



## Book review

**Van Belle, J., Ramos Arenas, F., & Peirano, M. P.** (Eds.) (2025). *Ingmar Bergman Out of Focus: Film Cultures and International Reception*, edited by Jono Van Belle, Fernando Ramos Arenas and María Paz Peirano, New York: Berghahn, 2025, 234 pages. <https://doi.org/10.3167/9781805398790>

Reviewed by **Maaret Koskinen**, Department of Media studies, Stockholm University, Sweden,  
E-mail: maaret.koskinen@ims.su.se.

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*Ingmar Bergman Out of Focus* is a valuable contribution to reception studies, as well as a timely and much needed contribution to Ingmar Bergman studies.

This is because it is the first book-length volume in English (aside from Van Belle's own 2019 dissertation *Scenes from an Audience*) that focuses entirely on the reception, rather than analysis and interpretation, of Bergman's films. But also, and not least, because it offers a fresh perspective by decentering Bergman's reception in the western hemisphere, which hitherto has tended to dominate the studies that do exist (with the recent exception of Hamish Ford and Daniel Humphrey's special 2021 issue of *Popular Communication*). In *Out of Focus* there is instead an attempt at tracing images that, in the words of the editors, transport them to "other" mental and geographical spaces – in this case, the way in which Bergman's work has been received for more than half a century in very different contexts and film cultures, for instance in Uruguay, Chile, Argentina, and India.

What these studies clarify is the astonishing degree to which Bergman's films have been "used" in forwarding various agendas. From the very start they seem to have been incorporated into larger philosophical debates that exceed cinematographic concerns, from Catholic values in increasingly secularized societies, or the importance for local cine-philia organizations during the Pinochet dictatorship between 1973–1990 in Chile. In Poland after WW2, then a Soviet-aligned Communist state, it seems that what then was called "the craze" for Bergman suited the Communist party's post-thaw cultural policy, for instance in cautiously introducing access to Capitalist products. In Uruguay, in turn, there was a "Bergman effect" that in the early 1950s turned out to be no less than a key for the construction of the country's very own film identity.

What this book, then, sheds light on, is how local film communities relate to larger concepts such as national identity and modernity, as well as the importance of the various agents in the process of auteur construction and canonization, by cultural gatekeepers such as film critics, distributors, film festival organizers, film institutions, and infrastructure at large (not least censorship boards), in the recep-

tion of a film *auteur*. But what is also highlighted is the overarching argument that interconnects the individual contributions – that “a broader understanding of film-cultural phenomena is essential to illustrate differences in institutional and sociological micro-histories of film consumption” (p. 2).

Methodologically, the various contributions in this volume expand in a fruitful way some assumptions usually identified within reception as a field of research, by seemingly paradoxically placing in its center an *auteur*. This is unusual, as studies of an individual filmmaker, on the one hand, and reception-centered research interested in for instance film circulation and exhibition, on the other hand, may seem antithetical. But, as the editors themselves point out, it is precisely the combination of these approaches that constitute an important part of the contribution of this work. Given the rich results of this combination, it is easy to agree with the editors that the history of Ingmar Bergman cannot be limited to the history of his films, although, as they note, his films fostered imaginaries “with an intensity one rarely finds among other filmmakers” (p. 1), and that this volume therefore is an important contribution to cinema history.

In addition, and equally importantly, this methodological diversity contributes to larger research questions. This diversity includes transdisciplinarity, as the contributors are film historians with backgrounds in Communication Sciences, Art History, and Anthropology, and so here one finds combinations of cultural-historical approaches within the humanities with more hardcore sociological methodologies, including oral history interviews and big data, in line with New Cinema History. Needless to say, this allows for studying reception across time, as well as on geographically separate but historically compatible audiences.

But for all the varying theoretical and methodological approaches, this volume makes for a smooth read, as its structure is well thought out. Starting with early reception studies of Bergman, it then moves to new studies on the South American reception, followed by thematic studies, such as the role of Catholicism and Communism, which is then narrowed down to the role of critics, and even fan mail – letters addressed to Bergman, which are contextualized by integrating historical reception and cine-philia cultures with concepts from star and fandom studies.

I therefore wholeheartedly agree with the editors’ self-evaluation that this volume “presents a different story, expanded to other areas, methodologically challenging, geographically decentered, and intertwined with the profound transformations of the ways cinema has been consumed, discussed and publicly considered in the last seven decades, a history that shows that Bergman’s legacy is still alive and well” (p. 10).