

UC Santa Barbara

Journal of Transnational American Studies

Title

Reception, Circulation, Desire: Liv Ullmann and the Transnational Journeys of a Scandinavian Actress

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/09h5b6m1>

Journal

Journal of Transnational American Studies, 7(1)

Author

Koskinen, Maaret

Publication Date

2016

DOI

10.5070/T871030646

Copyright Information

Copyright 2016 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

SPECIAL FORUM

Reception, Circulation, Desire: Liv Ullmann and the Transnational Journeys of a Scandinavian Actress

MAARET KOSKINEN

Film is by its very nature transnational, yet historically it has been, and is still today, defined nationally, along geo-political borders. It comes as no surprise, then, that the process of globalization prompted new concepts and theoretical developments as dissatisfaction grew among film scholars as well as scholars working across the humanities “with the paradigm of the national as a means of understanding production, consumption and representation of cultural identity (both individual and collective) in an increasingly interconnected, multicultural, and polycentric world.”¹

This on-going inquiry has started a revision not only of the concept of national cinema but of traditional, nationally based film histories as well. To cite one of many recent anthologies on transnational cinema: “The assumption that the export of European and US cinema to the rest of the world, from the silent period onward, inspired only derivative image cultures has been replaced by a dynamic model of cinematic exchange, where filmmakers around the world are known to have been in dialogue with one another’s work, and other cultural and political exchanges to form the dynamic contexts of these dialogues. [. . .] Borders are seen to have been always permeable, societies always hybrid, and international film history to have been key to the process of globalization.”²

Needless to say, transnational film theory covers a wide spectrum, ranging from the local and the regional to the global.³ Initially, scholarly focus clustered around the national/transnational binary, for instance movements of films and filmmakers across international and intercontinental borders, including the reception of films by local audiences outside their indigenous site of production.

An illustrative case in point is Scandinavian (and/or Nordic) cinema, which has been characterized by various trans-Atlantic flows.⁴ One need only think of the cultural exchanges in the so-called Golden Age of Swedish silent cinema and the journeys to Hollywood of directors like Mauritz Stiller and Victor Sjöström (a.k.a. 'Seastrom'), later followed by, amongst others, Jan Troell in the 1970s and Lasse Hallström from the early 1990s on. In the new millennium two of many examples are Tomas Alfredson, whose *Let the Right One In* (2008) opened the door to directing *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (2011), which earned three Oscar nominations, and Daniel Espinosa, director of the highly successful film adaptation of the Stockholm noir bestseller *Easy Money* (2010), who subsequently directed *Safe House* (2012), starring Denzel Washington, and *Child 44* (2015). An important part of the westward flow is also American remakes of Swedish or Scandinavian films. Significantly, the Swedish original story about vampires in the bleak suburb of Blackeberg outside Stockholm, the above mentioned *Let the Right One In*, was afforded a Hollywood remake with *Let Me In*, directed by Matt Reeves in 2010.⁵

Not surprisingly, actors too have made similar journeys westward, since they often possess an intrinsic potential for working transnationally. Prominent Swedish examples include Greta Garbo in the silent era and later Ingrid Bergman, Max von Sydow, Stellan Skarsgård, and Peter Stormare. Among the most recent Swedish successes are Alexander Skarsgård (the *True Blood* television series), Joel Kinnaman (*The Killing* television series, *Robocop* 2014), Noomi Rapace (*Sherlock Holmes*, 2011, *Prometheus*, 2012), Alicia Vikander (*A Royal Affair*, 2012, and *The Danish Girl*, 2015, for which Vikander won an Oscar), and Fares Fares (*Zero Dark Thirty*, 2012).

Interestingly, however, in the last decade or so, the one-way westward tide of these trans-Atlantic flows between Scandinavia and the US has started to turn the other way. Thus, for instance, Danish director Lars von Trier shot *Dogville* (2003) in the Swedish small town of Trollhättan ('Trollywood') with international stars such as Nicole Kidman, as well as *Antichrist* (2009), with Willem Dafoe and Charlotte Gainsbourg. David Fincher even took the unusual decision to shoot, at an inordinate cost, the American remake of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2010) in Stockholm, rather than in the US, with international James Bond star Daniel Craig in the lead as investigative journalist Mikael Blomkvist. In fact, nowadays international actors have an unprecedented presence in American mainstream film, not only (and as always) the British and the Australians, but also those from China, France, Denmark—and Sweden.⁶

Clearly, then, in this global age the scales of power have started to shift. Hollywood needs to adjust to an increasingly globalized film industry in which most of the revenues no longer come from the US.

