

## **The everyday life of *Auteurs du Cinema*: The reception of Ingmar Bergman and his films**

Jono Van Belle,

Ghent University (Belgium) and Stockholm University (Sweden)

### **Abstract:**

The New Cinema History tradition has been crucial in how we think about audiences in the past as they approach cinema as a cultural and social institution. A recent study in this tradition, on cinema-going in Britain in the 1960s, has revealed that art film directors – *auteurs du cinema* – are mentioned surprisingly often (Stokes et al., 2017). This illustrates the need to trace how audiences perceive these *auteurs du cinema* and what the social and cultural meaning was/is of these art film directors in the everyday lives of people. In this article, I make use of oral history interviews to explore the meaning of Ingmar Bergman and his films comparatively, between Sweden (from a domestic perspective) and Belgium (from an international perspective). Findings show that the reception context plays a crucial role in how films are evaluated and how they are perceived through time. Swedish participants evaluate more in terms of identification while Belgian participants evaluate within their own frames of references, *annexing* the film in a different religious context. In general, the canonization of Ingmar Bergman as an *auteur du cinema* has a larger influence on reception in Belgium than in Sweden.

**Keywords:** New Cinema History, Ingmar Bergman, Auteurism, Audience, Film Reception

### **A bottom-up approach to *auteurs du cinema*?**

The New Cinema History tradition has been crucial in re-conceptualize how we think about film reception with ‘actual audiences in their social, historical and cultural context of everyday life’ (Van de Vijver, 2012: 3; Maltby, 2011:7; Kuhn et al., 2017:5). As Robert C. Allen noted, for the longest time, film history was ‘taken to mean the history of films’ (1990:347). Five years earlier, Allen had published the seminal work *Film History: Theory and Practice* ([1985] 1993) together with Douglas Gomery, arguing for a more empirically founded approach to film history with proper attention for the technological, social,

aesthetic, and economic contexts in which films are produced, distributed, exhibited, and consumed. They inspired a 'revisionist' approach to film history (see also Chapman et al., 2009). Others that have contributed to this turn were Tom Gunning (1986 [2011]), Miriam Hansen (1991), and Janet Staiger (1992). About a decade later, Annette Kuhn (2002)'s influential study on cinema memory appeared and, finally, as a sort of a consolidation, Richard Maltby (see Maltby et al., 2011) launched *New Cinema History* as a strand of context- and reception-oriented research within film studies (see also Kuhn et al., 2017). Making use of oral accounts and other reception data (e.g. on circulation and exhibition), cinema is centrally conceived as a social institution. Research ranges from mapping cinema history and a focus on place (Klenotic, 2011; Kuhn, 2004) to exhibition research on distribution and programming (Biltreyst et al., 2011) to venues (Maltby et al., 2011; Van de Vijver, 2012), always with the audience as a starting point.

In a recent study within this tradition on cinema-going in Britain in the 1960s, Stokes and Jones (2017) find that participants often mention art film directors (such as Bergman, Fellini, and Truffaut), sometimes even claiming an ongoing influence by certain filmmakers and their films to this day. Given that the 1950s and 1960s are characterized by an increased perception of films from an *auteurist* point of view (Corrigan et al., 2011), it is especially interesting to trace how audiences perceive these *auteurs du cinema* and what the social and cultural meaning was of these art film directors in the everyday lives of people.

From a comparative perspective, I explore the meaning of Ingmar Bergman and his films in Sweden and Belgium through memories presented in oral history interviews. Generally, Ingmar Bergman has primarily been addressed as *auteur du cinema*, and his films as art. This has contributed to a strong canonization of his work, both in terms of film history in general and of Swedish national cinema specifically. As Maaret Koskinen (2002, 2008, 2009, 2010) has pointed out, reality is much more nuanced. This is especially so within Sweden, where discourses around Bergman always were mixed between high art and the popular. All of this is underdeveloped from an audience perspective.

Only one comparative audience study has previously been conducted on the reception of Ingmar Bergman. Birgitta Steene (1998) compares audiences in Sweden, France, Brazil, India, and the United States in the 1990s. She concludes that it is in fact possible to construct a generic Bergman-viewer in the respective countries: 'What dominates in France is a formalist approach to Bergman's filmmaking, while in the United States it is Bergman the existentialist who reigns supreme. In Brazil we find the subversive and politicized Bergman, while in India his films become emblems of artistic filmmaking, challenging the native film industry. In Sweden, finally, the generic viewer sees Bergman in a much more controversial light: on one hand, provocative and self-absorbed, on the other hand artistically undervalued' (105-6).

Steene focuses on viewers in the 1990s and constructs ideal-types from questionnaires combined with additional interviews. The focus in my article lies much earlier, on the upcoming and height of Bergman's career in the 1960s and 1970s. For that, I rely on memories that bear relations to both then and now. Before focusing on memories, I

wish to address some issues that arise when juxtaposing the implied Swedish 'domestic' audience of Ingmar Bergman to an 'international' Belgian audience.

