

## An elevated feminist ahead of her time?

Mai Zetterling's non-fiction shorts  
in the 1970s and 1980s

*Ingrid Ryberg*

There are many Stockholms and the name means many things for many people. But for me it is the city of my childhood. The city of a thousand threads. The city of the silent crowds. The city with no faces. The city of no dreams. The city of a million hidden people. The city with the greatest solitude. The city of prosperity—

Mai Zetterling delivers these lines, her personal thoughts about the city of Stockholm, in a voice-over accompanying an early scene in the short film *Mai Zetterling's Stockholm* (Mai Zetterling, 1978), in which we see the Swedish director and actor in a crane, travelling up, high above a wintery view of the Kungsträdgården park in central Stockholm. The year is 1977. A Canadian production company has invited her to contribute an episode to the TV series *Cities*.<sup>1</sup> Melancholic and ironic by turns, Zetterling paints a portrait of her hometown, a city where she has not resided permanently for the last thirty years and where she obviously does not feel at home. The film's working title was 'The Native Squatter'.<sup>2</sup> Impersonating not only herself, 'author, actress, filmmaker Mai Zetterling,' as she introduces herself, but also 'author, alchemist August Strindberg' and 'author, philosopher, run-away-queen Christina,' Zetterling gives

the viewer a tour of places such as Sweden's state-governed chain of alcohol shops, Systembolaget, major tourist attractions such as the open-air museum Skansen, the medieval city centre, and the Royal Dramatic Theatre that she herself in 1942 had entered as a young acting student, soon to become movie star.

Viewing the city from her elevated position in the crane, Zetterling invokes Strindberg's famous opening lines to his novel *The Red Room* (*Röda rummet*) from 1879 by asking: 'Taking a bird's eye view over my city, what do I see?'. In this way, she also impersonates a recurrent description of herself as a stranger or 'rare bird' in the Swedish cultural landscape.<sup>3</sup> She was the movie star with an international career who re-made herself as filmmaker in the 1960s. Starting with short documentaries for the BBC, she soon advanced to become one of the first women art film auteurs in Europe. Her first Swedish features *Loving Couples* (*Älskande par*, 1963) and *Night Games* (*Nattlek*, 1966) both got a mixed reception in the Swedish press, but her third, *The Girls* (*Flickorna*, 1968), caused a scandal.<sup>4</sup> The film was infamously deemed 'a case of clogged up menstruation' by the journalist Bo Strömstedt, failed to attract an audience and was not considered worthy of the Swedish Film Institute's so-called 'quality premium.'<sup>5</sup> Zetterling's film-making career in Sweden stopped short. It took eighteen years before she was able to make her next, and final, Swedish feature, *Amorosa* (Mai Zetterling, 1986). However, she was far from unoccupied during these years. In addition to directing films such as the British feature *Scrubbers* (1982) and the children's short *Månen är en grön ost* ('The Moon is a Green Cheese', 1977), writing novels and directing theater, and forming part of launching the organization Film Women International, she also directed a number of commissioned non-fiction shorts—*Mai Zetterling's Stockholm* being one of them.

When given the opportunity to look back on Stockholm from the detached position of the 'exile director' a decade after *The Girls*, Zetterling uses a dry voice-over to contemplate the Swedish population's distanced shyness, problems with alcohol, perfect surfaces and banal dreams. Her observations recycle judgments

about the Swedish population from her early BBC documentary *The Prosperity Race* (1962), a film that just like *The Girls* had caused a scandal and even resulted in descriptions of Zetterling as traitor to the nation.<sup>6</sup> It also echoes Susan Sontag's 'A Letter from Sweden', an essay written in 1969 about Sontag's experience of Sweden while directing *Duet for Cannibals* (Susan Sontag, 1968), the first of her two Swedish films.<sup>7</sup> Sontag was invited to Sweden by the production company Sandrews and given the unique opportunity to direct two features at the very same time that the doors to Swedish film closed for Zetterling, who had also made her films under the aegis of Sandrews. This is ironic considering the devastating criticism that Sontag's films also received, but simultaneously symptomatic of a wish to launch, but failure to sustain support for, a woman auteur in Swedish film at the time.<sup>8</sup>

