‘Short Film of the Year–A Nazi Rite of Passage’: Gösta Werner and the making of *The Sacrifice* (1945)

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This article reconsiders the Swedish filmmaker Gösta Werner’s experimental short film The Sacrifice (Midvinterblot, 1945) and places its production history in an ideological context. In this case study, the article shows that The Sacrifice, which depicts gruesome old Norse pagan rituals of sacrifice, threw light on the director’s collaboration with the Nazi controlled German film company Universum Film AG (UFA) in the production of propaganda newsreels and that the film evoked a debate on the representation of violence in the aftermath of World War II. While some critics accused The Sacrifice of being influenced by ‘Blut und Boden’ and other elements of Nazi ideology others praised the film for its formal innovations and it was named the Swedish short film of the year. Tracing how these practices affected the authorial discourse surrounding Werner during and after the war, the article raises questions not only concerning how other media practitioners handled this chapter of his life, but also how he himself treated the war years in the construction of his own biographical legend.

Gösta Werner’s The Sacrifice (Midvinterblot, 1945) was a controversial film—rumoured to have been financed by the Nazi controlled German film company Universum Film AG (UFA), the film presented a gruesome take on the Old Norse pagan ritual of sacrifice to appease the Gods, evoking a debate on the representation of violence in the wake of World War II. Despite the films’ canonical status in the Swedish and, to a lesser extent, the international avant-garde historiography, the production history behind The Sacrifice has been neglected and, considering the critical reception at the time, the controversies surrounding the film have been
glossed over in favour of its artistic merit. Despite having been celebrated at the inaugural Cannes Film Festival, few Swedish cinemas wanted to screen the film and it would take more than two years until it reached a broader audience. This article attempts to map the making of *The Sacrifice* and asks how Werner’s connections to Nazi Germany affected the authorial discourse surrounding him during and after the war.

**Connections**

Gösta Werner was an omnipresent figure in Swedish film culture—as a film theorist, filmmaker, and film scholar. In the standard account of his career, Werner made his filmmaking debut in the postwar period, whereupon he gained recognition as a director of sponsored documentary films and next to the well-known documentarian Arne Sucksdorff became one of Sweden’s best-known short film directors. In the late 1940s and the early 1950s, short films like *The Sacrifice*, *The Train* (*Tåget*, Gösta Werner, 1948) and *To Kill a Child* (*Att döda ett barn*, Gösta Werner, 1953) won international critical acclaim and Werner was seen as an important promising new talent. Following retirement from film in the 1960s, he went on to become one of Sweden’s first film scholars, writing books on the Swedish golden age of cinema and Mauritz Stiller. Even though rumours about his past political sympathies have been persistent throughout his career, Werner’s connections to Nazi Germany have not been explored in-depth. Here, one should note that Gösta Werner’s archive, which is deposited partly at the University Library in Lund and partly at the Swedish Film Institute in Stockholm, contains relatively few traces of his activities during World War II, and as such much of the archival research this article builds on has taken place beyond the personal archive.

During the interwar period, Gösta Werner developed a close relationship to Germany. In September 1929, he became a founding member of one of the first film societies in Sweden in his hometown Lund. Historians have shown that many students and faculty members at the two prestigious universities in Uppsala and Lund were drawn to National Socialism at this time. Even though Lund Film Society occasionally screened Nazi propaganda films, which were sent to them from the German Legation in Stockholm and Copenhagen, their programming was eclectic and propaganda from other countries, such as the Soviet Union, was also part of their program. However, their relationship to the leading German film company UFA would have a strong impact on Werner’s career trajectory. Following an invitation from the company, Lund Film Society travelled twice to Nazi Germany, first in 1935 and then in 1938. During these trips, Werner not only gained insight into German film production, but he also became acquainted with UFA’s influential press chief Carl Opitz. Given that Werner was a diligent journalist at this time – writing about 30 pieces on German cinema in influential Swedish film journals – it is possible to trace the impact that Nazism had on him, and in many articles he wrote positively about the International Film Chamber (IFC) and expressed admiration for certain characteristics of the so-called ‘new Germany’.
In the past decade, scholars have paid increasing interest to the expansive German film policy throughout Europe during the war. As film historians Roel Vande Winkel and David Welch argue, much of this research has focused on film politics in Nazi Germany and the occupied territories where domestic production was subject to German censorship. This has led to a neglect of the country’s film policy in non-occupied territories, such as Italy, Spain and Sweden, where Nazi Germany had no direct influence over policy or content but were forced to compete against other domestic and international productions. As Vande Winkel and Welch note, the German film industry tried to expand its influence over such states: ‘this process, driven by propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels, not only represented an economic takeover, but also had important cultural and political implications. What has been lacking, however, is concrete information on the success and failure of the Third Reich film industry to influence, infiltrate or take over the film sector of such countries.’