In recent years, the national/transnational binary in cinema studies, which hones in on films, filmmakers, and actors across international and intercontinental borders, has tended to take a back seat. Increasingly the regional connections across the national borders of individual nation-states have come into focus, due to film cultures or national cinemas that invest in a shared cultural heritage and/or geopolitical

boundary.⁷ Regarding, for instance, cross-Baltic co-productions between Sweden and Denmark, with American stars at that, it is obviously more relevant to speak of a transnational cinema culture as regional rather than based on the idea of national cinema. As British film scholar Andrew Higson puts it, the national model is simply “limiting,” as the notion of the transnational is a “subtler means of understanding cinema’s relationship to the cultural and economic formations that are rarely contained within national boundaries.” This is also why, he concludes, “the contingent communities that cinema imagines are much more likely to be either local or transnational than national.”⁸

Liv Ullmann: Swedish, Norwegian, Scandinavian, American—or All of the Above?

In light of the complexity of shifting borders, both real and imagined, it is certainly a challenge to find a case study that can act as a prism for issues specifically related to transnational cinema culture in a Scandinavian-US context. But one such prism is arguably the Norwegian actress and director Liv Ullmann (b. 1939), whose career illustrates precisely the major strands in transnational cinema culture—both the national-transnational binary involved in trans-Atlantic crossings and the local and/or regional trans- or pan-Scandinavian flows. Ullmann's acting career began in Norway, but she soon started working in other Scandinavian countries. Subsequently she branched out internationally both as an actress and as a director in the theater as well as film, making a particular impact in the United States. Indeed she is still active as a director, her most recent theater production having premiered in 2013 and her latest film in 2014.⁹ She has also been involved in other fields outside her artistic career, since the 1980s serving as UNICEF ambassador as well as working for the International Rescue Committee, in which she currently is vice president. All these activities have further increased her international impact.¹⁰

In what follows, Ullmann is used as a case study, mainly in her position as an actress, one prominent example among the many individual artists in film history who in hindsight can be regarded through the lens of more recent transnational theory. Thus the attempt here is to apply the umbrella concept of transnational film in a way that can cast a more nuanced light on a phenomenon hitherto defined rather narrowly in what might be called the Standard version of film history.

First, however, as Ullmann has had a long and varied career, it may be useful to provide a brief chronological overview. As her autobiography and various biographies recount, her stage career began in her hometown of Trondheim, Norway, where her breakthrough came in 1957 at age 17. Her debut in film followed two years later, and by the early 1960s she was acting in prestige stage productions, for instance playing Ophelia in *Hamlet* in Oslo, the country’s capital.¹¹

She was already well established on stage and in film in Norway before she became known, beginning in the mid-1960s, as the leading lady in the films of Swedish director Ingmar Bergman, a collaboration that continued for many years but was

especially significant through the 1970s.¹² Bergman's films have generally been received as quintessentially "Swedish," (including two films in the 1970s that were co-produced with West Germany and US-based companies), but it was nonetheless these highly nationally defined films that launched Ullmann's international reputation. Before long her career came to include appearances in American film and theater, in both of which she enjoyed phenomenal success. Lauded for her radiant beauty as well as her consummate talent as a performer, she was twice nominated for Broadway's Tony Awards, for her roles in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* in 1975, and for Eugene O'Neill's *Anna Christie* in 1977. She also starred in a musical adaptation of *I Remember Mama* (1979), Richard Rodgers' short-lived last musical on Broadway.¹³

As for the cinema, Ullmann was nominated for an Oscar for Swedish director Jan Troell's *The Emigrants* in 1972 and for Bergman's *Face to Face* in 1976, while also winning the New York Film Critics' Award for Best Actress three times, for the *The Emigrants* in 1972, for Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage* in 1974, and for *Face to Face* in 1976. She was also appreciated for her roles in American-produced film, for instance as the female lead in Troell's *Zandy's Bride* (1974) with Gene Hackman. In the following decade Ullmann made a successful transition to middle-aged film roles, often wise and maternal, for instance in *The Rose Garden* (1989) as a public defender in a Nazi-related case and in *Mindwalk* (1990) as a scientist in seclusion.