In this essay, focusing on Zetterling's little-known non-fiction short film production in the 1970s and 1980s, including *Mai Zetterling's Stockholm* and the infomercial *Concrete Granny* (*Betongmormor*, 1986), I discuss how a similar paradox conditioned her film-making opportunities during these 'exile' years—a period that is largely associated with the establishment of so called 'state feminism' or 'women-friendly' welfare politics in Sweden.<sup>9</sup> On the one hand, the issue of women's liberation was gaining considerable political currency and the notion of Swedish gender equality became internationally viable.<sup>10</sup> In promoting this image of Sweden, an internationally successful feminist director such as Zetterling could function as a front figure. On the other hand, the economic and material preconditions for women's film-making in Sweden remained difficult, and in Zetterling's case practically impossible. I argue that Zetterling's commissioned non-fiction shorts from this period—produced in vastly different contexts, ranging from the Olympic Committee to Denmark's Royal Greenland Trade Department—set in motion and exploited an image of Zetterling as an emancipated and progressive Swedish feminist. Drawing on Victoria Hesford's work on the American women's movement, I discuss these films as examples of the feminist film culture's

complex interrelation with the broad public, transnational contexts and political and commercial interests.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, I argue that these short films testify to a significant articulation of a distinct feminist aesthetics, characterized by the employment of strategies such as the female gaze and drag impersonation. Highlighting such notable characteristics of these hitherto largely neglected films, this essay interrogates popular accounts of Zetterling as an oppositional outsider struggling against the stream. Contesting the often-repeated idea that Zetterling was ‘ahead of her time’, I propose that this notion has counterproductively contributed to obscuring not only her short films, but also the crucial role that she played in the transnational feminist film culture in the 1970s and 1980s. My essay sheds light on this largely overlooked aspect of Swedish film history.

### Zetterling and the feminist film culture

While the harsh criticism of *The Girls* and Zetterling’s subsequent setbacks in Swedish film are well known, little attention has been given to the film’s quick elevation to cult status in feminist film culture. According to Zetterling herself, Susan Sontag was one of the international feminist icons who, just like Simone de Beauvoir, celebrated and promoted *The Girls* as a masterpiece, resulting in the film’s opening of the First International Festival of Women’s Films in New York in 1972.<sup>12</sup> The screening received a small notice in the Swedish press, commenting on how ‘The almost exclusively female audience seemed to especially enjoy a scene where a group of women throw tomatoes, eggs and pies at pictures of Charles de Gaulle, Lyndon Johnson, Moshe Dayan, Mao Tse-tung and Adolf Hitler’.<sup>13</sup> The International Festival of Women’s Films in New York was the first in a range of similar festivals through which the feminist film culture emerged, along with the launch of distribution companies such as Women Make Movies, the magazine *Women & Film* and other crucial publications such as Marjorie Rosen’s *Popcorn Venus* and Claire Johnston’s *Notes on Women’s Cinema*.<sup>14</sup>

*The Girls* was celebrated in many of these contexts, including at the Copenhagen International Women's Film Festival in 1976, where the programme criticized the film's unjust reception in Sweden and exclusion from the Danish cinema and television repertoire:

A women's film festival had to happen, before this amazing film could have its Danish premiere. It is largely characteristic of both this film and several other films by Mai Zetterling that first in the context of the new women's movement they have been pulled out in the light, understood and valued.<sup>15</sup>

In her autobiography, Zetterling comments on how *The Girls* now suddenly took her to 'Paris, Lisbon, Copenhagen, Rome, Australia, Africa and even Stockholm' and how she drew strength from this new appreciation.<sup>16</sup>

In an influential early chronicling of some of the major events and activities that the feminist film movement emerged through, B. Ruby Rich contends that from 1975 and onwards the initial activist spirit of the movement and its productive crossover between practice and theory gave way to academic specialization and a view of feminist film as 'an area of study rather than a sphere of action.'<sup>17</sup> Rich also identifies a foundational dichotomy between realist and avant-garde styles in feminist film-making, a dichotomy recurrently addressed in feminist film theory ever since.<sup>18</sup> An overlooked aspect in debates about feminist film form and the movement's institutionalization is the interaction with non-academic institutions and broader public contexts that crucially enabled and thus contributed to shaping the film culture. As I will discuss below, the sometimes unconventional instances that supported feminist filmmakers at this time were not necessarily characterized by activist or oppositional aims.