### **The national audience?**

If the transnational perspective takes Hollywood as dominant (Ezra et al., 2006:1; Rawle, 2018:22), Ingmar Bergman can be considered counterhegemonic. This is reflected in the type of people that watches Bergman-films, i.e. art-house audiences (cf. *infra*). When scrutinizing this audience, we see a new dominance arise: that of the canonical *auteur*. It is crucial to explore subtle differences in relation to the canon from a meso-perspective, in our case the national context of the audience.

Art film directors like Bergman are often deeply embedded in the national cinema culture and, therefore, reception studies have often been limited to national settings while film is inescapably an international medium (Stigsdotter et al., 2009:216). Moreover, what 'national cinema' offers to non-domestic viewers has rarely been the object of research. All the while reception of cinema, and media in general, happens more than not outside of the nation where the content was produced (Athique, 2016).

Crofts' well-known argument (1993:62) is that we should avoid to 'hypostatize the "national" of national cinema'. Considering Bergman's films in isolation ignores other films that circulated at the time. This potentially re-creates the canon we wish to go against in the first place. Two other risks are that internal national cultural diversity is ignored or that national identities are uniformly promoted over those of ethnicity, class, gender, or other identities, all for the sake of defining a 'national' participant perspective. As such, this article emphasises the national context more than the audiences' or the films' nationality.

The nation seems particularly problematic when it limits the perspective of the researcher (Higson, 2006; Crofts, 1993). However, the national should not be 'displaced' or 'negated' in a transnational analysis (Higbee and Lim, 2010: 10). The limitations that national boundaries pose are what strengthens the comparative analysis presented in this article, where the national contexts serve as 'taxonomic labelling devices' (Higson, 2006:16). National cinema remains important in thinking on cinema and identity, while transnational cinema reminds us of the permeability of national borders (Rawle, 2018:49).

Because cinema is a unique personal experience that is at the same time socially situated, the comparative dimension on a national level is valuable if one maintains a dialectic perspective (Biltreyst and Meers, 2016:25). This dialectic returns in differing degrees in Steene's (1998) transnational study. She distinguishes three sequential stages: *transmittance*, *annexation* and *assimilation*. The first stage primarily relies on marketing and distribution forces, where 'a stereotyping of the film product frequently takes place' (120). Second, we have an annexation phase, where a foreign culture accepts a product from another culture because of its combined 'otherness' and familiarity. As an example here she considers the French reception of *Sommarnattens leende* (1955), which was highly praised at the Cannes Film Festival. Steene believes that the film was successful in France because it resembled cinematic criteria that were already established in France (cf. familiarity), i.e. 'a

*jeu d'esprit* reminiscent of René Clair's comedies' (121; see also Grodal, 2014 for a similar analysis). At the same time, the film was exotic in its Swedishness (cf. otherness or novelty). A characteristic of annexation is that the receiving culture is not changed by the product it accepts. One step further is assimilation, where the foreign mind absorbs a cultural product to that extent that its foreignness disappears. At this stage, the film has a deep emotional impact.

This article can be seen as part of more recent attempts to compare oral history data such as memories beyond the local (see also the European Cinema Audiences project (<https://europeancinemaaudiences.org/>)). I consider Belgium and Sweden as contextual delimitations to the memories under investigation, important in their difference to one another.

Starting from participants' cinema memories, I examine how contexts, exhibition, and cinema-going differ for the reception of Ingmar Bergman and his films in Belgium and Sweden respectively. The comparison allows me to nuance Kuhn's influential typology of cinema memory (2002, 2004, 2010, 2011).

## Memories

How people remember is as important as what they remember (Kuhn, 2002: 9–12). The retrieval of memories, i.e. memory work, is *performative* (cf. Butler, 1999; see also Portelli, 2005). It is necessarily grounded in the environment one is in upon retrieval, including larger social and cultural interactions as part of that environment (Timcke, 2017:13). Here, we have delimited that environment to two national contexts. Explorations of memories in the present can only be approached as an active processes of creation of meaning, also relating to and in function of that present (Portelli, 2006). The merge between past and present subsequently allows for an exploration of dominant historical discourses and into different accounts of social experiences (Jernudd, 2013:111-2).

For cinema memory in particular, some general characteristics have been described beyond nuances in the geographical location or national context of the participant. These general characteristics provide insight into the working of cinema memory in particular and cultural memory in general. One is that participants remember more of going to the cinema as a social event than titles or details. Another is that these memories are often expressed in collective terms, further underlining the social dimension of cinema-going and the meaning of cinema in everyday life. A critical question here is whether this focus on social aspects is a consequence of memory fading over time or whether it is the researcher who tends to steer the answers in that direction through the focus of research (Kuhn et al., 2017:7, 10).