Ullmann made her directorial debut with the Danish-Swedish film production *Sofie* in 1992, followed by the Norwegian prestige production *Kristin Lavransdatter* (1995), based on Norwegian Nobel laureate Sigrid Undset's historical novels. Possibly even more prestigious was taking on two scripts by Bergman, her former common-law spouse, for the Swedish films *Private Confessions* (1998) and *Faithless* (2000), which was nominated for the Palme d'Or at the Cannes International Film Festival. Her latest feature film, an adaptation of August Strindberg's play *Miss Julie* with Colin Farrell and Jessica Chastain (the Golden Globe-winning actress from *Zero Dark Thirty*), premiered in the fall of 2014.¹⁴

It is clear even from this condensed overview that in particular Ullmann's acting career serves as a rewarding case study within the frame of the national/transnational binary. Obviously her Scandinavian persona succeeded in striking a chord in the United States, especially in the 1970s, as will be further explored below. Significantly it was at this time that she also became a bestselling author; her autobiographical *Changing* (1976) was translated into twenty-five languages and later followed by *Choices* (1984). But while Ullmann may still be best known as an actress along the lines of the national/transnational binary, her career as director is better framed by the conception of transnationality as a regional phenomenon. She not only started off with a pan-Scandinavian film, but also continued with costly prestige productions that involved Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. This is of course a highly regional affair in that the individual countries invest in a shared cultural heritage and/or geopolitical boundary, in this case regional co-production across the borders of the individual Scandinavian nation-states.

In sum, Ullmann's trajectory comprises the local, the national, the regional, and the international aspects of transnational cinema culture. A corroboration of sorts can be found in the awards that have been bestowed on her, particularly in recent years. In 2008 her hometown, Trondheim, launched a film festival in her honor, thus highlighting both a specific local connection and her national significance, since by this time Ullmann was considered a Norwegian national icon. In January 2015, when she received a Lifetime Achievement Award at the Göteborg International Film Festival in Sweden, the occasion was obviously framed by an international context but with transnationality conceived of primarily as a regional and pan-Scandinavian affair.

That Ullmann's overall career has been a success story is quite apparent. Tracing in more detail her burgeoning US career in the early 1970s can nevertheless provide a more nuanced picture by exploring some of the complications she encountered along the way. Just as interesting as her accolades—and perhaps more revealing—are matters that have not worked particularly well transnationally. What, if anything, do her failures (albeit minor or relative) say about US-Scandinavian cultural differences?

Trouble on the Horizon: Pre-Packaging and Accented Cinema

As mentioned, it was Bergman's films that propelled Ullmann's career and eventually made her a star in the United States as well as internationally. Although the black-and-white films of the late 1960s certainly blazed a trail, *Cries and Whispers* from 1971, in a vibrant color palette, was arguably the final coup, if for no other reason than that it was the first Bergman film to reach a wider audience in the US.¹⁵ When this film was nominated for an Oscar for Best Picture that same year, Ullmann was present to accept the award, thus giving her additional exposure. A sure sign of her rising star was the New York Film Critics' Award for Best Actress in the film, also in 1971.

Not surprisingly, she soon landed a leading role in the US in *Pope Joan* (1972). By all accounts this film was an ambitious attempt at showcasing her particular talents and adapting her accumulated "European" persona for the American market. When Ullmann came to Los Angeles in 1972 to promote Troell's *The Emigrants*, she was quickly contracted for two more American films, *Lost Horizon* and *40 Carats*, an adaption of the Broadway play, which both premiered in 1973.

It nevertheless became patently clear that Ullmann's first ventures into this new cultural environment were not very successful. Although *Lost Horizon* also featured other well-respected character actors of the time, most of them from Europe—Peter Finch, Charles Boyer, John Gielgud and Michael York—this did not help the reception of the film. It was considered flat and lifeless, while reviewers noted that Ullmann had obvious difficulties with her role.¹⁶ Indeed, the film is sometimes found on lists of the fifty worst films ever made. Ullmann did not fare much better in *40 Carats*, in which she played a woman of 40 having an affair with a man in his early 20s.

So what were the reasons for this negative reception? Concerning *Lost Horizon*, the core problem was that this actress of extraordinary range, well versed in many skills, was expected to do something she had never before done professionally: sing and dance. Ullmann herself expressed reservations before accepting the role, insisting to the producers that she could do neither, but she eventually caved in and simply made it for the money. Like many actors both before and since, when offered lucrative work in Hollywood Ullmann allowed herself to be miscast. Her later references to this painful subject have been characteristically humorous and self-deprecating.¹⁷

In the meantime, however, Hollywood's PR wheels churned on, for as soon as the production of *Lost Horizon* was set in motion *Time* magazine featured Ullmann in a cover story (1 December 1972), including a glowingly beautiful cover photo with the caption "Hollywood's New Nordic Star." Clearly the film producers immediately saw an opportunity of launching Ullmann as a new Ingrid Bergman. Significantly, after the failure of *Lost Horizon* the film company, Warner Brothers, went ahead with their second production with her, *The Abdication* (1974), in which she played Swedish Queen Kristina. No doubt the studio had in mind Garbo's role in *Queen Christina* (1933)—again a clear indicator of their intention of pre-packaging Ullmann.