One such overlooked context that enabled crucial networking between women filmmakers was provided by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) in the 'International Women's Year' in 1975. As part of the organization's large initiative to 'promote new efforts in the struggle to end

discrimination against women', an international symposium on 'Women in Cinema' was organized in the Valley of Aosta in July 1975. The purpose was:

to provide an opportunity for women active in cinema from many different countries to exchange views on the various theoretical and practical considerations of their work, to discuss their mutual or different problems and points of view and to consider action that might be taken to improve their professional lives and the image of women projected in films.<sup>19</sup>

Among the twenty-eight delegates from sixteen countries, four came from Sweden: Mai Zetterling, Maj Wechseltmann, Bibi Andersson, and Anna-Lena Wibom. Other participants included Susan Sontag, Agnès Varda, Chantal Akerman, María Luisa Bemberg, Durga Khote, and Márta Mészáros. Zetterling led one of the two workshops, the so-called 'Money Workshop', where according to one report she suggested the creation of an international association for women working in cinema.<sup>20</sup> The proposal resulted in the formation of 'Film Women International', the main outcome of the symposium. 'Film Women International' was constituted with goals such as 'supporting the production and distribution of films that promote a new and truer portrayal of women', as well as 'to work towards equal representation of men and women in all national and international festival committees and juries'.<sup>21</sup> It was decided that the association would be based in Stockholm, headed by Anna-Lena Wibom from the Swedish Film Institute.<sup>22</sup> Undoubtedly, the Swedish delegates played a crucial role in the symposium and in the ambitious planning of 'Film Women International'. Back in Sweden, the initiative received some attention in the press.<sup>23</sup> Bibi Andersson agitated in an interview with one newspaper that: 'We must fight against films that depict women as sex objects, lovers, virgins, tarts or generally unpleasant ploys', and stated that 'the banalization of women is worse than ever. Now we must work to get rid of the clichés'.<sup>24</sup>

For unclear reasons, most probably financial, no further meetings or activities seem to have taken place under the banner of 'Film Women International'.<sup>25</sup> Instead, Anna-Lena Wibom formed part of founding the Swedish Women's Film Association in the beginning of 1976.<sup>26</sup> This organization turned into a lively platform for women's film culture in Sweden in the following decade, organizing workshops, screenings, study circles and a film festival in 1983 that unsurprisingly invited and celebrated Mai Zetterling.

Interestingly, UNESCO's International Women's Year also provided Zetterling with the opportunity to make the short film *We have many names* (*Vi har många namn*, Mai Zetterling, 1976), originally commissioned by the BBC on occasion of the Women's Year, but later adopted by the Swedish Television, where it was broadcast in April 1976.<sup>27</sup> The film is about a woman, played by Zetterling herself, who is left by her husband after a long marriage, in which she carried the main responsibility for the household and children. The Swedish reception was lukewarm.<sup>28</sup> Yet the film was screened in Cannes, and also included by the women's film festival in Copenhagen. During this same year, Zetterling was also involved in collaboration with Simone de Beauvoir who had invited her to adapt *The Second Sex* (*Le deuxième sexe*, 1949). The project was planned as a seven hour long internationally co-produced TV series depicting 'women's situation in different areas of the world, how it was, how it is'.<sup>29</sup> Zetterling stated that she was also interested in portraying 'Simone de Beauvoir's own development'.<sup>30</sup> In an interview, de Beauvoir equally talked enthusiastically about the work, praising *The Girls* and speaking about the new project's potential to raise awareness amongst women.<sup>31</sup> *The Second Sex*, just like 'Film Women International' and numerous other projects that Zetterling sought to initiate in these years, was never realized. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that apart from her setbacks in Swedish film, Zetterling experienced a kind of 'prime time' in relation to the transnational feminist film culture in the 1970s, playing a crucial part in and earning significant re-evaluation through this movement.<sup>32</sup>

## Haunted by re-evaluation

To this day Zetterling continues to be described as 'ahead of her time', almost every time her name appears in public in Sweden.<sup>33</sup> According to Zetterling herself, Susan Sontag was one of the first to make this judgment about *The Girls*, specifying that the film was 'some five years' ahead of its time.<sup>34</sup> In a mapping out of the Swedish filmography of the 1960s, published in 1977, Harry Schein, the founder and director of the Swedish Film Institute, also invoked this idea, as well as the notion of Zetterling as a stranger or 'rare bird' in her home country:

Through a use of imagery that was a bit overloaded, Zetterling's films became alien elements in Swedish film. More noteworthy is how the view of women that her films reflected, especially those that she wrote herself, *Night Games* and *The Girls*, was well ahead of its time, before the women's issue was generally accepted by the male dominated society. *The Girls* did not receive a quality premium from the Film Institute's committee, and the consequences thereof were the same as for Jörn Donner. The committee's decision in both of these cases are the only grave mistakes that have been made obvious in hindsight by our contemporary perspectives.<sup>35</sup>

Schein's statement is intriguing in its rhetorical twists and insertion of notions such as 'the view of women' and 'male-dominated society'. It says something about the popularization of such terminology in Sweden by 1977 and reveals some of the effects of calling Zetterling 'ahead of her time'. Schein suggests that by 1977, Sweden had stepped out of ignorance and generally accepted the issue of women's rights. Indeed, by then, several political 'women-friendly' reforms had taken place in Sweden, including parental (rather than maternity) leave and free abortion. Gender equality had started to become a Swedish trademark, promoted not least by Schein's good friend, Social Democrat Olof Palme (Prime Minister between 1969-1976 and 1982-1986).<sup>36</sup>