Kuhn (2011: 87) has developed a typology for cinema memories that consists of three modes: 'firstly, remembered scenes or images from films (Type A memories); secondly, situated memories of films (Type B memories); and, finally, memories of cinema-going (Type C memories). Empirical evidence suggests that these three forms of cinema memory are not separate or distinct from one another, but are more aptly seen as occupying positions along a continuum, with Type A memories at one end and Type C

memories at the other. In many actual instances, these memory types merge or share characteristics’.

Type A memories often revolve around feelings of terror or fear. Type B memories are also images or scenes from the film but in this case related to one’s own life. According to Kuhn, Type B memories can be *implants*, memories that might originate from - for instance - family stories or other cultural or social activities. These implanted memories tend to be less detailed than other memories. Type C memories are not about the films anymore at all but only about the social and cultural aspects of cinema-going. In these, the notion of place is particularly strong. A distinction can be made between *cinema in the world*, where cinema represents growing up and exploring the world outside of the family and the home, and *the world in the cinema*, a place outside of but also embedded in everyday life, much in line with Foucault’s heterotopia (Kuhn, 2011:107-9). Also other scholars find a prevalence of places in cinema memory (Van de Vijver, 2012), both imaginary and real, functioning as ‘memory anchors’ (Haake, 2016:80).

### **Interview Sample**

People were recruited in Sweden and Belgium mainly on the basis of availability, and secondly via snowball sampling (Goodman, 1961). In both countries, there is a large underrepresentation from lower class backgrounds. This may be due to Bergman’s reputation as ‘unnecessary’ difficult and dark. All Swedes know Bergman by name, but only a cultural elite is today willing to talk about their Bergman-viewing. People who like Bergman consider themselves to be out of the ordinary (cf. Steene, 1998). In Belgium, only in certain cultural circles the work of Ingmar Bergman is known.

Secondly, there is an initial recruitment problem (Anderson, 2009:188-90), since there was no clear definition of what kind of people were searched for at the outset. Although some of the calls for participation mentioned explicitly that the interviews were on Bergman, ‘whether one liked or disliked him’, most people who were willing to be interviewed somehow identified as Bergman-fans, -experts, or at the other end of the spectrum, -haters. Many people refused because they were afraid they would not know enough or because they felt no affiliation to the topic at all. Even those who were interviewed expressed concern about their own knowledge and made meta-remarks asking whether their answers were satisfactory. Because of this, the middle range of opinions on Bergman is probably not accounted for.

In Sweden, 20 people were interviewed and in Belgium 28. These interviews were conducted face-to-face during 2015 and 2016, in people’s own home or at a location of their choice. The interview was a semi-structured in-depth interview with probes that were verbatim transcribed. The interviews varied in length ranging from just under one hour to over three. Additionally, a drop-off was taken at the start of each interview (age, sex, social background, education, place of upbringing, cultural habits, as well as which Bergman-films they had seen and which were their three favorites).

All participants signed an informed consent. Standard procedure when dealing with respondents is to make all respondents anonymous or to allocate pseudonyms. However, research indicates that some people might feel they lose ownership and agency when their words can no longer be identified as theirs. Allocating random pseudonyms might result in names that do not 'match' the original names (Grinyer, 2009). For this reason, each participant could choose to participate under their own name, a pseudonym, or to remain anonymous.

Generally, my participants can be defined as an 'art-house audience'. Surprisingly, this category seems to exist beyond the national boundaries under consideration. This echoes Steene's earlier transnational study (1998). Art-house audiences have been shown to form 'indirect communities' with a sense of like-mindedness with other audience members, built around e.g. taste, class, age, ideology and etiquette. This sense of like-mindedness appears to be true to reality as art-house audiences tend to share demographic, taste and ideological characteristics (Evans, 2011:327, 339).

For Belgium and Sweden specifically, some reports were of help for assessing this. For Belgium, there is a report from the Flemish Audiovisual Fund<sup>1</sup> (Martens et al., 2015) on the audience of special film screenings in cultural centers. Usually, these films can be categorized as 'art films'. The audience that attended these was predominantly female (more than 60 per cent), one third of this audience was between 45 and 60 years old and there is next to no ethnic diversity (Martens et al., 2015). In Sweden, a similar report was acquired from Ingrid Stigsdotter<sup>2</sup> (2016), who studied the audience of four art cinemas in four Swedish cities. Also here, the audience consists of remarkably more females (73% of Stigsdotter's sample) and older people (71% was 50 years old or older) than the Swedish average of cinema visitors. Most people in this sample worked in the cultural sector.