But aside from the fact that these films were not well suited to Ullmann's talents, an additional obstacle must be taken into consideration, one that in a transnational context should be seen as a usual suspect: accent. In fact, accent had already been a problem in the transition to sound film, particularly for Scandinavians, as Arne Lunde has shown.¹⁸ Not speaking "decent" English is still a fundamental obstacle and regarded as a handicap.¹⁹ Ullmann had a clearly discernible Scandinavian accent, which was duly noted.

In this context it is relevant to consider Hamid Naficy's oft-cited concept "accented cinema," and to test to what degree it may be applicable in Ullmann's case.²⁰ This is also relevant because accented cinema has been referred to as the third major strand (besides the two mentioned above, the national/transnational boundary and regional connections across national borders) in both transnational cinema practice and theory. In Naficy's conception, however, this notion deals with diasporic, exilic, and postcolonial cinema and aims, through its analysis of the cinematic representation of cultural identity, "to challenge the western (neo-colonial) construct of nation and national culture and, by extension national cinema as stable and Eurocentric in its ideological norms as well as its narrative and aesthetic formations."²¹ Thus one might rightly object that applying this concept to Ullmann is somewhat odd, for where does the postcolonial come into the equation? After all, her case exemplifies more equally balanced constellations within the western hemisphere, while Naficy's concept is primarily meant to encompass North-South issues. To the degree to which the core of this notion deals with cinematic representations of cultural identity, it can nevertheless apply in a more general sense, without narrowing the concept to the exilic or diasporic. (In fact, in later publications Naficy himself has made an attempt at widening the concept in such a direction.²²)

In this light there is no doubt that Ullmann's cultural identity and accent in *Lost Horizon* and *40 Carats* were discerned as a handicap. At other times, however, those very features could become an asset, contributing to the transnational performance. This is true, for instance, of *Zandy's Bride*, in which Ullman was back in her element playing a Scandinavian mail order bride in the American West, at first maltreated by her bully of a husband, which allowed her to tap into her particular brand of seemingly brittle beauty and a sturdy, strong-willed, down-to-earth character. That combination is also evident in Bergman's US/West German production *The Serpent's Egg* (1977), in which Ullmann plays a cabaret singer in pre-Nazi Germany with a mixture of wide-eyed naiveté and an indomitable will to survive—and this time, her character, fortunately, is not supposed to be very good at singing and dancing. Here, too, Ullmann's noticeable, vaguely European-accented English served her well rather than working against her.²³

Interestingly, accent does not seem to have hampered Ullmann in her stage roles in the US. Quite the contrary: when she played Nora in the production of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* for the New York Shakespeare Festival at Lincoln Center in 1975 it was sold out during its entire run of eight months.²⁴ The fact that Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage* had recently been a smash hit most likely was a major factor in the Broadway success, but in this context her particular idiom was not only accepted but presumably seen as an asset, given that the play is a classic by her Norwegian compatriot.

It thus appears that Ullmann's accent and idiom served her well most of the time, at least on stage. For, as the Swedish critic Leif Zern once noted, what sometimes gives life to a role interpretation is a certain "margin of error." "All truly promising actors have some small flaw," he wrote, and "it is this tiny blemish that creates a break in the monotony. Perfection is always tedious [. . .] and it is only by means of a mysterious search for that margin of error, in that thin boundary between sharpness and bluntness, that the actor can evoke the feeling that he is visible; visible, but first and foremost, on his way to becoming visible."²⁵ Following this line of reasoning, Ullmann's flaw or idiosyncrasy, her Norwegian-accented English, eventually became a positive aspect of her artistic persona—an added value that audiences learned to appreciate.

In this context a brief comparison with iconic American actress Katharine Hepburn may be illustrative. Throughout her career Hepburn was vilified for her characteristic voice, which sometimes was compared to the metallic sounds of a chain saw. Even worse, some critics claimed, was her cultivated New England accent with the aristocratic nasal squeak and drawn-out vowels—all those *daaah-lings*, *teeehraahhblys*, *aaawfullys*—not to mention her highly idiosyncratic pronunciation of the word 'problem' as 'probb-lemm,' emphasizing the last syllable. If one might expect it in *Bringing Up Baby* from 1938, it is certainly somewhat of a revelation to hear it again thirty years later in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* (1967), as this accent invariably belongs to Hepburn herself, rather than to her fictional character(s). Yet over time, it

was precisely this particular idiom that audiences learned not only to accept but to expect, even crave, precisely because it made her different from everyone else.

Something similar could be said about Ullmann's idiosyncratic accent, and not only with regard to her reception in the United States but in Scandinavia as well. It was Ullmann who won the role of the farmer's wife Kristina in Troell's two film adaptations of Vilhelm Moberg's tetralogy about emigration to America, a much-loved classic of Swedish literature. In *The Emigrants* and *The New Land*, most characters speak Småland dialect. In this context Ullmann's clearly audible Norwegian accent was an anomaly, yet Swedish audiences not only tolerated but even embraced it. The reason seems to be that in Sweden, unlike the United States, her lengthy collaboration with Bergman had established the accent as part of her particular professional persona, pattern, and repertoire—her own unique style.