However, this presumed new progressive, ‘contemporary’, perspective on women’s rights—supposedly embraced even at the Film Institute—did not result in offering Zetterling a second chance or actually putting the issue of women’s film-making on the agenda. Rather than opening new doors for Zetterling or other women filmmakers, the effect of the dramaturgy of Schein’s re-evaluation of *The Girls* and rejection of the quality committee’s decision was to fix her at the moment in time she was considered too radical for—1968. In much the same way, the continuous repetition of the notion of Zetterling as ahead of her time and in need of constant re-evaluation and rediscovery by Swedish filmmakers and critics seems to have become a mantra that in fact does very little for the reassessment of Zetterling’s role in film history.<sup>37</sup> Rather, it has become a counterproductive feminist rhetorical figure that obscures and elides the fact that a re-evaluation and canonization of *The Girls* as a feminist masterpiece took place very shortly after its premiere, and that Zetterling played a decisive role in transnational feminist film culture. Moreover, while recurrently drawing attention to *The Girls* and the scandal of its reception, this mantra has paradoxically not urged a rediscovery of Zetterling’s filmography after *The Girls*, including her non-fiction work from the 1970s and 1980s.

Despite the long-running idea that Zetterling’s work needs re-evaluation, until 2015, her filmography in the Swedish Film Institute’s database lacked information about her work from the 1970s and 1980s. One reason for the incomplete records of Zetterling’s work in these years is the fact that many of her productions were made abroad. One example is *Mai Zetterling’s Stockholm*, a film broadcast in Canada as part of the thirteen episode TV series *Cities*. There are no known records of the film’s exhibition history in Sweden.<sup>38</sup> Another likely reason for the gaps in the filmographic records is the film historiographical privileging of the notion of the auteur and feature-length fiction films, also in feminist film theory.<sup>39</sup> The notion that Zetterling was ahead of her time indeed invokes a celebratory idea of a misunderstood genius with a distinct individual creative vision that was too radical for her backward

contemporaries. Feminist film theory, emerging in tandem with the feminist film movement in the 1970s, has predominantly focused on individual directors and issues of film style and aesthetics. The rediscovery of individual women filmmakers such as Alice Guy, Germaine Dulac, Dorothy Arzner, and Maya Deren and the reclamation of their place in film history have been central.

However, such rhetorical emphasis and celebration of forgotten 'pioneering' achievements and overseen aesthetic subversiveness invokes a notion of the woman filmmaker as an independent oppositional creative agent, hence disregarding the specific historical terms, conditions and interplays on which film-making depends.<sup>40</sup> The politics of representation in women's film-making, scrutinized for instance in the so-called 'realist debates', has largely been considered as autonomously reflecting distinct, sometimes conflicting, feminist agendas. The extent to which women's film-making has been shaped, also aesthetically, by various conditions of possibility determined by financing opportunities, production, and exhibition contexts are often overlooked. Shifting focus to the institutions and circumstances that women's film-making depended on in the 1970s and 1980s not only complicates the notions of women film auteurs and pioneers, but also challenges ideas about the feminist film culture as an independently oppositional movement.

In her work on the American women's movement, Victoria Hesford draws attention to the interplay between the movement and the broad public. Hesford examines how the women's movement has come to be remembered and summarized, in academia and popular culture alike, through one particular 'image-memory', the figure of the bra-burning lesbian feminist. This lingering figure, Hesford demonstrates, was popularly constructed in mass media as well as in activist texts through various rhetorical strategies. Drawing on Hesford, I propose that rather than being seen as autonomous products of an individual feminist's vision or as reflections of the feminist movement's various political tendencies only, women's film production in the 1970s and 1980s should be analysed as being imbricated with broader public contexts.

Unlike other forms of ‘women’s culture’ that emerged as part of the women’s movement, film production demanded considerable budgets and technical access and support, hence necessitating an infrastructure that involved a variety of instances and institutions.<sup>41</sup> Importantly, women often had to seek funding outside of established film institutions, and Zetterling is an example of this. Therefore, I contend that the films that women managed to make in these years, rather than being independently oppositional, are also indicative of what issues women were able to raise and get support for—at the time of the popularization of the issue of women’s rights and establishment of ‘state feminism’ in Sweden. Zetterling’s filmography in the 1970s and 1980s provides fascinating case studies for investigating the ways in which feminist film-making intersected with transnational contexts and national and commercial interests, as well as how Zetterling’s feminist persona, rather than being deemed too radical or ahead of her time, is set in motion as a crucial component in these films.

