

ABSTRACT

Dark Shadows over Folkhemmet: A Cultural Genre History of Crime Fiction in Swedish Cinema and Television
(*Folkhemmets skuggbilder: En kulturanalytisk genrestudie av svensk kriminalfiktion i film och tv*)

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This dissertation investigates Swedish crime film with a combination of genre history and cultural analysis. The main focus is how this popular genre has elucidated dark aspects of the welfare state model widely known as Folkhemmet (“The People’s Home”), since it was established in Swedish cinema during World War II.

Through the visual metaphor Shadow Images (“skuggbilder”) this dissertation clarifies how crime films cast a dark shadow over social life with fictional stories about murders and criminality. Crime is a term associated with ruptures and uncertainties, just like the concept of Modernity. An exhaustive study of all crime fiction produced for Swedish cinema and television shows how the genre continuously has reflected and commented critically on the changes in modern society.

The crime film genre in Sweden encompasses five traditions with different types of Shadow Images and point of views. The Detective Films of the 1940s to the 1960s were characterised by suspicious attitudes to the upper classes and dramatised one of the general ideas behind Folkhemmet: the supplanting of the old class society. The Psychological Thriller developed in interaction with a cultural process of secularisation and has told stories about killing with less moral certainty. Films about Criminals, depicting characters trying to “break free”, have shifted focus from a welfare state with too rigid control, to an individualised neo-liberal society. In Police Films the crime investigations have been tied to the demise of Folkhemmet and rise of a more brutal and hard to understand society. The Political Thriller reflects a more disillusioned attitude to Sweden’s public image as an ideal democracy, and how the myths of the country as a world conscience have been undermined.

Thus, the crime genre forms a dark history of failures in Folkhemmet, and convey interesting critical views on the socio-cultural transformations of Sweden. Foremost, the Shadow Images of crime films taken together reveal an altered attitude toward unpleasant social ambivalences in the welfare state. If disturbing ambivalences were moderated and censored in the 1940s, crime stories have increasingly come to portray violence and human darkness as “normal” parts of contemporary life.

Key words: crime film, crime fiction, genre studies, culture studies, Swedish film history, television drama, Folkhemmet, welfare state, modernity and ambivalence, detective film, psychological thriller, police film, political thriller.