An official corroboration of sorts, although oddly inverted, as to the degree to which Ullmann seems to have been appropriated as a representative for national Swedish culture, can be found in correspondence I unexpectedly stumbled upon when conducting research for an entirely different purpose in the archive of Olof Palme, the former Swedish prime minister. It is an exchange of letters between Ullmann and Harry Schein, the founder and CEO of the Swedish Film Institute, concerning some comment she had made to the press on the Vietnam War. Interestingly, Schein saw fit to correct her: "For your information, Palme has in no shape or form talked about Kissinger and Nazism. What he has said is that the Christmas bombings of Hanoi will in their cruel meaninglessness go down in history in the same way as other atrocities in history"—and so on.²⁶ Ullmann's response was understandably rather lame, because who would have thought that the views of an actress were considered important enough for a state official to take time to admonish her, almost as if expecting her to stick to some political doctrine, as if she were an appointed ambassador.

Another official but certainly less contested corroboration as to Ullmann's position as a kind of 'honorary Swede' came in January 2015, when she received the Swedish counterpart to an honorary Oscar, the Honorary Golden Beetle Award.

Hybrid Cinemas, Hybrid Identities

What can be seen in Ullmann's case, as with other actors with foreign accents in US films, is a kind of hybrid identity, but one that involves a double movement. That is, while certain particularized elements may be declared quintessentially "Swedish" and/or vaguely "Nordic," at the same time there exist undercurrents of certain "universalizing" strategies that strive toward making any perceived foreign-ness disappear. Of course making the "exotic" recognizable has always been a crucial strategy, particularly in the US film industry, where specifically local or regional qualities tend to be flattened out for the wider (American) audience on the receiving end.

Such seemingly universalizing strategies are still set in motion as a dominant business strategy in the US, quite simply because the domestic film industry, unlike those in many other countries, never needed to accustom viewers to subtitling, instead opting for remakes. In current film research, Hollywood is even accused of favoring a “zero degree of unchallenged cultural for-me-ness,”²⁷ and a kind of “transcultural ventriloquism” when attempting to integrate “foreign talent in its modus operandi.”²⁸

But while some scholars claim that what is currently happening in a global environment is an increased de-differentiation and de-culturalization, that is a universalizing trend that mixes various cultural elements into a standard formula, others in contrast claim that more relatively intact cultural particularities exist than one would think. Whichever the case, it is still easy to agree that identity no longer is defined in terms of original nation states. In that case what is circulating is not a single meaning or “identity” but hybrid identities, in the plural—local and global, which increasingly will have to involve accent or accented cinema.²⁹ As mentioned, this hybridization increasingly affects contemporary American film, with an example like *Babel* (2006), directed by Mexican Alejandro González Iñárritu, clearly demonstrating that the Anglo-American linguistic hegemony is being undermined.

No doubt accent brings with it certain meanings and effects, not only in Ullmann’s day. Applying this discussion to a recent Scandinavian-US context, a telling example is David Fincher’s unusual decision that English and American actors in his remake of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2010) speak with a “foreign” accent, all except Daniel Craig in the lead. Inevitably the effect is that Craig retains a certain air of “normalcy” that includes a heroic male authority manifest in his speech and delivery. To accentuate this, the most despicable members of the Vanger family are played by Swedish actors whose English is heavily accented, and the über-murderer himself is played by one of Sweden’s internationally best-known “accented” stars, Stellan Skarsgård. (Significantly the only sympathetic character in the Vanger family is played by Christopher Plummer, an actor with much accumulated sympathetic credibility—and a suitable English accent.) Thus, even if the audience initially does not know (from having read the books, for instance) that the Vanger family is ideologically reprehensible, the foreign-ness of their accented English drives home the point. Indeed, while most likely not intended, the “Swenglish” accent in Fincher’s film becomes eerily similar to the Germanesque American lingo so prevalent in Hollywood’s World War II films.

In any case it is worth remembering the extent to which sound, voice, and accent carry cultural meaning, and that cinema culture of the past, like contemporary media culture, is as much auditory as it is visual.