### Commissioned opportunities to examine masculinity

During her ‘exile’ from Swedish film, Zetterling directed a number of short commissioned non-fiction films for diverse contexts. In 1972, she was the only woman of eight international directors, including Miloš Forman, Claude Lelouch and John Schlesinger, to document the Olympic Games in Munich, resulting in the collection *Visions of Eight*. The project affirms Zetterling’s international auteur status at a time when she was not able to make films in Sweden. Her segment ‘The Strongest’ looks at male weightlifters, capturing the silent, low-key emotional drama of preparation and practice as well as the actual competition. Zetterling’s portrayal of the weightlifters is not celebratory, but rather a gentle backstage observation of vulnerability, softness, and intimacy between men. The men are recurrently framed either in large, wide shots, often filmed from a high angle, making the weightlifters appear as tiny players in the imposing and often desolate gym and arena

environments, or in medium shots and close ups focusing on body parts, such as muscular torsos and half-naked buttocks. The film is characterized by what could be described as a critical 'female gaze' deconstructing the hard surface of heroic masculinity.<sup>42</sup> As Mariah Larsson has shown, Zetterling's films in the 1960s, not least *The Girls*, saw masculinity through a critical lens emphasizing coldness, power and violence.<sup>43</sup> In 'The Strongest', by contrast, the lens is tender, almost eroticizing. Whereas feminist film-making, art, and criticism at the time was largely devoted to exposing and criticizing the superficial and submissive role of womanhood in art, literature and film, Zetterling here turns the gaze onto men and masculinity instead. In her autobiography, Zetterling writes that she turned down what she found to be the commissioners' too obvious suggestion that she should focus on the women in the games.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, as original as her approach may have been, and as much as her participation in the collection may have reinforced her feminist auteur status, the Olympic Committee commissioned the short, and it was thus not Zetterling's exclusive, independently conceived idea. The topic however did inspire Zetterling to start planning a larger, but never realized, film about the Olympics together with Lisbeth Gabrielsson, producer and commissioner at the Swedish Film Institute.<sup>45</sup>

In contrast to *Visions of Eight*, Zetterling was not the only woman invited to portray her hometown in *Cities*. Outspoken feminists such as Germaine Greer also participated, as did Melina Mercouri, who had also been present at the UNESCO symposium in Aosta. In *Mai Zetterling's Stockholm*, the sarcastic observations regard not only Swedishness, but also patriarchy and marriage. In the role of Queen Christina, decked out in a cape and feathered hat, Zetterling writes on the wall of an exhibition at the House of Culture (Kulturhuset) in central Stockholm: 'Marriage is warfare'. Through her parody of August Strindberg, an author famous not least for his misogynist portrayals of women and complicated heterosexual love affairs, the film represents masculinity in a critical spirit, much less tender than in 'The Strongest'. *Mai Zetterling's Stockholm* hence

recalls and draws from themes characteristic of many of Zetterling's previous films. Larsson highlights how the bourgeois institution of marriage, masculinity, and Swedish society are all recurrently portrayed through a critical lens in Zetterling's early documentaries and feature films alike. She argues that the controversy and harsh criticism of *The Girls* was caused not only by the film's feminist caricature of masculinity, but also by the gloomy light in which Zetterling portrayed Swedish society and the welfare state.<sup>46</sup> In particular she highlights Zetterling's recurrent representation of a hypermodern bomb shelter in Stockholm, reused in *Mai Zetterling's Stockholm*, as a symbol of the Swedish population's deep inner fear and preparedness for warfare despite being a neutral country.

However, by impersonating Strindberg herself in *Mai Zetterling's Stockholm*, the director explores a new strategy for criticizing and mocking masculinity. Her drag parody amplifies and mercilessly ridicules the constructed nature of the male artist genius, its misogynist and romanticized outsidership and neuroticism. The on-camera inclusion of the act of dressing up as the male character emphasizes this constructivist critique of gender. Zetterling theatrically puts on a wig and moustache in front of and looking into the camera, while answering off-screen questions about Strindberg's hatred of women. Taking self-portraits and operating a slide show, she goes on to quote Strindberg's derogatory view of actresses as untalented, moan about the many fears and demons that haunt him and presents his paintings with titles such as 'Shit yellow sky' and 'Shit green landscape'. In *Mai Zetterling's Stockholm*, Zetterling hence not only reinforces her criticism of Sweden, but reaffirms her feminist persona by fiercely attacking one of the foremost national heroes in Swedish literary canon—a move in line with the transnational feminist cultural criticism of the time.<sup>47</sup> Importantly, instead of seeking to remedy dominant 'images of women' or deconstruct women's 'to-be-looked-at-ness', she turns the camera towards men.