My sample partially corresponds to the art-house audience in terms of age, sex, and profession. In Sweden, most participants were women (13/20) born in the 1940s. A possible explanation here is that the persona of Ingmar Bergman in Sweden was highly sexualized/celebritised, generally appealing more to women. In Belgium, most participants were men (18/28) born in the 1950s. A mainly male cultural elite was still using their knowledge of Bergman to portray their own elite status in Belgium, corresponding to Bergman's international status as a high art auteur.

Age is relevant in both countries as it indexes both life course (teenager, parent, elderly) and generation (e.g. 'post-war' generation, 'sixties' generation). There is an interaction between the two. Being young in a given period determines which generation one is part of. Both play a role in which cultural frameworks people employ in their interpretations (Reiner et al., 2011:173). Age is an important factor when it comes to the construction of memories, too. It seems that memories on cinema-going in late childhood and adolescence are remarkably strong, a fact that is also supported by neurological research, and which is called the 'reminiscence bump' (Kuhn et al., 2017:12; Janssen et al., 2007). It was found that the peak of formation of a *generation* identity lies between 10-19 years old, while the peak of the formation of intimate relations lies between 20-29 years old



(Holmes et al., 1999:21). Moreover, research shows that watching a film multiple times further increases this reminiscence bump (Janssen et al., 2007:755). This means that canonization likely contributes to valuing certain cultural products from one's adolescence, as is the case for Bergman-films and my participants here. The peak of Bergman's international career is situated in the 1960s and 1970s, when most of my participants became active cinema-goers and were in their most influential years as adolescents in terms of cinema memory (Kuhn et al., 2017:12).

### **Film Exhibition in Sweden and Belgium**

Perhaps important to make clear is that Belgium was characterized by a pillarized society. Different ideological groups - socialists, Catholics, liberals, and Flemish nationalists – have historically had their own networks that tried to influence one's political and social life, leisure activities, media consumption, and health care needs (Van de Vijver et al., 2007:4; Biltereyst, 2007:103). In Flanders (the northern part of Belgium where my participants come from), the Catholic pillar was most dominant while in Wallonia (the southern part of Belgium) the Socialist pillar was the strongest. In more recent times, under influence of the strong competitive and individualistic pragmatism of the 1980s, the pillarization has collapsed (Witte, 2005). In media development, pillarization was very influential throughout the twentieth century. Newspapers and magazines belonged exclusively to one pillar and public broadcasting has until 1960 been characterized by problematic political influence on its organization and the information it presented (Witte, 2005:512-8).

Film mostly circulated and was screened within existing pillars. Catholic venues were dominant, making up one third to one fourth of the exhibition scene between the 1930s and 1950s, besides the socialist, liberal, and Flemish-nationalist venues (Biltereyst, 2007:201, Van de Vijver et al., 2007:5). Besides film screening, the Catholic pillar was also quite well-developed in censorship and film criticism, guiding their audiences' choices. The Catholic Film League (Katholieke Filmliga / Ligue Catholique du Film / *hereafter shortened as KFL*) had local departments that organized screenings and even boycotts. The KFL had a film classification board (the Catholic Film Action / CFA) that published film magazines with quite a wide membership and its own venues, and it controlled its own distribution network (Biltereyst, 2007:104, 194-8). We can see remnants of this in the interviews. Many of the Belgian participants saw Bergman-films in special film screenings that were organized by the (Catholic) schools they attended.

In Sweden, there is a similar structure of cinema ownership. The Swedish society was not pillarized like in Belgium but many cinemas at the time were owned by different voluntary and non-governmental movements. As a result, Sweden had the highest European ratio for number of cinemas per capita in the 1950s (Furberg, 2010:30; Jernudd, 2010:177).

The golden years of cinema in both Sweden and Belgium lay in the 1950s. By the mid-fifties, attendance rates in Sweden were the highest ever and there were more cinema's than at any other time (Furberg, 2010:30; Sjöholm, 2003:12, 51). Also in Belgium

cinema was very popular after the war, although different taxes and strict safety rules inhibited a true blooming (Van de Vijver, 2012:98).

After the introduction of television, attendance rates declined heavily throughout the second half of the twentieth century, both in Belgium and Sweden. The amount of venues fell back with one third over the course of the 1960s and attendance rates declined to half in Sweden (Björnehult et al., 1986:67). The crisis in cinema in the 1960s in Sweden hit the rural areas especially hard and that continued into the 1990s (Jernudd, 2010:170). In the 1970s, the structure of the international cinema industry changed and profits relied increasingly on a few blockbusters per year rather than on the regular attendance (Van de Vijver, 2012:102). Slowly, cinemas developed into multiscreen rather than single screen, and from the 1980s onwards, mainstream films were exclusively released in multiplex cinemas with eight to fifteen screens (Van de Vijver, 2012:104). The first multiplex in Sweden was opened in 1980 in Stockholm, *Filmstaden* (Furberg, 2010:32-3). The first multiplex in Belgium was *Decaskoop* in Gent, which opened in 1981 (Van de Vijver, 2012:104).