Given that Sweden was a ‘neutral’ country, much attention was paid to the propaganda war taking place in Swedish cinemas, not least from a German perspective. Following changes in the Swedish film censorship laws, UFA’s Swedish subsidiary AB Ufa-film, which previously mostly was engaged in the distribution and marketing of German films and newsreels, decided to start in-house production of a Swedish language newsreel in the fall of 1941. Subsequent to the outbreak of World War II, the state apparatus paid much interest in foreign newsreels’ propaganda effects, and The Swedish Board of Film Censorship made different changes to the Cinema Decree (Biograförordningen) that effectively prohibited the import of newsreels that had been dubbed, subtitled abroad or had foreign voice-overs.

Initially, the Swedish language Ufa-journalen gained much attention, and the inclusion of Swedish segments on sporting and cultural events, juxtaposed with images from the ongoing war’s different fronts, was highlighted in the Swedish press. Typically, Ufa-journalen would be screened alongside Swedish and foreign newsreels in special short film theatres, or as pre-films to Swedish or other international feature films. While there are no systematic studies of the circulation of newsreels in Sweden, previous research shows that Sweden allowed British, French, American, German and Soviet newsreels to be screened throughout the war.

My research shows that Werner worked as a freelance editor of Ufa-journalen, combining the shooting of original footage in Sweden with the editing of images from the war. Besides working with Ufa-journalen, Werner also made his actual debut as a film director under the auspices of UFA with the short film Sommarvind (1942), which went on to be screened as pre-film to the popular Swedish director Hasse Ekman’s comedy Lyckan kommer (1942). Despite the setbacks on the battlefields, the propaganda newsreel Ufa-journalen was circulated in Sweden until the very end of the war. A travel diary from Werner’s visit to German film studios in Berlin, Munich, Vienna and Prague in October 1944 shows that he continued to work with the newsreel until late stages of the war. Moreover, the Bescheinigung that the Propaganda Ministry afforded him during his stay indicates that he had a privileged position in the production of film propaganda intended for a Swedish audience.

World War II has been described as a watershed, a crossroads in twentieth century European history. In contrast to many other European countries Swedish
society did not experience major turmoil following the end of the war – parliamentary democracy was intact, there were no major constitutional reforms and there were no trials against collaborators – something which historian Johan Östling, drawing on a survey of a large body of writing on Sweden and the Second World War, argues fundamentally shaped the way Nazism was treated in the post-war years.22 Furthermore, using sociologist Erving Goffman’s theories on stigma, Östling argues that many Swedes active in the public sphere, from the geographer Sven Hedin to the actress Zarah Leander, were stigmatized and suffered to a different degree from their connections to Nazism.23 The Second World War also made a deep impression on the climate in the post-war Swedish film industry. As Ingmar Bergman comments in his autobiography The Magic Lantern (1989):

When I went to Gothenburg Municipal Theatre the year after the end of the war, there was a deep rift between, on the one side, the German Ufa newsreel commentators, the organizers of the Swedish National Film Chamber and their usual fellow-travellers and, on the other, the Jews, the anti-Nazi followers of Segerstedt, the editor of the pro-Allies Gothenburg newspaper, and the actors with their Norwegian and Danish friends […] They sat in an atmosphere thick with mutual loathing24

While many film scholars have mapped the connections between the German and Swedish film industries in the past, focusing also on mapping the production and distribution of Nazi newsreels, less emphasis has been placed on individual filmmakers’ entangled positions and their post-war experiences.25

In the post-war period, critical voices questioned several famous European filmmakers for their connections to Nazi or Fascist institutions during the war. Italian director Roberto Rossellini, for instance, gained his breakthrough directing a number of feature films for the Italian military, including La nave bianca (1941) and Un pilota ritorna (1942), and together with L’uomo dalla croce (1943) these films are sometimes referred to as the Fascist trilogy.26 G.W. Pabst is another internationally renowned filmmaker who received criticism after the war. After a failed venture in Hollywood, Pabst returned to Europe and made two historical dramas, Komödianten (1941) and Paracelsus (1943), in Austria during the war.27 Much like Rossellini, Pabst was able to move on after the war and many of his post-war films, such as Der Prozess (1948), Es geschah am 20. Juli (1955) and Der letzte Akt (1955) have been interpreted as rejections of Nazism.28 From an international point-of-view, then, Werner is by no means the only European filmmaker with a challenging ideological background to become well-established after the war. However, I argue that the controversies surrounding the production and the critical reception of The Sacrifice shines light on some of the particular ambivalences that permeated the post-war treatment of Nazi affiliations in the Swedish film industry.