The examination of masculinity continued in Zetterling's next project. Shortly after the production of *Mai Zetterling's Stockholm*, she travelled to Greenland in order to make a documentary short

about traditional seal hunting practices, *Of Seals and Men* (1979), a film that was commissioned by Denmark's Royal Greenland Trade Department. Mariah Larsson and Anna Westerstahl Stenport discuss how colonial and feminist film contexts intersect in the documentary.<sup>48</sup> By focusing on the merits of the traditional seal hunt, in contrast to the then ongoing international debate and global opposition to seal-skin trade, the documentary promotes Danish trade interests. At the same time, the ethnographic documentary form allows Zetterling, whose presence behind the camera is stressed through her voice-over, an opportunity to portray the male hunters with an objectifying, eroticizing 'female gaze'. Larsson and Westerstahl Stenport contend that the men 'become archetypal male figures, like motorcycle riders or gunfighters—Marlon Brando, James Dean, Clint Eastwood—objectified in a way that is at odds with their active work as hunters.'<sup>49</sup> Yet, such objectification also draws from and reinscribes a conventional visualization of the colonial Other.

In these three commissioned non-fiction shorts, Zetterling develops her feminist aesthetic by critically examining and objectifying masculinity through strategies that could be understood as using the female gaze and drag performance. Employing these strategies was not necessarily to be ahead of her time, but still original since they were not standard elements in feminist film-making, which at the time was largely invested in either portraying 'real' women or in destroying the visual pleasure of the medium. Unlike Zetterling's fiction films in the 1960s, these non-fiction shorts not only criticize but also eroticize masculinity.<sup>50</sup> Importantly, these original explorations of feminist strategies were enabled by, not in conflict with, the commissioning institutions. The fact that a film made under such politically problematic conditions as *Of Seals and Men* still offered Zetterling an opportunity to reaffirm her feminist persona is a reminder that feminist film-making, rather than automatically challenging intersecting dominant structures, may instead draw on and reinforce colonial and commercial interests. By strategically commissioning Zetterling, Denmark's Royal Greenland Trade



Figure 7.1. Mai Zetterling on location for *Seals and Men* (1979). Photo: The Swedish Film Institute/Mai Zetterling Archive.

Department aimed for a specific political credibility and cultural capital, as Larsson and Westerstahl Stenport note.<sup>51</sup> It is probable that a similar motive prompted the construction corporation SKANSKA in 1986 to choose Zetterling as director of a promotional short, *Concrete Granny*, discussed below.

### The feminist ethnographer as globetrotter and national trademark

*Of Seals and Men* makes explicit how Zetterling's feminist auteur persona intertwines with her role as ethnographer, a role established in her four documentaries for the BBC in the early 1960s. In these shorts, Zetterling sets out to explore four different groups of people: Sami, Roma, Swedish and Icelandic populations. Travelling to the north of Sweden, the south of France, Stockholm and Iceland in order to film these groups, the shorts present Zetterling's voice-over as well as on-camera reflections about what she sees. According to

her autobiography, the BBC demanded that Zetterling should appear in front of the camera in the films.<sup>52</sup> Yet, if the idea was to draw on Zetterling's star persona, this also placed her in the authoritative position of explorer and interpreter of these cultures. The role of ethnographic documenter affords Zetterling the Eurocentric and male-coded privileges of an authoritative voice and gaze, as well as the agency and mobility of an adventurer in the world. In her autobiography, she comments on how these early films allowed her to not only explore the medium but also the world. These qualities are reactivated and implicated in her feminist auteur persona in the non-fiction work in the 1970s and 1980s. These films draw on Zetterling's persona as authoritative critical observer of the phenomena she examines: the Olympics, Stockholm, seal hunt, and, not least, masculinity.

The short, non-fiction format paradoxically reinstated and amplified Zetterling's feminist auteur status and afforded her privileges of authority and mobility at a time when her agency in and access to the field of fiction film production in Sweden was heavily restricted. In the non-fiction shorts, Zetterling's outsidership is rather reinscribed as an asset. Invoking the notion of herself as detached outsider and 'rare bird', Zetterling observes her subjects literally from above by recurrently choosing a high camera angle, 'a bird's eye view', in significant contrast to low-angle shots in her fiction films.<sup>53</sup> In 'The Strongest', a weightlifter practices lifting positions in a car park while the high-angle camera slowly zooms out until the weightlifter is seen only as a small dot in the middle of concrete surroundings. *Of Seals and Men* includes the arrival to Greenland, filming the vast landscape from a helicopter and *Mai Zetterling's Stockholm* includes high-angle shots over the city from the air and from the outdoor lift Katarinahissen, as well as from Zetterling's subjective point of view in the crane above Kungsträdgården park.

