

Swedish animated film - 100 Years

Animated children's films, commercials, animated documentaries, as well as films influenced by comics made by distinct individualists are the cornerstones this cinematic phenomenon is based on.

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VICTOR BERGDAHL WAS A SAILOR, a painter, a cartoonist, a reporter and also an author. But above all he deserves his place in history as an animator.

His first encounter with animation was in 1912 when he, by coincidence, had seen *Slumberland*, an early animated film from 1911 by the American genius Winsor McCay. The film, in fact a staging of McCay's cartoon drawings from the strip *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, gave Bergdahl the impulse to try animation himself. Of course he had no technical knowledge, but the cinema owner "explained" the secret of animation in the following words:

"The magic is brought about by letting the pictures joined together in the shape of a book dash past with the help of one's thumbs in front of the camera, to enable the optical illusion of motional pictures to be caught on the celluloid film." After that "explanation" Bergdahl's only choice was to develop a technique of his own.

And that is exactly what he did.

THE SAME YEAR HE FINISHED DRAWING his first movie, but it wasn't filmed until 1915 when the famous manager of Svenska Bio, Charles Magnusson, realized the potential of animated films. The film is *The Magic Potion (Trolldrycken)*. The bizarre contents and abstract graphic elements places it at least fifty years ahead of its contemporary animations.

The "leading character" of the film is alcohol, which continued to play an important role in the films of Bergdahl and probably in his life, too. Bergdahl was soon to create "the drawn pictorial joke" about his alter ego Captain Grogg, a discarded sailor with a pug nose, permanently armed with a pocket flask that often helps him out from difficult situations and dire straits.

Captain Grogg was in fact the first true animation of the European continent with a recurring character. In all there were thirteen episodes with the liquor-loving Grogg. Rather frank erotic passages, jokes and innovative animation made Bergdahl famous even abroad, especially in Germany and Soviet. The masterpiece above all among his pictures is *Captain Grogg had his portrait done (Kapten Grogg skulle porträtteras)* from 1917. Here Bergdahl used both live and drawn pictures in an utterly complicated method of double exposure, a technique developed in the studio of Julius Pinschewer around 1910.

With Bergdahl, but also his contemporary colleagues like Emil Åberg and M R Liljeqvist, Swedish animation got to a striking start.

A SWEDISH ANIMATOR WITH A DIFFERENT IDEA on animation was Viking Eggeling, born in 1880 in Lund but moved to Germany at the age of 15 in search of jobs and education. Eggeling became an avant-garde artist who also was interested in animation. His only completed animated work *Symphonie diagonale* (1924) has been of vital importance in abstract animation. Here geometric shapes come to life in symbiosis with rhythm and music, forming what Eggeling called a "universal language". His work attracted attention of the most respected art and film critic and is considered as a very pinnacle of experimental animation from the 1920s. Unfortunately just two weeks after the first screening of *Symphonie diagonale*, on May 19, 1925, Eggeling died.

However, Bergdahl got an unusual successor in Arvid Olsson, who was the most prolific film animator in Sweden since the 1930's until the 1950's. As a young student in Paris in the 1930's he became interested in animation. Back in Sweden he devoted his time to the commercial animation. Olsson created the first Swedish animated film with sound track, a humorous commercial about Swedish monetary value, *The lunar eclipse of the kruna (Kronans Månförmörkelse)* in 1931. In 1934 he became the first Swede to work with colour film in professional way. Apart from hundreds commercials he animated some election campaign films for the Social Democratic Party.

Cartoonists Robert Högfeldt and Einar Norelius, who learned animation from Bergdahl, achieved another great success in the early period. They produced a Disney-inspired film *Bam-Bam, so toktas trollen (Bam-Bam and taming the trolls)* in 1934. The film, which had a synchronized sound as well as a soft and smooth animation laid the foundation for what would become the first dominant genre in Swedish animation, animated children's film. Shortly afterwards, Norelius started his ambitious new project - a long animated film based on Selma Lagerlof's book *Adventures of Nils Holgersson through Sweden*, but the war put an end to this ambitious plan.

AFTER THE BREAK CAUSED BY WW2 ANIMATIONS PRODUCTION restored since the mid-1950s. During the coming years, Nils Holgersson, Alfons Åberg, Peter-No-Tail, Laban, Pettson and Findus, Bamse and other popular characters from children's literature became heroes of TV series and animated features. Alongside the former Czechoslovakia, Sweden was actually one of the European countries with, relatively speaking, most animated feature films, which were almost exclusively produced in the Disney inspired cell animation technology. Thanks to such a considerable production Gunnar Karlsson, Stig Lasseby, Olle Hallberg, Tor-Erik Flyght, Rune Andréasson, Jan Gissberg and Per Åhlin as a leading figure built the second-generation professional animators. Thanks to television, a new market for animated children film, several companies specializing in animated films started. As a typical product for television animation one can take Olof Landström's and Peter Cohen's classic children's programme, *Kalle klättreredd (Kalle's climbing tree)*, with seven year Old Kalle laying in his apple tree thinking about life and love, with Grandpa sitting below, reading a magazine.