Production

The thirteen-minute short film The Sacrifice constitutes Gösta Werner’s most famous and canonized film. In the book A History of Swedish Experimental Film Culture
The film is described as his main contribution to the history of Swedish experimental film along with his work as a film theorist. Henrik Orrje goes further to argue that The Sacrifice ‘can be seen as an introduction to a new epoch in Sweden in which artists and writers would explore the medium of film alongside poetry and painting.’ In The Long View (1974), documentary filmmaker and historian Basil Wright positions Werner alongside Bergman and Sucksdorff as Sweden’s most interesting filmmakers during the 1940s and 50s and especially he praises The Sacrifice: ‘it is a piece of pure cinema, spare, economic, tailored to the barest necessities of the medium.’ Other scholars dealing with Werner’s career as a filmmaker have wrongly labelled the film his debut and afforded it great importance as an emblem of his views on film style and aesthetics.

The Sacrifice was shot during a few freezing nights in Stockholm in March 1944. Long before production began, Werner started to collect articles and literature on the Old Norse pagan ritual to appease the Gods that, according to the mythology, took place in the Winter months during the darkest days of the year. The filmmaker himself cites anthropologist James George Frazer’s work on mythology, and especially The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion (1890), as an important source of inspiration. While the pagan ritual of sacrifice had not yet been depicted on film, the motif recurs in Swedish literature and art history. For example, Carl Larsson’s famous painting Midvinterblot, which now hangs at the national gallery of Sweden Nationalmuseum, features priests, musicians and ecstatic farmers participating in the ceremony. Approaching this familiar topic, Werner stressed that his treatment relied heavily on cinematic techniques, such as rapid montage sequences and extreme close-ups, thus putting the whole ceremony in a new light.

In the establishing shot, we see snow-covered stones, hills and trees while the film’s narrator, the actor Olof Widgren, proclaims: ‘Centuries ago Sweden laid barren, empty and inhospitable. Back then, one feared the unknown powers of the forest, the lake and the sky. When the winter was the darkest and the cold was the most bitter they sacrificed one of their own so that the sun would come back.’ Even though The Sacrifice stands out in relation to the contemporary Swedish short film repertoire to a high-degree, the film initially adheres to a genre convention, namely that the narrator situates the story in time and space. Notably the film does not include any dialogue but rather dramatic modernist music, composed by the musical director Björn Schildknecht, accompanies the images. The Sacrifice contains some rather explicit shots. During the ritual, there is a strong emphasis on the pagans’ faces juxtaposed with the blunt knife that is headed toward the victim’s throat. Swift crosscutting between medium shots, close-ups and extreme close-ups, adds to the intensity of the scene. When the sacrifice has been made, the blood is collected in a wooden bowl. Following this, the priest (Gunnar Björnstrand), dressed in a large wool hat with horns, a traditional pagan garment, distributes the blood by flinging it on the participants sitting in a circle around the victim. Here, we see several shots containing graphic nudity. Combined with the blood from the sacrifice, these shots appeared as quite gruesome and sensationalistic.

After the bloody ritual has ended, a festive atmosphere ensues. In medium long shots and medium shots, the people who are gathered by the fire are consuming large
pieces of meat. In the following shots, the music is intensified and close-ups reveal the ecstasy of the heathens. In these scenes, strong shadows accentuate the participants’ eyes, mouths and cheekbones. The use of long shutter speed creates motion blur reminiscent of a Daguerreotype effect. In this sense, Sten Dahlgren’s cinematography, a versatile film worker that Werner would cooperate with for 20 years, gives an expressionistic impression. In the final scenes, the film refers back to the beginning. The light flows from the sky, the snow is glistening and the narrator announces the return of the sun. From a stylistic point of view, the film’s ending has more in common with contemporary newsreels and short films than with the contemporary experimental or avant-garde film.

Already during production, Werner’s connections to UFA’s Swedish subsidiary gained attention. First of all, rumours were spread in the left-wing press. In March, for example, the social democratic newspaper Morgon-Tidningen, formerly Social-Demokraten (1885-1944), featured a report about the shooting with the headline: ‘Mid-winter sacrifice for thirteen hours’, quoting a disgruntled extra’s insider observations. The article claims that UFA acted the film’s producer and that a number of men from the ‘Deutsch-schwedische Kulturgemeinschaft’ wearing jackboots were present during the shooting of the outdoor scenes. Further, the unsigned article ascertained that ‘It was a propaganda piece, where the new theology played some kind of role.’ Soon after the publication, Werner contacted the paper’s film critic Nils Edgren, the signature Moje, who he knew previously from their activities in the members club The Swedish Film Club (Svenska filmklubben). In the director’s personal archive, there is a written statement denying the involvement of UFA, claiming that it was an altogether Swedish film production. However, Morgon-Tidningen never published the denial.