Society, Feminism, and *Scenes from a Marriage*

Ullmann's success—and failures, too, for that matter—in the US at this time cannot entirely be reduced to her individual qualities, accent or no accent, nor is it solely the “performance of Americanness” that is essential to reach international and/or American audiences. Just as important is the converse—that is, how “we make sense of those performances that have been popular beyond the local but are by no means ‘American’ in their style?”³⁰

Even though some more or less “exotic” issues such as accent may have played their part in Ullmann's reception, just as important was everything contemporary American audiences must have *recognized*. In this case answers lie not only with particular national or “vernacular” features in Ullmann's person(a) that happened to work transnationally, but just as much with local particularities on the receiving end, where the culture at large in some way already was “ready” for the perceived foreignness or difference. In this context it becomes necessary to return to Bergman and ask which factors in American culture made it possible for his work—and by extension, Ullmann's—to fascinate film audiences in the US at that particular time.

In the 1950s and early '60s, cinema was becoming established as an academic discipline at American universities. The sophistication of Bergman's films meshed perfectly with this academic agenda: here was a trove of films worthy of scrutiny in accordance with so-called “close reading” and other interpretative matrixes in the humanities. Working in tandem with this shift toward intellectual rigor in film analysis was that influential American critics, for instance Andrew Sarris, championed Bergman and auteur cinema in general. As Sarris put it in an oft-cited article on *The Seventh Seal*, here was “the first truly existential film in the history of the cinema.”³¹ Just a year later, in 1960, Bergman won his first Oscar for *The Virgin Spring*.

Thus by the time *Scenes from a Marriage* hit the US market and further propelled Ullmann's career, certain factors had already acted as trailblazers. This production, originally a mini-series made for Swedish public broadcasting, had made television history in Sweden, where astonished statisticians noted that no less than 40 percent of the population watched the final episodes.³² The cinema feature, cut down by half for the international market, became, as Lester J. Keyser noted, Bergman's “first smash hit in America.” He continues: “[T]he first week of its release, *Variety* was referring to the box office receipts as ‘boffo’ and the American distributor, Cinema V, a company beleaguered recently by financial problems, was lining up more theaters to exhibit the film. Furthermore, influential critics gave the film rave reviews, “almost unprecedented in the history of New York journalism.”³³ Rex Reed at *The Daily News* called it “one of the most important films I have ever experienced in my lifetime.” Vincent Canby in *The New York Times* pronounced it “intensely, almost unbearably moving,” while *The New York Post* declared the film “the best, most penetrating, utterly fascinating movie ever made on the subject.”³⁴ Long lines of ticket holders, Keyser continues, “formed along Third Avenue, the Mecca of New York cinema, which

hadn't seen such pushing and shoving nor endured so many traffic jams since the days of *The Godfather* and *The Exorcist*.”³⁵

Scenes from a Marriage tapped into one of the most influential intellectual and societal movements of the period, the rise of feminism in the western world. This sophisticated “soap” for intellectuals, as the film has been called, featured a female protagonist who, like Nora in *A Doll's House* a hundred years earlier, breaks free from her chains. Significantly, one finds a fascinating corroboration of Ullmann's standing as feminist icon in a documentary about her, *Scenes From a Life* (1997, narrated by Woody Allen), which includes archival material from an event in New York where none other than Susan Sontag makes a speech in Ullmann's honor.

A contributing factor in this success story most likely was public awareness of Ullmann's and Bergman's previous common law marriage. Indeed it seems that *Scenes from a Marriage* was preceded by gossip (or at least a perception) that the film was based on this relationship, which was not, in fact, the case.³⁶ In accordance with Edgar Morin's deft observation that the most important feature in defining “stars” is to regard them as “actors with biographies,” the previous liaison, which produced a daughter but by this time had become a purely professional relationship, apparently served as a highly marketable feature in such a “biography.”³⁷

European Auteur Actress or American Star?

But to what extent is it really possible to regard Ullmann, this consummate character actress, as a “star”? Considering Arnold Huysen's notion of “the great divide,” that is, on the one hand the American and the popular, for instance mainstream “movies,” and on the other the European and the high brow, for instance art house “cinema”—is it not a contradiction in terms?³⁸ No doubt the tendency at the time was to separate terms such as “art house” and “character actor” from “mainstream” and “star,” both in academia and in culture and journalism at large. However, if one digs a bit beyond such dichotomies, the picture starts to become more nuanced.

