming copyright of a 125-year-old film. Silly archivists.

Established in 1907, Swedish Biograph was the first major film company in Sweden. A few years later, the company relocated and built a film studio in Lidingö, outside Stockholm. The CEO Charles Magnusson (a former film photographer) was an excellent businessman with an artistic eye. He eventually hired Julius Jaenzon, Victor Sjöström, and Mauritz Stiller, one cinematographer and two directors who would become world famous with films like *Terje Vigen* (1917) and *Sir Arne's Treasure* (1919). The very same year, Swedish Biograph merged with the film company Skandia, relaunching itself as Svensk Filmindustri (SF), while also establishing an up-to-date studio space: the Filmstaden [Film City] in Råsunda, Stockholm.

Film historians have usually analysed Swedish Biograph's productions in a romanticised way, focusing on a cinematic Golden Age that produced feature films with a Nordic aesthetic envisioned by brilliant directors. Olsson's book, however, offers a more nuanced narrative of the short history of Swedish Biograph. The story of this canonical film studio does not only involve great films, but also commercial demands and technological restraints, volatile audience preferences, crass business opportunities, and government regulations (in 1911, the National Board of Film Censors was established in Sweden).

Olsson knows his subject well. Swedish Biograph has been a research interest of his for more than three decades (full disclosure: Twenty-five years ago, he was my supervisor). *The Life and Afterlife of Swedish Biograph* hence offers a rich exploration of both business and economics, film production practices, changes in film style, and commercial misgivings, to quote some of the chapter headings. The book is written with exquisite prose and is a pure pleasure to read. It also features a number of witty remarks and amusing comments – one heading is entitled, “The Government Goes to the Movies”, *pas mal*. As indicated by the title of the book, a recurring theme is a kind of cinematic *longue durée* – from commercial circulation of film prints on an international market towards archival heritage, a process during which the market value of Swedish Biograph diminished, while gradually being replaced by increased cultural value.

One especially fascinating chapter in Olsson's book deals with reel culture. Early cinema had the technical disadvantage of being produced on different film reels; such “one-reelers” or “two-reelers” were gradually replaced by multiple-reel films. Yet, in Sweden, each cinema had only one projector. In December 1918, the Palladium theatre in Stockholm became the first cinema with two projectors for continuous projection. This particular media infrastructure affected Swedish Biograph's usage of storytelling and dramatic narrative – or as Olsson states, “SB's production practices were intertwined with the Swedish exhibition model, which operated with a single projector and thus necessitated breaks during reel changes” (p. 26). For film directors (and producers), it was thus necessary to

place reel breaks at natural moments in the unfolding of stories. Form affected content, to say the least.

By accentuating both projection technology and reel culture, business and film style, as well as the actual output of Swedish Biograph, Olsson in many ways delivers a completely new history of early Swedish cinema. While previous film scholars usually put emphasis on major productions during the Golden Age, Olsson makes a careful examination of the company's film production year by year, a meticulous research endeavour that nevertheless encounters some disturbances. From 1914, for example, not a single production of the sixteen feature films of Swedish Biograph has been preserved. All are lost.

Yet, for the films that have been archived, there remains the question of what an original film actually looked like. Sjöström's first masterpiece, the social drama *Ingeborg Holm* from 1913, can serve as a case in point. When the film had its premiere, it was almost 2,000 meters long, but in 1915, a reedited version of some 1,500 meters was released (and submitted for inspection by the film censors). When SF screened the film in 1944 during its twenty-fifth anniversary celebration, the version was down to 1,300 meters. Olsson states that some of the missing scenes (among the lost 700 meters) are described in textual scenarios – but he also firmly declares that the “film we now call *Ingeborg Holm*, which has been screened and analyzed as a classic since 1916, is a severely truncated version” (p. 103).

Given my own research interest, the archival afterlife of early cinema is an especially interesting read. Olsson devotes a final chapter to what he terms archival practices, focusing on both the establishment of the so-called Swedish Film Society [Svenska Filmsamfundet] as well as the Swedish Film Archive [Filmhistoriska Samlingarna]. These actors – laying the foundation for film historical scholarship in Sweden during the late 1930s and onwards – ironically began their archival activities at the same time as an explosion and fire in Vinterviken, Stockholm (in 1941, close to the Nobel dynamite factory) wiped out most of the feature-film negatives from Swedish Biograph. From a scholarly perspective, this was a devastating catastrophe; yet, according to the minutes from the board meeting at SF afterwards, a laconic comment simply stated that during the fire, “some older negatives belonging to the company were destroyed. The negatives lacked commercial value”. Film was (and still is) often pure business.

While researching his book, Olsson has used the Swedish Film Institute (SFI) and its archival holdings a lot. The oldest part of these collections was gathered by film archivist Einar Lauritzen, who almost single-handedly created the Swedish Film Archive during the 1940s and 1950s, then located at the National Museum of Science and Technology in Stockholm. Due to a lack of monetary resources, the Swedish Film Archive was, however, foremost a paper archive devoted to film. In 1964, for example, SF sold all of its newsreels and non-fiction films (among them the 1911 footage from Sundsvall and New York) not to Lauritzen's archive, but rather to Swedish Radio and its Film Archive [Filmarkivet], not the Television Archive as Olsson states. Olsson furthermore claims that SFI – and its new CEO Harry Schein – absorbed Lauritzen's creation a year later in 1965.

Here, however, Olsson is only scratching the film historical surface, since Lauritzen was against the merger; in short, Schein forced him. Today, SFI (2018) states on their website that the origins of its archive is the Swedish Film Society, “making our archive one of the oldest in the world” – but nothing is said about Lauritzen’s refusal.

The archive, Olsson states, is a site for practices “aimed at safekeeping and reviving films from the past” (p. 11). Such practices have naturally changed from the early analogue days of “pioneering film archivism in the 1930s to the digital culture that drives today’s restorations, preservations, and screenings at archives” (p. 11). Professional film archivists and institutions like SFI perform the important task of safeguarding film heritage. Yet today, the archive – understood in a wide sense – is also elsewhere, most prominently online. On YouTube, Sjöström’s *Ingeborg Holm* is available for anyone to see, and so is his *Terje Vigen* – including various mashups of both films – not to mention movie pirate sites such as *yts.mx*, where almost all of the film classics from the Swedish Golden Age are available. Some film archivists may be upset by sites like *yts.mx* or ColorByCarl’s algorithmically upscaled footage from Swedish Biograph. Yet, they give unprecedented access to archival material. ColorByCarl’s endeavours can also be perceived as a way to bring Swedish Biograph back to a new audience – or as one commentator (ColorByCarl, 2022: Tiffany C.) on the film *Sundsvall 1911* stated: “Very interesting! Everyone seems fascinated by the camera. Some are curious, some are suspicious”.

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