



# HippFest

18 — 22 March 2026



## The Outlaw and His Wife

**Dir. Victor Sjöström | Sweden | 1918 N/C 15 | b&w | Swedish intertitles with English surtitles | 1h 51m + short**

With: Victor Sjöström, Edith Erastoff, John Ekman

**Performing live:** Meg Morley (piano)

**Programme notes:** David Cairns

**Wed 18 March 12:30 - 14:30**

*Screening material courtesy of Swedish Film Institute.*

“Here without doubt is the most beautiful film in the world,” gushed Louis Delluc in 1919. “Victor Sjöström has directed it with a lavishness that transcends analysis [...] It is the first love duet heard in the cinema. A duet that comprises all life. Is it a drama? What happens in it? I don’t know.”

Fortunately, I do know.

The Swedish cinema of the 1910s in some ways was ahead of even America – the films were praised for their understated but powerful performances, as well as their gorgeous use of natural light, landscape, architecture. The two great directors were Mauritz Stiller and his friend, the actor Victor Sjöström.

When Ingmar Bergman directed Sjöström in the 1950s, he found the old man had a tendency to ham it up a bit, and he had to squash him slightly (the resulting performances, especially in *Wild Strawberries*, are magnificent). But in his youth Sjöström was an actor of rare restraint. When he laughs, he just *grins*: no holding his sides and shaking. But somehow invisible vibrations of mirth let us hear his mocking laughter.

*The Outlaw and His Wife* (1918) combines many of the elements this national cinema was celebrated for, including strong, sometimes harsh, drama, and powerful presentation of nature. The echoes can still be heard in Bergman’s much later cinema. Though his story, based on a play he’d acted in a few years earlier, is set in Iceland, Sjöström filmed in Sweden due to the danger of U-boats in 1917.

Early Swedish cinema started with a tableaux approach, capturing scenes in static long shots derived from theatre but making detailed use of the camera’s precise viewpoint: unlike on a stage, where each audience member has a different vantage point, in a movie actors could be positioned to block one another out and then reveal one another or themselves. Sjöström is still using this peekaboo approach in *Outlaw* but he’s advanced to breaking his scenes into different shots which can emphasise key details. American



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movies, meanwhile, had adopted the left-to-right rule, whereby a character exiting frame left will reappear frame right in the next shot, preserving their direction of movement. When a character waves off screen left, the shot of the person waving back will show them looking screen right. World War One meant that American films were not being as widely seen in Europe, however, and so Sjöström hasn't grasped this useful principle. Nevertheless his direction is fluid enough that his regular violations of screen direction don't result in confusion, merely occasional little jolts of surprise.

He's also fully embraced location shooting, including some difficult snow and mountain scenes in which the cast participate in rather hair-raising high altitude performing.

Delluc rightly praised "the third, unusually impressive member of the cast: nature!" Sjöström had always been keen on filming outdoors but for his recent Ibsen adaptation, *Terje Vigen* (1916) he had revisited the scenes of his childhood and been transfigured by this exposure to the landscape, adopting an attitude that merged the characters' emotions with the behaviour of the elements in an almost Shakespearian way, uniting the stark Protestant outlook of his homeland with a pantheistic nature-worship. Critic Peter Cowie remarks that this transformative sentimental journey is uncannily similar to that which Sjöström's character undergoes as the main character in Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* thirty-eight years later.

The huge success of Sjöström's Ibsen film encouraged the producer to invest in fewer but bigger films, and *The Outlaw and His Wife* was a direct result of this policy.

The production roved about, filming snow scenes in Åre and summer ones in the Lapland mountains around Abisko and in Gotland (the scenes with sheep) – during the gap in filming necessitated by capturing two contrasting seasons, Sjöström shot a whole other movie, *The Girl from Marsh Croft*, as well as starring in a comedy for his friend Mauritz Stiller, *Thomas Graal's Best Film*.

The difficulties of location filming sometimes require Sjöström and his team to use elaborate sets, as in night scenes with fake snow and little model buildings in the background, but these are so beautifully lit they cause no harm, and the interior sets are beautifully detailed, tactile and naturalistic, working with the costumes to create an extremely vivid sense of place and time. One factor that made Scandinavian cinema so effective was a devotion to the naturalistic use of light. If a scene would be dark in real life, the Swedes let it be dark, and the only light allowed is that which comes from a convincing source in the scene. It turns out that following the logic of real light can result in very beautiful images, full of dynamic chiaroscuro, shafts of light, pools of illumination, ink-black darkness...

The movie really is a kind of film noir before that genre was ever thought of – the characters are compelling because of their needs and their highly active approach to getting what they want, not because we have to approve of them. They suffer not because there's a divine morality imposed by some Swedish version of the Production



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Code, but because life is difficult and seems to have a sense of irony. There's even a flashback – “How I became an outlaw” – reinforcing the sense of noir style: noir characters always have a past, and it dictates their actions and drives them headlong into trouble.

Sjöström had befriended playwright Jóhann Sigurjónsson, who encouraged him to consider *Outlaw* as a film subject. The tale of a gigantically strong man unable to escape his criminal past, it was surely influenced by Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, but it turns into a tale of *amour fou*, with the love of rich landowner Halla (Edith Erastoff) for fugitive sheep-thief Kari (Sjöström) driving both beyond the bounds of civilised, law-abiding society.

Erastoff is a little more theatrical than Sjöström, and even he can't resist hamming it a little, old stager that he is, during the more dramatic scenes. But even the most extreme histrionics benefit from being anchored in the film's very convincing environment. And Swedish cinema's reputation for erotic frankness is justified early on when the couple's friend Arnes gazes lustfully at Halla's cleavage while she does the washing at a hot spring. Along with this comes the gloominess associated with Ingmar Bergman: this is a dark tale that keeps getting darker. It seems typical that the couple's happiest scenes are flashbacks glimpsed when they're in extremis. But a work of art can be bleak and yet still result in exhilaration for the audience, not depression. This is such a film.

HippFest regulars who enjoyed 1928's *The Wind*, directed in Hollywood by Sjöström (credited as Seastrom), but were surprised by the abruptness of its studio-imposed happy ending, will find another reason to appreciate *The Outlaw and His Wife* – you're about to find out how Sjöström planned to end *The Wind*...

## DAVID CAIRNS

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