Let us consider the idea of stardom as it is related to the notion of nationhood. In this context it has been noted that stardom includes not only general qualities, but also features which are perceived as specific to certain nations.³⁹ In this regard Ullmann's stardom in Norway, before the collaboration with Bergman, was based on what Norwegian film scholar Gunnar Iversen conflates into the oxymoron “charismatic ordinariness.” In the US reception as well, Ullmann's fresh, freckled facial features with little makeup were seen as part of her charisma, while at the same time this freshness was framed with the usual attributes of glamour, discernible, for instance, in the photo on the cover of *Time*. Significantly, a sumptuous American coffee table photobiography on Ullmann published in 1979 was called *Without Makeup*.⁴⁰ Thus Ullmann fits the more general observation regarding stars—that while recognition in a foreign country often requires (and is afforded) an air of glamour and exoticism, “fame in his or her native country is based on a real-life correlation and ordinariness.”⁴¹

It is nevertheless relevant to note that “[m]any alleged idiosyncrasies of national stardom reveal themselves very soon to be shared features when juxtaposed with corresponding cultures in different countries.”⁴² This is certainly detectable in Ullmann’s case too: what was once considered unique or exotic or just different may in hindsight turn out to be such shared features, which—crucially—the American audience recognized. This reasoning casts a light on the porousness of the notion of national cinema, and the fact that what a nation-state or the surrounding world considers uniquely “national,” in some solid or fixed fashion, is in fact not.

In this context the term “vernacular stardom” may be enlightening. It is a notion that follows from Miriam Hansen’s claim that Hollywood cinema should be imagined as a cultural practice related to the experience of modernity; while it is an industrial product, aimed at mass audiences, it is nevertheless a modernist project. What made this observation ground-breaking was that Hansen, rather than contrasting the classical or mainstream (“Hollywood”) with art and modernism (“Europe”), expanded the notion of modernism to include the popular, while also pointing out that Hollywood’s success internationally is not necessarily due to some innate “universality,” but only one of many local, vernacular popular narrative forms that happened to tap into the experience of modernity in a successful way.

It is precisely in such a nexus of “vernacular stardom” one might place Ullmann in attempting to explain her particular form of appeal. She seems situated in a kind of “in-between-ness,” in possession of just the right mix of the ordinary and the extraordinary, similarity and difference, “European” and “American,” national and transnational. In this regard she appeared on the American scene at an opportune juncture, when the dominance of commercial interests was being challenged and mainstream culture had started opening up to various “differences.”

What makes Ullmann intriguing, then, is that she cannot be regarded as *either* a “star” or a “character actress,” but as both-and—indeed a kind of auteur star. Of course such a mixed notion is more obvious in cinema culture today. For instance, Mark Gallagher has demonstrated the degree to which Spanish character actor Julio Bardem, mainly associated with auteurs such as Pedro Almodóvar and Woody Allen, also functions as “an exploitable asset in film financing, international circulation and promotion.”⁴³ If Bardem can be seen as a latter-day example of a desirable auteur star, Ullmann seems to have served a similar function in the influential auteur-fuelled western film culture of her day. In any case, as David Bordwell has noted, it is wise not to assume that art house auteurs at this time were less commercial than their Hollywood counterparts just because they were sustained by national film industries.⁴⁴

In sum, while Ullmann may be regarded as one of the quintessential 1960s European character actresses, as an auteur star her appeal worked transnationally in a way that perhaps no Scandinavian actor since Ingrid Bergman in the 1940s can match. It was presumably this quality of auteur stardom, that fresh-faced in-between-ness captured in Bergman’s famous close-ups—this most traditional of mainstream star shots, yet utilized to varying purposes in modernist art film—that Hollywood, too,

ended up desiring. Indeed, as a popular highbrow star, Liv Ullmann may serve as a kind of index to certain bourgeoning transnational developments in the cinema culture of her time, trends that have become firmly established in the current media landscape.

Notes

¹ Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim, "Concepts of Transnational Cinema: Towards a Critical Transnationalism in Film Studies," *Transnational Cinemas* 1:1 (2010), 8.

² Natasa Durovicová and Kathleen E. Newman, eds., *World Cinemas: Transnational Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2010), 4.

³ Durovicová and Newman, *World Cinemas*; Mette Hjort, *Small Nation, Global Cinema: The New Danish Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Higbee and Lim, "Concepts of Transnational Cinema."

⁴ Andrew Nestingen and Trevor G. Elkington, eds., *Transnational Cinema in a Global North: Nordic Cinema in Transition* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005); Hjort, *Small Nation, Global Cinema*.

⁵ Rochelle Wright, "Låt den rätte komma in och vampyrfilmtraditionen," in *Den nya svenska filmen: kultur, kriminalitet och kakafoni*, ed. Erik Hedling and Ann-Kristin Wallengren (Stockholm: Atlantis, 2014), 173–86.

⁶ Alastair Phillips and Ginette Vincendeau, eds., *Journeys of Desire: European Actors in Hollywood* (London: BFI Publishing, 2006).

⁷ Erik Hedling et al., ed., *Regional Aesthetics: Locating Swedish Media* (Stockholm: Kungliga Biblioteket, 2010).

⁸ Andrew Higson, "The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema," in *Cinema and Nation*, ed. Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie (London: Routledge, 2000), 64.