In terms of general film experience and organization of the film sector, Belgium and Sweden are surprisingly similar, despite the characterizing pillarization of the Belgian society at the time. When we explore the release dates and screenings for Bergman's films in particular, differences between the national contexts surface that influence the interpretation of Bergman and his films.

### **Release Dates and Screenings**

The release dates of the Bergman-films differ substantially in Sweden and Belgium. Many of Bergman's early works have in Belgium only been released at the end of the 1950s, especially after the success of *Det Sjunde Inseplet* (1957). *Kvinna utan ansikte* (1947), *Fängelse* (1949), *Törst* (1949), *Till glädje* (1950), *Sommarlek* (1951), *Kvinnors väntan* (1952), and *Kvinnodröm* (1955) were all released in Belgium between 1958 and 1960. This means that the films were evaluated by the press in relation to the successful works or from the perspective to which extent 'the future master' (Het Volk 22/5/1959, 'Fängelse') was present in these works.

In Belgium, Ingmar Bergman's films are often exclusively situated within the Catholic pillar because of the screenings and discussions held by the KFL, often in schools. The film-introductions were given by Father Jos Burvenich, a popular figure in Flanders associated with Bergman and his films. He is mentioned by multiple participants for his leading role in the promotion of Bergman within the Catholic pillar. Another name is Maria Rosseels, film critic for *De Standaard*, Flemish Catholic newspaper. Both Rosseels and Burvenich were influential in approving or disapproving of a film. Further ratings were given in the film magazine of KFL, 'Film en Televisie'. K.P. (male, b. 1951, Belgium) recalls how most films by Bergman were advised to be avoided. Egoel (male, b. 1945, Belgium) recalls how he never really considered these labels until he grew up, and what a liberation it meant to be able to see any film he wanted. This form of indirect censorship was not mentioned in Sweden.



## All Kinds of Memories

My interviews resulted in a variety of memories that correspond to Kuhn's classification above. First I explore Type C-memories on cinema-going.

When I was 16 or 17 years old I was allowed to go the screenings of the KFL, which was kind of special, since it was on Thursday evening at eight, the middle of the week because on Fridays I had to attend school! They were my first nights out, almost like my first steps into adulthood. I had to be home by eleven so sometimes I had time for a beer. Others my age were probably allowed more... but I did it mainly for the films. I had a friend that always went along and we often discussed the films afterwards. [Male, b. 1960, Belgium]

The participant here refers to the screenings organized in the Catholic pillar. The fact that Bergman-screenings were part of an ideological pillar had as the advantage that a framework for discussion and evaluation was already set. Some respondents have fond memories of these screenings and especially the discussions afterwards, as also illustrated in the above quote. Nero (male, b. 1954, Belgium) mentions how in discussing these films, one was forced to uncover one's own feelings, which otherwise would have remained hidden.

Yet these frameworks of discussion can also be considered normative. The purpose of the screenings by KFL was partially to educate people. Introductions were often paternalistic. From the interviews can be deduced that introductions promoted a strong *auteurist* reading. Especially those participants who got to see these films as teenagers, mention often they did not understand the films 'as they had to be understood'. Another male participant (b. 1960, Belgium) says the introduction did not get you anywhere as they had too little background to fully understand and dissect the films. D.V. (male, b. 1956, Belgium) remembers how he saw *Wild Strawberries* at school, he only remembers certain images 'and that I did not understand anything'.

More importantly, the quote above illustrates the importance of cinema-going for adolescents as a way of growing up, an exploration of the world outside the family. This emphasizes the role of cinema as a place and is what Kuhn calls *cinema in the world* (2011:107-9). Place functions in another way too what the Bergman-films is concerned. Sweden is for both Belgian and Swedish participants an imaginary place that they use to construct their own identities against.

## Another Type of Place Memory: The Swedishness of the films

Kuhn's typology does not discuss place in this sense while it is particularly relevant for Bergman's films to consider how they are perceived to be representative (or not) for Sweden and Swedish culture. Surprisingly, both Swedes and Belgians make use of stereotypes and Sweden as a sociocultural framework. Sweden functions as an emotional

component in the construction of a myth and cultural identity for its inhabitants (Ezra et al., 2010:4). Here, common narratives or images return in Swedish cinema (see also Larsson et al., 2010) that help shape how audiences process the films: the social welfare system, sex and pornography, Swedish summer, and existentialism. Note that these narratives are not unified and historically specific (Rawle, 2018:21).

