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Film studies anno 2013: A bird's eye view

ABSTRACT

This short subject assessing the current state of the academic field of film studies as practiced at sites of higher learning in Sweden is based on experiences and knowledge the co-authors gained as members of a national committee to evaluate the 'academic quality' of programmes from a comparative point of view.

During the autumn of 2012 an e-mail from the Swedish Higher Education Authority (Universitetskanslersämbetet) dropped down in our mailboxes. Cordial in tone, the letter informed us that our domestic

peers had nominated us to be part of a group of examiners whose task would be to evaluate the subject of film studies – together with five other humanities disciplines (musicology, art history, theatre, fashion and textile studies) during the upcoming national teaching quality assurance assessment. After presenting the terms, while at the same time suggesting the significance of the task, the letter spelled out the conditions that would attend our agreement to participate.

What was not spelled out was that ever since its introduction, the evaluations have been controversial, considered ludicrous by some and dubious at best by a number of

KEYWORDS

film studies
New Public
Management
Swedish humanities
audit culture
history of film studies
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1. English or Swedish language presentations (not every place seems to have an English language homepage) of the various Swedish film studies units discussed in the article may be found at the following homepages: Gävle (www.hig.se/Ext/Sv/Organisation/Akademier/Akademier-for-utbildning-och-ekonomi/In-English/Faculty-of-Education-and-Business-Studies/Departments/Department-of-Humanities/Film-Studies.html?), Göteborg (www.kultur.gu.se/english/disciplines/film-studies/?languageId=100001&disableRedirect=true&returnUrl=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.kultur.gu.se%2Famnen%2Ffilmvetenskap%2F), Halmstad (www.hh.se/hum/student/kurser/filmvetenskap.3169.html), Karlstad (www.kau.se/utbildning/kurser/amne/am1005), Lund (www.sol.lu.se/filmvetenskap/), Stockholm (www.ims.su.se/english/section-for-cinema-studies), Växjö (<http://lnu.se/subjects/film-studies?l=en>) and Örebro (http://lily.oru.se/studieinformation/kurs_lista.cgi?amnekod=FVA&lasar=2011/2012).

professional academics as well as universities. Accordingly, accepting would mean that we would align ourselves with an ‘accreditation agency’ and its characteristic discourses of suspicion, supervision and inspection that unmistakably form crucial parts of the principles of New Public Management (NPM), a controversial and often despised scheme that presently is much interrogated, not just in Sweden but globally (Lorenz 2012).

In fact, during our final examination work, the daily *Svenska Dagbladet* published a heated opinion piece by two vice-chancellors and their deputies (at Lund and Uppsala Universities), who fiercely assailed the current evaluation practice, describing it as a system of distrust as well as ‘unilaterally focused on control and disciplinary action’ (Åkesson et al. 2013). The current ‘crisis of confidence’ must be acknowledged, they claimed, with an urgent need to ‘create an evaluation system that is recognized internationally and has legitimacy in the [academic] sector’ (Åkesson et al. 2013).

Viewed from this perspective, our task appeared somewhat different. After all, what we were asked to do was to play devil’s advocate in relation to the work of our own long-time peers, colleagues and even, in a sense, rivals. Nevertheless, agree we did, believing some kind of evaluation system is necessary even if the present one may be riddled by imperfections. In addition, our cohorts could certainly do worse than ending up with us as their adversaries.

Another cause for complying, furthermore, was that we assumed the undertaking could provide us with a unique bird’s-eye view of the current state of a field that we in different ways have a certain stake in: the domestic academic discipline of film studies and its structural make-up.¹

BACKGROUND

In Sweden, film studies was officially introduced into higher education in 1969, when Stockholm University introduced a one-year undergraduate course entirely devoted to film studies. The idea partly stemmed from various initiatives at the Swedish Film Institute during the 1960s. Its founder Harry Schein, for instance, had set up a ‘film research group’ (*filmforskningsgruppen*) to address censorship issues under the premise that the film experience should not be regarded as dangerous, with unprotected minds running the risk of negative effects and influences. On the contrary film was an art form that could be studied in its own right (Vesterlund forthcoming).

Meanwhile, it was decided that a department that previously had been dedicated to theatre history would add ‘and Cinema Arts’ to its name. The following year a professor and several lecturers were appointed, and shortly thereafter an undergraduate major was established. While a first set of doctoral candidates enrolled in 1972, the first Ph.D., perhaps paradoxically, had already been awarded the previous year (Bolin and Forsman 1998: 42). The subject matter immediately proved popular with undergraduates and soon attracted large numbers (Waldekrantz 1995: 80).