Judging from surviving records from the film production, no evidence points to UFA supporting The Sacrifice financially. However, one should note that the Swedish subsidiary Ufafilm were forced to dispute an invoice that the film studio Centrumateljéerna had sent to the company instead of Werner. In the letter, which has been preserved in Werner’s personal archive, the company writes: ‘We want to stress that the film in question is entirely editor Werner’s private affair.’ Invoices, contracts with actors and the rental agreement with the film studio was made out to Werner, something that supports the thesis that he produced the film independently. Despite being an independent production, The Sacrifice has a relatively high production value. Beyond material costs – the film was shot and distributed on 35 mm film despite the existence of cheaper technology – one should note that the film also makes use of professional actors (as opposed to amateurs) which made the expenses rise steeply. For instance, Werner solicited Henrik Schildt, who was engaged at The Royal Dramatic Theatre Dramaten, and upcoming actor Gunnar Björnstrand, who would later become internationally famous for his work with Ingmar Bergman, to play the lead roles. Therefore, Werner was not able to bank roll the film himself. Instead, he received a loan from one of the owners of the production company Kinocentralen, Carl ‘Kino-Anders’ Andersson. This, in turn, adds to the intricacies surrounding the production of The Sacrifice given that Kinocentralen’s laboratory was in charge of the actual development of the propaganda newsreel Ufa-journalen during parts of World War II.
Reception

Even though the Swedish film censorship agency Statens Biografbyrå approved the film for public screening already in May 1945, and gave it the highest age rating (15 years old), it would take almost a year until The Sacrifice was screened in Sweden for the first time and even longer before it was screened in Swedish cinemas. The film was first shown at the international film congress in Basel, Switzerland in September 1945, gaining little attention in the press. A few months later, in January 1946, the film was screened in Sweden for the first time, at the film society in Uppsala. The Swedish film society movement gained its momentum during the interwar years, but by continuing to screen obscure and censored films it also served an important function in the post-war era. The fact that The Sacrifice still was not available to larger audiences was noted in the press: ‘The film has been sold to France and Switzerland and will probably be screened also in Swedish cinemas—when the Stockholmian programming coordinators’ traditional fear of anything innovative has been curbed.’ A week earlier Werner had also voiced his critique against the mainstream film industry: ‘The film got raving reviews […] but Sweden is more careful. The Swedish distributors are afraid of experimental films’. However, these public statements did not immediately help The Sacrifice gain distribution.

The film remained in the vaults until the Swedish Charlie Film Award gala, a precursor to Sweden’s Golden Bug Award (Guldbaggen) organized by the daily newspaper Afton-Tidningen, in May 1946. Without having been screened in Swedish cinemas, The Sacrifice won in the category best short film of the year. Afton-Tidningen’s film critic Stig Almqvist, who co-founded the Lund Film Society together with Werner, was the head of the jury and he praised his friend’s work and noted that he was anything but a run-of-the-mill-filmmaker: ‘He often goes back to the essentials of the silent film era, to the expressiveness of moving images.’ Other critics celebrated Gösta Werner as the biggest hope for Swedish avant-garde cinema. Prior to the film gaining wider distribution, then, The Sacrifice had gotten much positive criticism.

However, the reception was split, and shortly after Werner had received the Charlie Award, he was once again criticized for his ties to UFA and Nazism. The periodical Stockholms Extrablad, which in the post-war years frequently highlighted Swedish connections to Nazi Germany, described the film as ‘a nazi rite of passage’:

One of the German’s most diligent propagandists during the war, former newsreel editor at UFA, Gösta Werner, has recently been awarded the most prestigious Swedish film award, the Charlie, for a short film, which has been planned and made during his time working for the Germans. The film, which is faithful to Nazi ideology, has without a doubt been seen a rite of passage foreshadowing further advancement in German-Swedish film industry […] After having made guest appearances as a head of advertising and as a translator at several Swedish and American film companies, UFA hired Gösta Werner as a newsreel editor at a point in the war when the company had a difficult time finding staff. He was the one who week after week wrote the Nazi propaganda clichés that UFA-journalen served the Swedish people. At the
same time as he was making up stories about a German counter offensive, he finished his now prize-winning short film *The Sacrifice*. It became a film in the spirit of the master race. Like UFA’s patrons, the Swedish propagandist believed that ‘violence is needed for light and happiness to return to the world’.51

In this context, *The Sacrifice* was seen as a reflection of certain central elements of Nazi ideology. Whereas other newspapers had discussed the context within which the film was made, *Stockholms-Extrablad* attacked Werner as an individual. In other words, he was condemned as a collaborator and a propagandist.