The participants made many references to darkness and depressive aspects in the films, which were often equated to Swedish culture in general. Other participants thought the darkness is particular to Ingmar Bergman. One female participant in Sweden (b. 1939) stated beautifully that ‘the big is mirrored in the small and in that sense it mirrors Swedish society, but it is continuously Bergman’s universe, that which he holds within [that is represented]’.

The idealization of the Swedish summer is perhaps the strongest cultural image I came across. Its iconography is primarily nature-related: archipelagos, water with lilies, warm sunlight that lasts all evening, wild strawberries, and midsummer celebrations (Björklund et al., 2016:1; Stigsdotter, 2008:187). Underlying is the notion of absolute freedom. The following quote ties together this strong Swedish cultural image with personal experiences and desires through the remembrance of Bergman’s *Sommaren med Monika* (1953).

There is a special feeling around *Sommaren med Monika* (1953) ... The characters’ freedom ... to be one with nature and to dive naked into the sea ... When I later had a life in the archipelago, I had these feelings. It was so natural, it felt as that what I had always longed for. Now that I think about it, it was *Sommaren med Monika* that it all started with. [Bitti, female, b. 1942, Sweden]

The quote further illustrates how memory is construed in the now; how an image of personal liberation became intertwined with the film at the time of recollecting the memory, in turn affirming and re-affirming an ongoing influence. In that sense, the influence of Bergman and *Sommaren med Monika* (1953) is not only personal, but also canonical. Yet, the fact that multiple Swedish respondents indicate that the nudity and narrative of *Sommaren med Monika* came as a shock to them indicates that the stereotype of a more free representation of sexuality (not necessarily the freedom *an sich*) was also new for them and that the image that lived after these films was not as accurate as for example some Belgian participants seem to think.

### **Scenes, Images and Situatedness**

Type A and B memories, i.e. how the participants remember scenes or images and how this relates to their own life, seem most suitable in determining which films are ‘important films’ through today. Canonization plays a complex role in these memories.

The two countries differ enormously in terms of the actual number of films seen by the participants. The average amount of films seen in Sweden is 24.9 versus in Belgium 8.4.

Yet, in terms of most favorite films the participants filled in on the drop-off, the same films return in both countries. This is a first indication of canonization influence. For Sweden, the favorites are *Fanny och Alexander* (1982), *Scener ur ett äktenskap* (1973), *Trollflöjten* (1975), *Det Sjunde Inseget* (1957), and *Persona* (1966). In Belgium, *Trollflöjten* is replaced by *Smulltronstället* (1957). Remarkable is that *Persona* (1966) comes out as a favorite for both countries. When considering Sweden and Belgium together only one participant talks about its personal importance in the interview. While other reception research suggests *Persona* was an instant classic (Stigsdotter et al., 2009:219; Björnehult et al., 1986:59), my findings suggest the film was a success among critics but not necessarily for other audiences. An explanation for its high mentioning as a favorite compared to next to no discussion of *Persona* in the interviews is that the drop-off (where *Persona* came out as one of the favorites) was presented to the participant at the beginning of the interview. Likely, most participants felt the need to present themselves as knowledgeable at the outset.

This contrasts sharply to *Det Sjunde Inseget* (1957), where the majority of the participants in both countries described detailed images that have remained with them, or were telling why they found the film important. This has probably to do with canonization processes in general in both countries. In Belgium, the film's religious theme and its repeated screening in the Catholic pillar is another reason for its high remembrance rate. Recurring comments were that the film has personal resonance because of the (religious) questions it raises or that the film was important because of its 'art' experience (cf. the normative reading).

The second most-mentioned film in terms of importance (in the interview, not the dropoff) in both countries was *Jungfrukällan* (1960). The rape scene in particular recurs in many accounts. Monika (female, b. 1937, Belgium) describes this scene in remarkable detail: 'the conflict between the pure and the humiliation... the girl on her horse, she took a different route and spreads her cloth and invites the man to eat with her. Then there's a frog that jumps out'.

For Belgian participants no particular other film stood out, while for the Swedish participants, third and fourth most-mentioned films were *Nattvardsgästarna* (1963) and *Sommarnattens leende* (1955). *Nattvardsgästarna* (1963) seemed to be particularly realistic. One Swedish participant stated that she understood her parents better after having seen it. *Sommarnattens leende*, (1955) seems to be of importance to many Swedish participants for different reasons. G.F. (male, b. 1936, Hungary/Sweden) states he has the film on VHS since some years, it is 'my antidepressivum, when I am down, I just watch the film and I become happy again. It is fantastic, it is a fantastic film'. Two female participants in Sweden (female, b. 1939, Sweden and L.E., female, b. 1933, Sweden) admire Eva Dahlbeck's character and for how she deals with men. One of them thinks 'it is perhaps how I myself would want to be in some situations'.