WITH HIS ENORMOUS CONTRIBUTIONS TO SWEDISH ANIMATION Per Åhlin appears as Bergdahl's rightful heir. He is one of Swedish foremost and most beloved, animators making everything from short films, commercials and TV series to features. In the early 1960s he got the chance to make animated vignettes on various television programs, where he began his collaboration with Hasse Alfredson and Tage Danielsson, the team behind *In the Head of an Old Man (I huvet på en gammal gubbe, 1968)*, an animated feature not intended for children. It is a satire of the Swedish welfare state, produced with humour and the human kindness. Film is situated in an old people home and deals with picture from memories of its inhabitant the old age pensioner Johan.

Per Åhlin distinguished primarily by his cartoons that are characterized by carefully studied figures and an Åhlin-typical twisted and curvy line (as if he was sitting in a swivel chair as he draws). His animation and drawing style was totally in tune with the most modern trends in the contemporary world of animation, enriched with distinct Scandinavian traits and feelings. International fame got Åhlin with *Dunderklumpen* (1974), which was also a feature film with mixed cell animation and live-action based on the book *Spells* by Beppe Wolgers. The film took four years to produce, but it paid off: *Dunderklumpen* became a huge box office success both in Sweden and abroad, and for this film Åhlin was awarded a Guldbaggen which is Swedish national film prize. Then came 23 minutes short film *Karl-Bertil Jonssons Christmas Eve (Sagan om Karl-Bertil Jonssons julafton)* that is shown on national television in Sweden every Christmas eve since its premiere in 1975. With films that followed since then Åhlin became one of Europe's animation giants in the field of animated features.

DESPITE THE FINANCIAL CUTS THAT HIT TELEVISION IN THE 1970s became a period when children's film bloomed so strong that even today in the country exists an idea of animation as "something for children."

Johan Hagelbäck, who is one of Swedish most influential animators, began his successful career at that time. His peculiar productions have amused children and grownups alike. He has created several shorter series for children and participated extensively in the SVT children's program. Hagelbäck made a series of short and sometimes almost mid-length animated children's films as *Who will comfort Toffle? (Vem ska trösta knyttet?, 1980)* based on Tove Jansson's classic picture book. Besides this immense work with children's film he created even some personal and some wayward short films intended for adult audiences. One of his most famous characters is Charles Nonsens who was first seen in the TV. *Fish and Chips* was one experimental film for adults and it has, among other things, been exhibited at MoMa in New York.

AFTER THE 1980s MANY TALENTED FEMALE ANIMATORS have come forward fighting for gender equality in Swedish animation. Like in other animation cultures female animators in Sweden showed propensity to experiment and use other techniques than cell animation. A special place in that context belongs to Brigitta Jansson, one at the College trained artist, who began animating with Per Åhlin in the 1970s and then continued independently. Her biggest success was Sweden's first clay animation, 13 minutes long award winning *Semesterhemmet (Holiday home, 1981)*. Animations bring to life conversations recorded at a retirement home, where the tenants tell their life stories. The film's documentary qualities laid the groundwork

for a whole genre and is still a fascinating piece of work. The talented Birgitta Jansson, who sadly passed away too early, understood that clay allows great elasticity and flexibility of the characters' arms and legs and stronger expressiveness in the face. With this film, Jansson started another genre that would also become an important identifying feature of Swedish animation - animated documentary which, simply put, occurs when an animated film is made in accordance with the standards and application inherited from the documentary.

AN IMPORTANT EVENT FOR SWEDISH ANIMATION occurred in 1996, when Konstfack, University College of Arts, Crafts and Design in Stockholm founded its department training in animation located in a small town Eksjö. Driving force behind the project was Stig Lasseby, and since 1999, also Witold Nowak. In addition to educational activities the Department also managed to conduct serious research, organize conferences and seminars, start an animation festival and a regional resource centre for film and animation, expose the students' work at various places in the world as well as publish *Animagi*, a journal for animation studies. Most important of all was the fact that over 120 pupils and students have graduated there, which changed the Swedish animation for all times.

Gunnar Catches an Owl (Gunnar fångar en uggla, 2002) by Teresa Glad is a typical student film of the Eksjö College. In a beautiful cut out animation the film tells a story about Gunnar who dreams of having an owl. One of the students in Eksjö was Magnus Carlsson who achieved huge international success. In his company Happy Life, founded in 1997 in collaboration with Peter Gustafsson, he produced the television series *Robin and Jerry and Three Friends (Jerry och vänner)*, that acquired both distributions and co-financing around the world. His style and expression coincided with a new type of animation launched by MTV whose main characteristic was a kind of pictorial nonchalance, coarse humour and interest in youth culture and way of life. 1990s is also a period when digital media replaced film technology. Digitization meant democratization in both production and distribution. Although it did not reduce production costs became animation accessible to more people and especially young people embraced this medium as a way to articulate their voice.