This signature perspective and other characteristics of these three films are recycled once more in Zetterling's perhaps most bizarre venture into commissioned non-fiction film-making, *Concrete Granny* (*Betongmormor*) from 1986. The film is a grandiose infomercial



Figure 7.2. Mai Zetterling on the set of *Concrete Granny* (1986). Photo: The Swedish Film Institute/Mai Zetterling Archive.

made for the corporation SKANSKA, promoting the industry's construction projects all over the world. Zetterling herself plays the role of 'concrete granny', coaching her grandson as he applies for an engineer job at SKANSKA. The grandson is played by Philip Zandén who also formed part of the cast of *Amorosa*, Zetterling's first Swedish feature after *The Girls*, that premiered the same year. Followed by a couple of spies from a competing corporation trying to convince her to reveal the secret behind the company's success, concrete granny travels around the globe demonstrating among other sites a water reservoir in New York City, a school in Algeria, an airport in Greenland, a power plant in Indonesia, and a bridge and a ski resort in Sweden.

In addition to observing these sites through high-angle, glossy shots from helicopters, cranes and rooftops, *Concrete Granny* also reuses Zetterling's authoritative voice-over and playful impersonations—including of male characters and, more problematically, of a veiled woman in Algeria. Whereas *Mai Zetterling's Stockholm*

turns the ethnographic gaze onto Swedishness, masculinity, and marriage, criticizing and ironizing over self-aggrandizing notions of progress and modernity, *Concrete Granny* promotes the idea of Sweden's industrial superiority. The mobilization of Zetterling's authoritative ethnographer as well as feminist persona here contributes to selling the idea of Swedish progressiveness and innovation. Zetterling's impersonation of concrete granny invokes notions of the modern Western emancipated woman through an emphasis on independence, agency, and mobility, for instance by adventurous shots of Zetterling, dressed in a vintage pilot hat, driving various vehicles, such as a 1950s style convertible car, a motor boat, and a helicopter. The concrete granny moves freely in the world, among different cultures and in and out of costumes, male and female. Just like the presented construction projects, this modern character functions as a symbol and trademark of Swedish progressiveness and excellence. The film interweaves self-celebratory notions of Sweden as a country in the forefront of both the construction industry and women's liberation. Both are represented as attractive export products contributing to the development and modernization of the rest of the world. However, it should be added, there is a disjunction between the elements of the film that potentially undermines its message. The voice-over is delivered in the same ironic tone as *Mai Zetterling's Stockholm*, and the almost hysterically exaggerated emphasis on SKANSKA's excellence opens up the possibility to read the film as mocking the company's grandiosity, rather than as a sincere promotion.

## Conclusion

*Concrete Granny* mobilizes the notion of gender equality in Sweden, performed and impersonated by renowned feminist filmmaker Mai Zetterling, as a fundamental aspect of Swedish progressiveness in order to promote SKANSKA's international projects. The infomercial epitomizes the paradoxical conditions under which Zetterling made her non-fiction films in the 1970s and 1980s. While the

filmmaker was unable to get funding for fiction features in Sweden after the scandal with *The Girls*, outside of Sweden, Zetterling's feminist persona was not considered too radical but embraced, bringing cultural capital and credibility not only to independent TV productions such as *Cities* but also to SKANSKA, Denmark's Royal Greenland Trade Department, and the Olympic Committee.

By shedding light on how Zetterling's feminist auteur status was affirmed and strengthened not only within the transnational feminist film culture in the 1970s and 1980s, but also in the widely different national and transnational production contexts of 'The Strongest', *Mai Zetterling's Stockholm, Of Seals and Men* and *Concrete Granny*, my aim in this essay has been to draw attention to the interrelation or even cross-fertilization between feminist film-making and broader contexts, commercial as well as public service. Zetterling's non-fiction film-making in these years is a symptomatic example of how women, while rejected or overlooked by dominant funding institutions like the Swedish Film Institute, have been able to make and fund films through creative and unconventional means.<sup>54</sup> Non-fiction formats, for instance documentary made for public service television companies such as, in Zetterling's case, BBC and CBC, have often been more accessible to women filmmakers. Importantly, the non-fiction format and Zetterling's interaction with not only John McGreevy Productions, but also large commercial instances such as the Olympic Committee, Denmark's Royal Greenland Trade Department and SKANSKA enabled her to explore original, feminist, aesthetic strategies, such as the female gaze and drag performance, in order to examine, criticize and eroticize masculinity.