Most of these memories can be categorized as Type A memories, specific images or scenes, often remembered as moments of fear (Kuhn, 2011:87-88). The vividly remembered rape scene from *Jungfrukällan* (1960) confirms the influence of fearful emotions on strong

memories. The interviews suggest that not only fear or terror is responsible for the fact that these images are remembered, but heightened emotions in general.

Earlier research on cinema memory suggested that participants remember more social aspects than actual titles and films (Kuhn et al., 2017:7, 10). My interviews suggest that canonization and cultural memory may play an important role in the repetition and continuation of exactly these types of details, as my participants had no issues remembering titles or visual details. This echoes Kuhn's idea of 'implants' (Kuhn, 2011) and can primarily be found in Type B-memories.

### **Type B-Memories**

Type B-memories are those memories where participants relate what they see to their own life (Kuhn, 2011:87). Like heightened emotions, this also increases the vividness of the memory. Our study shows it is not only how participants relate to the films but also how they reflect on that later in life, emphasizing the performative aspect of recalling the memory today. Identification plays a role here in three ways: identification when younger versus now; identification in Belgium versus Sweden (cultural proximity); and identification with the characters versus the assumed filmmaker.

Many participants recognize their own teenage melancholic and/or existential struggles in the films of Bergman, both in Belgium and in Sweden. That the participants link the Bergman-films to their own existential struggles as late teenagers echoes the reminiscence bump where memories formed as adolescents have a particular depth.

I liked these films because they were so problematic. I don't think I would like them today anymore, it's too much ... I was searching myself back then, did not know what I wanted or how life was supposed to be. Typical for a 17-year old I would say. I don't have that anymore, now I just think it is being ridiculously difficult. I became more pragmatic. [Doremi, female, b. 1953, Belgium]

There was a making of documentary of Tystnaden. I remember it very well, it was like an intellectual experience for me as a 16-year old. When I saw the film later, I did not feel anything... God's silence... It must have been the age and that I had so many existential questions back then. [Bitte, female, b. 1945, Sweden]

In Belgium, remarkably, many participants mention recognizing religious struggles and the suffocating religious environments. This indicates an *annexation* – as defined by Steene (1998:122) – of the films into the life of the participants, given the different religious background of Swedish and Belgian participants. Often, the participants who recognize their own struggles in Bergman tend to see this 'search' as part of their personality, and sometimes, as part of their gender identity, i.e. as typically female.

In Sweden, this seems to be related to the family situation. Those participants who recognized their own life questions in Bergman's films mention that one or both of their parents were religious and/or active in church life.

### **Bergman's Persona**

Comparatively, relatively few participants in Belgium link specific scenes or films to their own life. Usually, the experience is more general like a puzzle or an art experience. Participants in Belgium tended to identify more meaningfully with an assumed filmmaker than with specific characters. In doing so, participants in Belgium base their image of Bergman solely on the films, while in Sweden he is a well-known public figure and participants relate to what they know about Bergman's private life, as I demonstrated in a previous study (Van Belle, 2017). Consequently, while in Belgium 'religion' seemed to be the most overtly talked about topic in relation to Bergman's films, it is the topic of 'women' in Sweden. This is related to what is known about his public persona and his private life in both countries respectively.

In Sweden almost all participants evaluate the films and their characters to which extent they could identify with them. *Persona* (1966) offers an interesting case to examine this, as many indicate they could not relate to the main characters:

I cannot stand *Persona*. For many it is a favorite and I understand why Bergman has made it, with the different perspectives and the same woman, but no, I don't have any joy in seeing it. I cannot identify with any of the sides. [Female, b. 1939, Sweden]

In my interviews, class is often mentioned as an important measurement for the degree of identification of the participant. Bergman is known (and criticized) for portraying the higher class and not the ordinary people. C.B. (male, b. 1945, Sweden) uses class as a clear interpretative strategy for *Persona* when he states 'as an old revolutionary I saw everything in classes, the doctor and the patient are obviously friends and belong to an upper class while the nurse is represented as childish and confesses an infidelity on the beach or something'. Kjell D. (male, b. 1952, Sweden) expresses a fascination, 'Bergman was from an upper class and I am not so ... I don't recognize myself there and it becomes a bit surreal ... people around him, when he grew up, perhaps expressed themselves in that way, they perhaps had a richer capacity and had more freedom to express ... where I grew up, middle or worker's class, one was supposed to hold back'.

Generally, the films that 'one can relate to' were clearly more popular and more liked by the Swedish participants, such as *Sommarnattens Leende* (1955), *Smulltronstället* (1957), or *Sommaren med Monika* (1953). In relation to these films, participants explicitly described which characters they liked and why. This indicates that cultural proximity (Straubhaar, 1991) plays a role in the degree of identification with the characters.