Despite receiving the Charlie award, *The Sacrifice* did not gain distribution in Swedish cinemas in 1946. During this time, Werner continued his attempts to locate international exhibition venues. In September-October 1946, the first inaugural Cannes Film Festival was organized and Werner succeeded to get *The Sacrifice* entered into the competition at a late stage.52 While the film was not included in the original selection, Werner got representatives of The Swedish Institute, a joint public slash private non-profit association centered on marketing and promoting Swedish culture, industry and nature, formed in the wake of World War II, to try to convince the jury.53 Some of the Swedish journalists that covered the competition reacted to the participation of *The Sacrifice*. Sven Jan Hanson, writing under the pseudonym Filmson, a famous critic at one of the leading evening newspapers *Aftonbladet*, highlighted Werner’s former employee in his report from the festival: ‘Gösta Werner, formerly at UFA, has thanks to Rynell and Strömberg [The Swedish Institute’s representatives, authors notes] and his own energy gotten permission to screen *The Sacrifice*.’54 Hanson also taunted Werner in his next report: ‘A simple Swedish idiot when it comes to politics, that just listened to the applauses after Gösta Werner’s *The Sacrifice*, with its heathen stench of the old Germanic people’s Blut und Boden’, whereupon the writer continued by describing a few other films in the short film programme.55 Blut und Boden (Blood and Soil) was a Nazi philosophy signifying the bond between Germans and their land and the slogan captures the Nazi view on nationalism and racial purity. Even though many well-known figures in Swedish film culture respected Werner for his knowledge about film theory and for his artistic ambitions, others did not hesitate to use his past against him.

Following the end of World War II, Gösta Werner became the editor-in-chief of the influential trade journal *Biografbladet* and in this sense he occupied a quite prominent position in the Swedish cultural landscape. Between 1945 and 1952, Werner and others transformed the publication from a predominately technical and economic journal into a forum for debate on films with an artistic sensibility. During the time that he edited *Biografbladet*, contributors included important figures in Swedish film culture like the playwright and experimental filmmaker Peter Weiss, the director Ingmar Bergman and the young critic Harry Schein who would later become founder of the Swedish Film Institute in 1963. In the winter issue from 1946, Werner wrote a long report from Cannes where he dismissed his competition in the short film section as ‘mere reportage’.56 He argued that *The Sacrifice* and his country man Arne Sucksdorff’s *Shadows in the Snow* (*Skuggor i snön*, 1945) stood out: ‘Even though I partly speak on my behalf I truthfully have to
underline that both films enjoyed great success […] They did not merely record something, they framed their subjects. The international audience was very sensitive about that and applauded all attempts to innovate.57 Reports in the press also noted the positive international reception.58 Along with the report, Biografbladet published approximately 20 pictures from The Sacrifice that had been copied from the filmstrip. Many of the words that Werner used to describe the film scenes—’pagan’, ‘ecstatic’, ‘barbarism’—were strongly associated with Nazism and drawing on Östling’s argument these concepts can be seen as tainted and delegitimized in the Swedish post-war public discourse.59 Even though Werner suffered accusations of having been a Nazi sympathizer, he did not alter the description of the film, something which could be interpreted either as naiveté or as a sign of his never-ending self-confidence.

More than two years after the Swedish censors approved The Sacrifice, the film got widespread circulation in Sweden as a pre-film to the Italian drama Shamed (Preludio d’amore, Giovanni Paolucci, 1946). Even though some critics noted that the film caused unease among parts of the audience, it generally got favourable reviews from Swedish critics.60 Stig Almqvist once again praised the film’s originality and Sweden’s largest and most influential film magazine Filmjournalen called the fact that the film had been held back for years a shame: ‘The public screening of Gösta Werner’s The Sacrifice […] does not only repair a Swedish programming scandal but it also constitutes a film historical event […] Werner has learned that no one is a prophet in one’s own homeland [Swedish proverb, authors notes] and yet he is one of the most original filmmakers in Swedish film today.’61 Particularly, Swedish film critics lauded the form of the film and the director’s artistic ambitions.