⁹ David Morgan, "Liv Ullmann talks directing 'Miss Julie'," CBS News, December 11, 2014. <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/liv-ullmann-talks-directing-miss-julie/>.

¹⁰ Liv Ullmann, *Choices* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984).

¹¹ Liv Ullmann, *Changing* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976).

¹² These are, in chronological order, *Persona* (1966), *Vargtimmen/Hour of the Wolf* (1968), *Skammen/Shame* (1968), *En Passion/The Passion of Anna/A Passion* (UK) (1969), *Viskningar och rop/Cries and Whispers* (1972), *Scener ur ett äktenskap/ Scenes from a Marriage* (1973), *Ansikte mot ansikte/Face to Face* (1976), *Das Schlangenei/The Serpent's Egg* (1977), *Herbstsonate/Autumn Sonata* (1978), and *Saraband* (2003), Bergman's final production at age 85.

- ¹³ Bernie Garfinkel, *Liv Ullmann and Ingmar Bergman* (New York: Berkley Publishing Corporation, 1976); Ullmann, *Choices*, 15.
- ¹⁴ Morgan, "Liv Ullmann talks directing 'Miss Julie'."
- ¹⁵ Garfinkel, *Liv Ullmann and Ingmar Bergman*, 25.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 83–84.
- ¹⁸ Arne Lunde, "Garbo talks! Scandinavians, the Talkie Revolution, and the Crisis of Foreign Voice," in *Nordic Exposures: Scandinavian Identities in Classical Hollywood Cinema* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010).
- ¹⁹ Sabrina Qiong Yu, "Film Acting as Cultural Practice and Transnational Vehicle: Tang Wei's Minimalist Performance in *Late Autumn* (2011)," *Transnational Cinema* 5:2 (2014), 147.
- ²⁰ Hamid Naficy, "Situating Accented Cinema," in *Transnational Cinema: The Film Reader*, ed. Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden (London: Routledge, 2006).
- ²¹ Higbee and Lim, "Concepts of Transnational Cinema," 8–9.
- ²² Naficy, "Situating Accented Cinema."
- ²³ Thomas Elsaesser, "Ingmar Bergman's *The Serpent's Egg*: Reflections of reflections on retro-fashion," in *Ingmar Bergman Revisited: Performance, Cinema, and the Arts*, ed. Maaret Koskinen (London: Wallflower Press, 2008), 169–70.
- ²⁴ Garfinkel, *Liv Ullmann and Ingmar Bergman*, 23–24.
- ²⁵ Leif Zern, "Se skådespelaren!," in *Venus armar: Essäer* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1989), 101.
- ²⁶ Harry Schein to Liv Ullmann, 9 May 1973, Brevsamling [Correspondence]: 676/3/2, Olof Palme Archives, Arbetarrörelsens arkiv, Stockholm.
- ²⁷ Donna Peberdy, "All the World's a Stage: Global Players and Transnational Film Performance," *Transnational Cinema* 5:2 (2014), 96.
- ²⁸ Mark Gallagher, "On Javier Bardem's Sex Appeal," *Transnational Cinemas* 5:2 (2014), 113.
- ²⁹ Lin Feng, "Glocalizing Stardom: Internet Publicity and the Construction of Chow Yun-fat's Transnational Stardom," *Transnational Cinemas* 2:1 (2011): 73–91.
- ³⁰ Peberdy, "All the World's a Stage," 96.
- ³¹ Birgitta Steene, *Ingmar Bergman: A Reference Guide* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 225.

³² Steene, *Ingmar Bergman*, 425.

³³ Lester J. Keyser, "Bergman and the Popular Audience," in *Ingmar Bergman: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Stuart M. Kaminsky with Joseph F. Hill (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 313.

³⁴ Quoted in Keyser, "Bergman and the Popular Audience," 313.

³⁵ Kerner, "Bergman and the Popular Audience," 313.

³⁶ Garfinkel, *Liv Ullmann and Ingmar Bergman*, 95.

³⁷ Tytti Soila, "Introduction," in *Stellar Encounters: Stardom in Popular European Cinema*, ed. Tytti Soila (New Barnet: John Libbey Publishing, 2009), 5.

³⁸ Arnold Huysen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture and Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

³⁹ Soila, "Introduction," 11.

⁴⁰ David E. Outerbridge, *Without Makeup: Liv Ullmann* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1979).

⁴¹ Soila, "Introduction," 11.

⁴² Soila, "Introduction," 3.

⁴³ Gallagher, "On Javier Bardem's Sex Appeal," 111.

⁴⁴ Maaret Koskinen, *Ingmar Bergman's THE SILENCE: Pictures in the Typewriter, Writings on the Screen* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010), 31.