Identification changed throughout the life of the participants, which illustrates the performative aspect of memory most clearly. Very often, and in contrast to Belgium, participants in Sweden saw the Bergman-films again when they were older. This not only results in more detailed accounts but they also identify differently, while at the same time they remain aware of how they identified when they were young. They can recognize more now that they have lived through more themselves. Also the evaluation of the films changes. Some liked the films very much when they were young and cannot look at them today 'because they are so boring' (Bitte, female, b. 1945, Sweden). Others continue to think they are highly relevant today. For the participants in Belgium it was rather rare that they had watched Bergman-films a second time. When they did, a similar change in evaluation could be noted, and in most of these instances participants spoke of a stronger identification at a later stage (while next to non-existent earlier).

Whether participants liked the films or not had little to do with the amount of times they saw them or when. For example, a male participant (b. 1953, Belgium) recounts how the films 'have an important meaning because he portrays the imperfect human in a truthful and artistic way. Humans and their psyche are central, which is for me the ultimate value of Bergman's films: discovering one another, the talks, love, adventures, all of it is present. They are one of the building blocks of who I am today'. Other participants mention how the films, among others, have broadened their outlook on life. Different people also mention how they have carried the images throughout their life. Here, the Swedish participants have a much more detailed image of the oeuvre of Bergman and thus their liking is more nuanced. Not only was the oeuvre evaluated with more nuance in the Swedish sample, but also there was stress on the importance of Bergman as an auteur. In Belgium, Bergman is synonymous with the film oeuvre. To like Bergman means to like his films and this is static through time. In Sweden, multiple participants did not like Bergman but liked *some* of his films and this changed through time. The extended knowledge on the public figure of Bergman in Sweden influences the perception of his oeuvre.

## **Conclusion**

In this article I have explored the influence of two contexts in the reception of Ingmar Bergman and his films, domestic (Sweden) and international (Belgium). Clearly, memories are influenced by their contexts both now and then. The available information matters as well as the age of the participant when watching (cf. reminiscence bump and a possibly different evaluation later in life). Processes of canonization influence how these memories are remembered and told today. This canonization is for example reflected in the favorites participants have listed in both countries.

Many Belgian participants see the Bergman-films as part of their coming of age because of the themes of the films and the age at which they saw them. Remarkably, there is an *annexation* of the films in Belgium in terms of religion. This is in first instance due to the active role of the Catholic pillar in 'using' the Bergman-films to educate people and spread a specific message. Secondly, the secularization of Belgian society in the 1960s



together with the reminiscence bump at work for my adolescent participants, results in a high degree of identification with religious themes. In particular, religion was the only theme where Belgian participants spoke of identification.

Swedish participants evaluated the whole oeuvre much more in the light of their potential identification. This is reflected in the films they considered to be the most important. With *Persona*, for example, many participants did not identify. At the same time, *Persona* was mentioned as one of the most favorite films on the drop-offs preceding the interviews in both countries. This illustrates a strong canonization.

Different nuances can be added to Kuhn's typology on cinema memory. First, the strength of memories of images and scenes was not only intensified with negative emotions such as fear but by heightened emotions in general, also joy and pleasure. Second, how the films are related to the life of the participants was dependent on different kinds of identification. Both time and cultural proximity play a role here. Identification differed over time (younger versus now); over country (Belgium versus Sweden); and in primary object of identification (the characters versus the assumed filmmaker). These are related as cultural proximity largely increases character identification. Furthermore, place not only plays an important role in memories on cinema and cinema-going. For Bergman's films, Sweden as a sociocultural construct clearly plays a role for both Belgians and Swedes.

As presented at the outset, I have chosen to use the 'national' as a labeling device rather than a key approach in the analysis for two reasons. The first is that I focus more on outlining an art-house audience and how these differ and match in their respective countries. The second is that the goal of the article is to contribute to existing work on cinema memory from a comparative stance rather than transnational film studies. However, that I only take Belgium for the international perspective is a limitation of my study. Framing my audience more distinctly as national groups could benefit an analysis in line with current transnational trends in film studies.

In conclusion, the international reception of Bergman and his films as explored through the Belgian case differs substantially from the domestic reception. The context of reception plays a crucial role in how films are evaluated and how they are perceived through time. This has allowed us to explore interpretations and cinema memory in a different light. My study contributes to an alternative, and especially more nuanced, view on the reception of Bergman and his films, and perhaps of other *auteurs du cinema* at the time. In that sense, my findings confirm what Allen (1990) stated all along: film history cannot be reduced to the history of films.

### **Biographical Note:**

Jono Van Belle is a doctoral researcher at Ghent University, Belgium, in cooperation with Stockholm University, Sweden. Her research interests include film theory, the sociology of emotions, and audience studies. This article fits into a doctoral research project on the reception of Ingmar Bergman in Sweden and Belgium. Email: [jono.vanbelle@ugent.be](mailto:jono.vanbelle@ugent.be).

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## Notes:

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