For some time, though, further development was limited, at least from a national perspective. Consequently, in the early 1990s, only Stockholm was offering any sort of comprehensive curriculum. By this time film studies had become an autonomous department, separate from theatre history. Against this background, Jan Olsson, at the time a recently appointed professor, suggested that an additional, second department of film studies be established elsewhere. Simultaneously, however, he cautioned against other forms of growth. When

a number of provincial colleges and universities proposed offering undergraduate courses, often with a minimum number of faculty, Olsson saw this prospect as short-sighted and less desirable, if not outright destructive (1995: 84). To place Olsson's remarks in context, they were put forth at a time when Swedish governments were stepping up their expansion of higher education, a development that would last well into the first decade of the new millennium but eventually come to a halt.

There is cause for returning to Olsson's argument, but for now, the abovementioned suggestion can be kept in mind as the contemporary landscape of Swedish film studies is considered. At the moment, undergraduate courses are offered at seven Swedish universities or colleges: at Stockholm, Växjö, Göteborg, Lund, Gävle, Karlstad and Halmstad, to put them in order of the number of students they admit at that level. One more university, Örebro, offers a similar curriculum, but for administrative reasons – film studies is strongly linked to the university's media and communication studies programme – it was not included in the assessment. There are also other universities, among them Umeå, that offer film studies *lite* as a package coupled with other subjects such as drama and theatre. Moreover, during the last decade, two further colleges have introduced the discipline, only to abandon it a few years later.

Among the seven, only Stockholm offers regular M.A. courses (advanced level courses as they are labelled in Sweden), with two alternative paths of study. Other masters programmes with content related to film studies exist, notably in Göteborg and Lund, but for a variety of reasons neither was evaluated. Doctoral programmes at Stockholm, Göteborg and Lund were slated for inclusion in the assessment but eliminated

due to lack of funding. At this level Stockholm dominates because the number of available doctoral fellowships is larger than at Lund or the comparatively new programme at Göteborg. Ph.D. degrees with a film studies focus have also been awarded at Örebro, although formally these have been in the field of media and communication studies.

It may appear that the discipline has grown quite extensively during the last two decades. Contrary to Olsson's suggestion, however, the expansion has not come in the form of an additional comprehensive department. Rather the increase has been twofold. On the one hand, the subject has grown considerably at Stockholm, now among the larger units of its kind in Europe. Almost 30 individuals – professors, lecturers, part-time instructors as well as post-docs, doctoral candidates and visiting professors on fixed-term contracts – at present are affiliated with the department. On the other hand, the development of the film studies field has seen a rapid proliferation of undergraduate courses at a number of universities and colleges, from Lund in the south to Gävle in the north.

However, since the tendency today is that departments are merging (forming larger administrative units), the paradox is that currently no single university department is primarily dedicated to film, cinema or film and television studies. Even the unit at Stockholm has been merged into a larger entity – the Department of Media Studies – housing a number of disciplines. Accordingly, global developments within the academic world towards ever larger units, not only the demand for undergraduate courses that Olsson identified, may have played a part in the ensuing geography of the discipline. Though the Stockholm branch of film studies has been and continues to be strong, it remains to be seen whether the

merger between film and media, logical albeit somewhat odd since film has always been a medium, will prove productive from a film studies perspective. Still, from a bird's-eye view and with regard to size and the number of faculty employed, differences are drastic. A rough estimate indicates that approximately 50 per cent of the 30 or so film studies scholars employed in tenured positions in Sweden work at Stockholm University, while the rest populate the six other units where the discipline is taught. Among the latter, furthermore, the number of tenured faculty ranges from one to five, meaning that the second and third largest units, Lund and Växjö, are barely one-third of Stockholm's size in this respect.

CONDITIONS OF WORK

In his 1995 review, Olsson observed that by the mid-1990s, teaching and tutoring were increasingly performed by faculty with Ph.D.s. He ventured that this development signified the 'normalization' of film studies, implying that the union of teaching and research in the work of the individual scholar finally was on the horizon (much along the influential ideals famously put forth by German educator Wilhelm von Humboldt more than two centuries ago). From now on, he wrote, 'lecturers with PhDs will get external research grants, will participate in international exchange, present at conferences and publish research and information about research' (Olsson 1995: 84).

Although at present all tenured Swedish film studies scholars have Ph.D.s – a few from abroad, which suggests a nascent globalization of the Swedish academic world – far from all are entitled or able to embrace this conception of academic work. People no doubt strive towards that goal, yet teaching loads are quite heavy. During our evaluation, we observed

that undergraduate teaching and an assortment of administrative tasks dominate by far as the primary duties on most of the work description lists provided for the assessment. This is nothing new, of course. Still, it reflects the distribution of research funding, which is inadequate and dispersed on the basis of individual scholarly excellence through specific, designated governmental organizations rather than by universities. From a national perspective, research funding is exceedingly skewed with regard to certain domestic sites, individuals and to some extent types of employment.