The critics outside of the film culture sphere, however, were not as jubilant and once again the reception was split. In the influential evening newspaper Expressen, famous for ransacking and investigating Swedish connections to Nazi Germany in the post-war period, both The Sacrifice and Werner himself were strongly criticized.62 On the editorial pages, Expressen argued that the film showcased traces of the Nazi Blut und Boden-ideology. The editorial board, headed by the famous Ivar Harrie whose antifascist pathos was well known,63 also highlighted Werner’s involvement in German propaganda during the war:

To showcase the slaughter of a man is not a legitimate task for a film, even if the slaughter is being carried out a thousand years ago (with a flint knife from The Swedish History Museum) and is being portrayed through an artistic lens […] At this point we are tired of human slaughter. We experienced more than enough of that in among other things the triumphant UFA newsreels that the senseless mr. Werner allowed himself to edit during the war […] The Sacrifice was prepared for years, long enough for the film to initially have been conjured as a study in Blut und Boden or as a venture in UFA Nordism.64

In this article, Werner’s connections to UFA came to light once more. Notably, Expressen, which was founded in 1944, wrote critically about the newsreel Ufa-journalen toward the end of the war and their confrontation with German propagandists and collaborators continued in the first post-war years.65
Furthermore, the editorial argued against Wortzelius’ positive writing about the film’s immersiveness and ability to evoke instinctive, emotional reactions: ‘Feeling without reflection is an unusually ill-advised principle, and many south of the Baltic Sea are now contemplating its nasty consequences.’66 In the final paragraph, the authors questioned Werner’s judgement: ‘human sacrifice occurred into the Viking Age. They were resumed during the Nazi age, in larger scope and in different forms. To make a film like The Sacrifice during this time shows, at best, a lack of taste and judgement. At worst, it indicates something else.’67 Just like when Werner was confronted in Morgon-Tidningen and Stockholms Extrablad the accusations were met with silence from the filmmaker. This type of extensive and explicit attacks on his character ended with the article in Expressen and from there on the criticism was much more subtle and insinuating. When the film gained its premier in Gothenburg in the spring of 1948, for example, no Nazi connections were mentioned, but several newspapers wrote negatively about the film. For example, the Social Democratic newspaper Ny tid praised the cinematography but noted that the film had an ‘appalling tendency’ and the liberal Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfartstidning, whose former editor Torgny Segerstedt famously took a strong stand against Nazism during the war, dismissed the film as a ‘failure’ and called it ‘affected and macabre.’68

**Historiography**

The ambivalent reception in Sweden did not affect the international reputation of Gösta Werner or The Sacrifice. Several years after the first screening, the film was still distributed abroad and it gained widespread circulation in film societies, film festivals and cinemateques, of which many had strong ties to the contemporary avant-garde. For example, Iris Barry, curator of the film department of the New York Museum of Modern Art, acquired The Sacrifice after having been impressed by it in Cannes.69 At MoMA, the film was screened periodically, something which Swedish newspapers reported on.70 Werner’s film was also exhibited during the legendary experimental film festival Festival international du cinéma experimental in Knokke-le-Zoute in Belgium in the summer of 1949.71 The film was not only considered aesthetically innovative but it also combined nudity and violence, something that increased its appeal on the film society scene.72 During the 1940s and 50s, The Sacrifice was screened in the United States, Great Britain, France, Ireland, Denmark and The Netherlands. For this film, film festivals and film societies were the only viable exhibition venues, something which the correspondence between Gösta Werner and Cecil Cattermoul, a British distributor of Swedish films, indicates: ‘It is practically certain that because of its character, the film will not receive a showing in this country in any other way’.73 Its place in the history books further underlines the film’s international impact. For example, in the book The Film Till Now (1949), Richard Griffith, film historian and influential film curator at the The Museum of Modern Art in New York, described Midvinterblot as ‘One of Sweden’s principal contributions since sound’.74 As such, the film effectively established Gösta Werner as one of Sweden’s most promising film directors in the post-war era.
After a few years, the ideological criticism against the film was also absent in Sweden. In a similar way as abroad, *The Sacrifice* circulated for a long time in film societies and organisations pivotal to the emerging Swedish experimental film culture. An illustrative example of how the film came to be seen in a new light is Peter Weiss seminal book *Avantgardefilm* (1956), in which the author foregrounds *The Sacrifice* as one of Sweden’s first successful experimental films: ‘I do not know of any other film that so intensively projects the impression of Nordic cold and frustration … It is a magical study in human isolation and coldness.’ Weiss introduces the chapter on Swedish experimental film history with a discussion about *The Sacrifice*, followed by paragraphs about Rune Hagberg’s feature film … 

och efter skymning kommer mörker (‘… and after dusk comes darkness’, 1947), Carl Gyllenberg’s *Som i drömmar* (‘As in dreams’, 1954), Ingmar Bergman’s *Sawdust and Tinsel* (*Gycklarnas afton*, 1953) and the author’s own work with The Independent Film Group (Arbetsgruppen för film), something which pays testament to the film’s place in the Swedish canon.