DIGITIZATION FROM THE MID 1990s ON increased possibilities for animated documentary which definitely became the most prominent genre in new millennium. As typical examples for documentary approach one can take *Blu-Karma-Tiger (2006)*, subtitled "a documentary about graffiti", by the filmmaker duo Mia Hulterstam and Cecilia Actis. In Birgitta Jansson's footsteps they used claymation combined with some real graffiti artist's authentic voices. Another tandem is Hanna Heilborn and David Aronowitsch, who made the film *Gömd (Hidden, 2002)*. Through animated images and documentary sound, the story of 12-year-old Giancarlo is told. He is an undocumented immigrant, hiding in Sweden, who feels hunted by everyone.

With their animated documentary *Slavar (Slaves, 2008)*, which presents two children's tragic fate during the civil war in southern Sudan, they managed to win the Grand Prize in Annecy - Swedish animation of all time biggest international success. Maja Lindström made her reality-based films in the modern 3D CGI technology. In her film *Embryo (2013)* Emma Thorsander examined state of mind of young women who had an abortion and so on.

AS THE GENRE'S FOREMOST PRACTITIONER - both in terms of the number of films and artistic and cinematic quality - appears perhaps Jonas Odell. Together with

Lars Ohlson, Stig Bergquist, Marti Ekstrand he formed the Swedish animation studio Filmtecknarna in 1981. They started out producing independent films but have also made commercial and music videos. *Revolver* (1993) was their breakthrough work. This tragic comedy about the passing of time is constructed as several short animations combined into a kind of musical collage. A collage-like structure can also be found in Odell's other films. The most interesting one is probably *Never like the first time* (2005), based on recorded interviews with four people who all tell recollections of their respective sexual debut. In a personal manner the film highlights the control our carnal desires have over our lives as well as the incredible complexity of the term "love". The film was a major international hit and award winner at, for example, the Berlinale.

Even in his other projects *Lies* (2008) and *Tusilago* (2010) Odell continued with featuring real people's experiences. Particularly successful was *Tusilago*, whose starting point was a famous court cases from the 1990s that was based on an authentic biography of the woman "A", which in the 1970s was the girlfriend of West German terrorist Norbert Kröcher.

As one of the most consistent creators of this extraordinary genre Odell has proven that the animated documentary has come to stay in the Swedish cinema.

Alongside the animated children's films and documentaries can perhaps discern a third aesthetic tendency. Among the more recent films, arising Thus since the 1980s, is also reflected an influence that comes from the Swedish modern comics for adult audiences. The series and animated films that adapt that aesthetics are diverse, personal, something dark and pessimistic. These films are usually satirical and even class perspective is present. A long series of animators, from Hakan Westford, Annika Giannini and the alignment perhaps the foremost representative of Max Andersson belonging to this flow. A dark nightmare about a nail baby, a child with nails in its head, ruling a bizarre kingdom. Inspired by Svankmajer's surrealist animation comic artist Max Andersson made several nightmarish short films by using mixed media. One of the most recent international success of the series inspired animation became *Miss Remarkable* (2010) by Joan Rubin Dranger made after the cartoon series of the same title.

IN THIS CENTURY'S FIRST DECADE something that appears to be a small renaissance occurred in Swedish animation. One of younger animators that distinguished himself was Gothenburger Johannes Nyholm who, with his formidable energy appears as something of a one-man army who both directs and produces his films as well as a number of music videos. Already his very first professional movie, *Puppet boy* (*Dockpojke*, 2007), became Sweden's probably most award-winning animated film of all time. With this work Nyholm managed to create a distinctive fantasy world characterized by a refreshing sense of humour. It is, however, a movie whose plot unfolds in real time, and the execution of the animation is anything but perfect. It is rather that clay figure representing the main character is the sloppy animation - you can almost see animator's fingerprints on it - and the doll looks to melt under the headlights. The film's nonchalant surface hides a serious message about modern human's loneliness and her incredible difficulties in reaching other people. Another great success was *Las Palmas* (2011) in which Nyholm combined these live-recorded scenes with his two-year-old daughter, who plays the role of Marja, a spoiled, middle-aged Swedish tourist in Las Palmas whereas other

characters are played by puppets on the same scale as she. Marja hasn't grasped the social conventions that apply when vacationing in the sun, which provided foundation for a bizarre humour.

Among others individualists one can mention another Gothenburger Jacob Stålhammar that defies the dominance of 3D animation with its playful 2D films made in a jazzy rhythm and Niki Lindroth von Bahr, Sweden's arguably finest puppet film maker presents an imaginative and detailed world that leave you wanting more to see.