In fact, it can be claimed that higher education in Sweden left the ideals of Humboldt by the roadside as teaching and research became gradually dissociated in the 1960s and 1970s. In the social sciences and the humanities this development – promoted through the motto that only excellence can (and will) be supported – has increased during the last fifteen years or so. Consequently, seen as a collective, the Stockholm scholars are the group that has been most consistently and systematically successful in securing funding, and hence in combining teaching with a sustained and extensive commitment to research. Furthermore, the unit has been proclaimed a 'profiled' discipline within its own university, which probably means further advantages in comparison to its competitors.

Individual scholars outside this particular environment have been able to make significant and lasting contributions as well, although rarely in the same continuous way. Nevertheless, and to connect to an earlier mapping of the field inspired by the concepts of Pierre Bourdieu; within the hierarchical and strictly formalized structure that is Swedish academic film studies, the power connected with research funding, participation in international exchange and publishing has largely

remained with Stockholm during the time period marked by strong expansion of the domestic field (cf. Bolin and Forsman 1998: 37).

From yet another viewpoint, concerned with what and in what way students are being taught, there are both vast similarities and certain differences. On the one hand, various takes on fundamental film history, national cinema, introduction to film theory and some forays into television still loom large in many a basic curriculum. On the other hand, recurrent words in present course titles and descriptions, such as digital convergence, inter-art perspectives, world cinema and production studies, would probably not have occurred as frequently a decade or two ago. Moreover, it is possible to detect slight biases towards certain key areas. At certain universities the general thrust of the teaching seems to be more sociologically inclined, mainly situating film as a social, political and societal phenomenon, while elsewhere aesthetics, theory and a fondness for specific, occasionally rare filmic forms appears more pronounced.

Additionally, instruction in practical film-making and editing is offered in two or three programmes. Others, meanwhile, exclude such matters, whether due to a lack of technical and economic means or the belief that this is not what academic film studies are about and merely acts as a diversion from the core historical and theoretical curriculum. Interestingly, the student essays we examined (the core work of the evaluation) from universities with practical elements in their curriculum were generally just as strong as student work from places driven by an educational idea of 'theory-only'. Courses in practical film-making have long been debated within film studies, yet through digital techniques it is today quite easy to insert various practical elements, and perhaps these facilitates a more

thorough understanding of the craft of film-making.

TO CONCLUDE

On the English-language homepage of the Swedish Higher Education Authority, the governmental agency responsible for carrying out the quality assurance assessment, the rationale behind the exercise is stated in the following way:

The Government has laid down a qualification descriptor for each qualification awarded by the higher education institutions. Irrespective of the organisation of the studies that have led to the award of a qualification, the quality of the courses and programmes must always be high enough to ensure that the goals laid down in the qualification descriptor are attained.

(Universitetskanslersämbetet 2013)

As straightforward as this statement may appear, the intrinsic view of higher education it conveys nevertheless seems inconsistent. The variation in size of the faculty and consequently the range of scholarly perspectives students encounter is just one factor that is not accounted for as an evaluative norm. Neither are the scholarly virtues of lecturers, their comparative proficiency within the particular field in which they teach and supervise, or their research activity. Moreover, dissimilarities between student groups are not taken into account, nor is there any method of ranking students.

However, as student work was assessed – and not only by us, but also by an extended group of external examiners and readers – a fairly tight correspondence between precisely such factors as those recounted above and student output undeniably became

2. The entire completed evaluation may be found at (kvalitet.uk-ambetet.se/resultat/sok.4.25ae7641136bb9ef9e38000719.html?struts.portlet.action=/kvalitet/resultat&sv.url=12.6da1ffd913828526dc880000).

relatively clear. Rather easily assessed factors such as the number of years the course of study has been offered, the number of faculty, the publication rate and the amount of research funding would have provided more or less the same results as the exhaustive grind and trepidation of the teaching quality assurance assessment. At the same time it must be stressed that certain exceptions exist. Solid work is performed by some of the smaller units, units not always benignly handled by external funders or their own universities. Correspondingly, there is rather large variation among the students' performance, at the larger, more established places ranging from brilliant to unacceptable. Perhaps this merely indicates that larger student corpuses inevitably lead to wider deviation.²

Studied from a perspective of two decades, the discipline of film studies has unquestionably developed as a core area of teaching and research in Sweden – even if the various components of this growth have been unevenly distributed. At present, however, the era of expansion seems to have come to a temporary halt. As far as we can determine there are no plans or campaigns for further development of academic programmes, neither at the sites of higher learning included in the evaluation nor elsewhere. It seems that film studies, like the entire sector of higher education in Sweden, at best is in a holding pattern and may be threatened by cuts. Together with the audit culture and control inspections so typical of NPM, and to which we subjected ourselves and our peers, this possibility has produced a culture of uncertainty and hesitation in our field – at least as of now.

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