Examining how the feminist film culture interrelated with the broad public, transnational contexts, and political and commercial interests implies problematizing notions: of the movement as independently oppositional; of feminist aesthetics as autonomously reflecting radical agendas; and of women filmmakers as isolated auteurs and pioneers struggling against the stream. Importantly though, in the case of Mai Zetterling, shifting focus away from heroic

accounts of a misunderstood genius outsider ahead of her time does not imply depriving her of the re-evaluation and celebration she has earned since the 1970s. Rather, it is to acknowledge her legacy and crucial contributions to feminist film history and aesthetics beyond established film industries and histories.

## Acknowledgements

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## Notes

- 1 John McGreevy Productions. The thirteen-episode series was broadcast on CBC, 1979–80.
- 2 Svenska Filminstitutet (Swedish Film Institute) (SFI), Stockholm, Mai Zetterlings arkiv, A1.9.2, 'Film.MAI ZETTERLING'S STOCKHOLM (1979).
- 3 Larsson 2006, 18, 31, 43, 50, 185–6, 190; Stigsdotter 2015.
- 4 Editor's note: for films with an official English-language title, the original title is listed in brackets when first mentioned and the official translation is used throughout the text. For films that do not have an official English-language title, an English translation of the title is given when first mentioned and the original title is used throughout the text.
- 5 Strömstedt 1968; Larsson 2006, 168–70; Schein 1977, 26.
- 6 Larsson 2006, 48.
- 7 Sontag 1969. Sontag's second Swedish feature *Brother Carl* premiered in 1971.
- 8 Larsson 2006, 51–2 draws attention to the stated wishes of producer Rune Waldekranz and Harry Schein, founder of the Swedish Film Institute, as crucial to Zetterling's opportunity to make her first feature; Lundström 2015: 49–59.
- 9 Hernes 1987.
- 10 Martinsson et al. 2016.
- 11 Hesford 2013.
- 12 Wilson 1976.
- 13 'Kvinnornas filmfestival', 1972; 'Mai Zetterling bejublad', 1972. All translations are by the author unless otherwise noted.
- 14 Rosen 1973; Johnston 1973.
- 15 'Flickorna', 1976, 19.
- 16 Zetterling 1985, 218.
- 17 Rich 1978.
- 18 For example, Kuhn 1982; de Lauretis 1985, 154–75; Juhasz 1994, 171–90.
- 19 UNESCO 1976.

- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Hjertén 1975.
- 23 'Filmkvinnor bildar eget världsförbund', 1975.
- 24 Bjelf 1975.
- 25 Skawonius 1976.
- 26 Svenska Filminstitutet (Swedish Film Institute) (SFI), Stockholm, Svenska kvinnors Filmförbund-arkiv (Swedish Women's Film Association Archive), Anna-Lena Wibom, 'Kallelse, Konstituerande möte—Svenska kvinnors filmförbund', 12 February 1976.
- 27 Sjöberg 1976.
- 28 Eklund 1976; Sörenson 1976.
- 29 Wilson 1976.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Brison 2003, 197.
- 32 See Fischer 2017, 36–46.
- 33 For example, Domellöf-Wik 2013; Bendjelloul 2015.
- 34 Wilson 1976; Gustafsson 1976.
- 35 Schein 1977, 26.
- 36 Koskinen 2016, 153–67.
- 37 See Larsson 2006, 193 ff.
- 38 *Cities* was broadcast on CBC, 1979–80. A shortened 25-minute version of the original 50-minute film was unexpectedly discovered in a collection of 16mm films that the Swedish Institute planned to throw away in 2009 (Linder 2015).
- 39 See Larsson 2006, 193 ff.; Hollinger 2012, 230–46; Grant 2001, 113–30.
- 40 See Tomadjoglou 2015, 95–109.
- 41 Isaksson 2007.
- 42 See McDonald 2011, 115–16.
- 43 Larsson 2006, 152 ff.; see also Difrient 2005, 1506.
- 44 Zetterling 1985, 208.
- 45 Linder 2015.
- 46 Larsson 2010, 263–9.
- 47 For example, Millet 1970.
- 48 Larsson & Westerstahl Stenport 2015, 106–29.
- 49 Ibid. 117.
- 50 Larsson 2006, 134–5.
- 51 Larsson & Westerstahl Stenport 2015, 126.
- 52 Zetterling 1985, 171.
- 53 See Fischer 2017; Larsson 2006, 104, 135.
- 54 See Larsson & Westerstahl Stenport 2015, 112.

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