Peter Weiss (1916–82) was a central figure in Swedish experimental film culture and, as Lars Gustaf Andersson, John Sundholm and Astrid Söderbergh Widding argue, he was ‘the single one most important agent in the development of a Swedish filmic avant-garde.’ Weiss came to Sweden as a refugee at the end of the 1930s. When he began writing about film and the avant-garde in the 1940s, he became acquainted with Werner and soon he began to contribute to *Biografbladet*. During his time as editor, Werner published two longer texts of him: ‘Början’ (‘Beginning’) and ‘Tysk efterkrigsfilm’ (‘German post-war cinema’). Even though Weiss seems to have respected Werner as a filmmaker, there was little interaction between him the more abstract avant-gardists in The Independent Film Group in the 1950s. As Werner noted in an interview in 1998: ‘they were even more crazy than me!’ In this sense, the relationship between Werner and Weiss is indicative of the formers relatively peripheral position within Swedish experimental film culture.

There are other examples of ways in which *The Sacrifice* was re-interpreted and re-evaluated in the 1950s. In an article that was published in relation to a screening at Svensk Experimentfilmmstudio (‘The Swedish Workshop for Experimental Film’), the poet and filmmaker Eivor Burbeck compared *The Sacrifice* to Sergei Eisenstein and Grigori Aleksandrov’s *The General Line* (*Страшный исход*, *Staroye i novoye*, 1929). In this text, she compared the key scene in *The Sacrifice* where the priest slings blood in the faces of the onlookers with the famous cream separator scene in Eisenstein’s last silent film. She argued that ‘fertility, orgasm and expressionism seems to have been an inspiration in both cases’ but that there was an important difference in terms of their disposition. Whereas Eisenstein combined ‘fertility and birth’, *The Sacrifice* combined ‘fertility and death’. Burbeck further writes that *The Sacrifice* showcases the human death drive and cites the director’s documented interest in Freudian psychoanalytic theory and an article he wrote on the death drive (‘Todestrieb’) in cinema and the arts in 1938. In this text, Werner’s main argument is that the death drive is a recurring feature in art history, but that it takes new forms of expression depending on how the artistic media change. He argued that the death drive is particularly visible in the
cinema: ‘It is clear that film – as the art form most characteristic of and dependent on time – cannot be out of sympathy with the death drive. Rather, it is to be expected that film, with its potential to both address and express subconscious tendencies, proves to be a tool both more convenient and more amenable for artists who wish to fantasize about varying outlets of the death drive.’\textsuperscript{85} The notion that cinema can speak directly to human urges and the subconscious resonates with the aesthetic principles that \textit{The Sacrifice} has been modelled on such as montage editing, fast cross-cutting and extreme close-ups. It was exactly this type of affect that \textit{Expressen} criticized when they claimed that the film mirrored Nazi sentiments. Yet when Burbeck approaches the film a few years later, the association between the pagan ritual of sacrifice and ‘Blut und Boden’-ideology seems to have faded. Instead, \textit{The Sacrifice} was increasingly interpreted as an aesthetic manifesto, emblematic of Werner’s style as a filmmaker. In other words, with time Werner’s first experimental film gained a canonical status both in the Swedish and the international avant-garde.

\textbf{Conclusions}

\textit{The Sacrifice} stands out in any attempt to summarize Werner’s oeuvre; not only is it the first and last film that he wrote, produced and directed independently but it is also his most controversial and debated film. To speak with Goffman, the split reception indicates that Werner was stigmatized after World War II. In post-war Sweden, some interpreted Werner’s connections to the film company UFA as him taking a stand for Nazi Germany. As I have shown, the film’s production was surrounded by rumours and critics repeatedly lambasted the film from an ideological perspective, something which became a burden for the filmmaker. However, one should also note that Werner was far from ostracised from Swedish film culture. After the war, Werner took command as the editor of the trade journal \textit{Biografbladet}, which Jönsson and Martin have noted wrote positively about The International Film Chamber during the war, and as such his position in cinephile environments was strengthened. In particular film critics appreciated \textit{The Sacrifice}, especially from aesthetic point-of-view, adding to his credibility when reorienting in the post-war cultural climate. Studies of the experiences of individual publicists, scholars and journalists who had strong connections to Nazi Germany have provided insights into stigmatization mechanisms in post-war Sweden. Little attention, however, has been devoted the experiences of controversial figures in the film industry. This article shows that Gösta Werner, despite his connection to UFA and the German propaganda production in Sweden, neither was criticized by fellow filmmakers or film critics nor excluded from cinephile environments, but rather he was attacked by people outside of the film cultural sphere. In this sense, the controversies surrounding his persona only affected him partially.

This article also throws light on Gösta Werner’s complicated relationship to experimental film culture. Even though Werner never was considered a central character in Swedish experimental film, like the previously mentioned Peter Weiss, he still made an impression as a cinephile and as a formally innovative filmmaker. Many of his films, such as \textit{The Sacrifice}, were not only screened in film...
societies and experimental film clubs but were also read as experimental film by critics. As a writer and editor of *Biografbladet*, Werner put much emphasis on analysing film art, something which shaped his approach to filmmaking and not least the production of this film. On the one hand, the film, with its expressive use of light and shadows, dramatic music and relatively fast pace editing, bears trace of modernist experimental cinema and its emphasis on audio-visual rhythm. On the other hand, it seems as if the film carries a didactic element where emphasis is placed on a detailed, elaborate portrayal of the rite of sacrifice, while the accompanying narrator attempts to clarify any ambiguities. Besides the discussions about the ideological underpinnings of *The Sacrifice*, I argue that this ambivalence makes it difficult to define the film’s genre and to identify its intended audience.

**Disclosure statement**

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**Notes**

5. Invitation cards to the events that Lund Film Society organized during the 1930s are available at Gösta Werner’s archive deposited at Lund University Library and in the Lund Film Society archive deposited at Folkets Bio, Lund.


Jönsson, ‘Neutral Nazism?: Swedish-German Film Relations’, 60–1.


Stjernholm, ‘German Surveillance of the Swedish Film Market during World War II’, 349–64.


The starting point of my investigation into this topic was the discovery of a five-page dossier that the Swedish intelligence agency, Allmänna säkerhetsstjänsten, assembled on Gösta Werner during the war, outlining some of his connections to Nazi Germany, see ‘Sven Gösta Werner’, The National Archives of Sweden, Allmänna säkerhetsstjänstens arkiv (hereafter NAS ASA) personal file nr. 6278. For more evidence linking Werner to Ufa’s Swedish production unit, see Letter from A.B. Ufafilms to UFA Auslandsabteilung, 4 July 1941, NAS ASA F8EA:4; Letter from Elis Sundell Aktiebolaget Ufafilms Stockholm to Universum-Film Aktiengesellschaft, Auslandsabteilung, ‘Betr. Büropersonal’, 7 February 1942, NAS ASA F8EA:4; Notes on edited newsreels, ’Redigerade utländska propagentafilmer under kriget (1941–1944)’, Gösta Werners arkiv, Svenska Filminstitutet (hereafter GWA SFI) K-50.
17. Lill (Ellen Liliedahl), Lyckan kommer på Royal, Svenska Dagbladet, 18 August 1942.
32. Bergdahl and Olsson, *Gösta Werner 90 år*.
35. The author made all translations unless otherwise noted.
37. Ibid.
41. For more information about budgets and contracts, see GWA SFI K-1.
43. Censorship card nr 68530, production company Gösta Werner, Statens Biografbyrås arkiv, Riksarkivet (SBA RA).
44. Sverige dominerar internationella filmveckan, *Dagens Nyheter*, May 9, 1945.
47. Ramek, Psykoanalys och parodi, spex och show.
52. The first edition of Festival de Cannes was supposed to take place between September 1–20, 1939, but it was cancelled due to the breakout of World War II. The first festival took place in September 1946, see *The History of the Festival, Festival de Cannes*, accessed March 28, 2018. [http://www.festival-cannes.com/en/69-editions/history](http://www.festival-cannes.com/en/69-editions/history).
54. Filmson (Sven Jan Hanson), Filmson på filmolympiaden, *Aftonbladet*, September 21, 1946.
55. Filmson (Sven Jan Hanson), Bio och svart bors bland svenskar i Cannes, *Aftonbladet*, September 27, 1946.
57. Ibid., 220.
58. Letter from Sven Rynell to Kjell Strömberg (counsellor of the Swedish legation), SIA RA F 1: 97
67. Ibid.
70. Svenska avantgarden filmer söks till museisamling i New York, August 21, 1955.
72. For example, Cinema 16, a film society based in New York curated by the famous avant-gardist Amos Vogel, exhibited *The Sacrifice* (and several of
Werner’s other experimental films), see Letter from Amos Vogel to Gösta Werner, June 15, 1959, GWA SFI K-1.

73. Letter from Cecil Cattermoul to Gösta Werner, February 16, 1949, GWA SFI K-1.


75. The Sacrifice was screened by film societies in Stockholm and Gothenburg as well as other smaller cities like Umeå, Härnösand and Eskilstuna, see GWA SFI K-1.


78. Ibid., 80.


81. Burbeck, Rene Clair, Rune Hagberg och lite Gösta Werner, Svensk Experimentfilmmstudio, 8–9, 1952, 12. For more on Eivor Burbeck, see Andersson, Sundholm, and Söderbergh Widding, 73–5.

82. Burbeck, Rene Clair, Rune Hagberg och lite Gösta Werner.

83. Ibid., 13.


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