



everlasting moments

Autumn
Season
2009

Directed by Jan Troell, 2008, Cert 15, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, 125 mins

Reviewed by Philip French, *The Observer*:

The French New Wave film-makers overthrew or overshadowed by sheer weight of productivity and publicity their still-practising elders. Their Swedish contemporaries, however, found Ingmar Bergman too mighty a presence to budge. The three most gifted directors who started out when Bergman was at the height of his powers - Vilgot Sjöman, Bo Widerberg, and Jan Troell - were doomed to work under his formidable shadow. He outlived the first two, but Troell, who usually writes, edits, photographs and directs his own films, is still at work in his late 70s and his latest movie, *Everlasting Moments*, is a true masterpiece.

Unlike the solipsistic Bergman, who invariably reached into his own heart, psyche and guts for themes and subjects, Troell has been a major chronicler of the Swedish experience. His first film, *Here's Your Life* (1966), was based on an autobiographical novel of working-class life in the early 20th century by the Nobel Prize-winning author Eyvind Johnson. His most famous films, *The Emigrants* and *The New Land*, were carved out of Vilhelm Moberg's quartet of bestselling novels about the Swedes who settled in 19th-century America. Then in 1982, his *Flight of the Eagle* dealt with a national tragedy, the doomed 1897 polar flight by balloon, and in 1991 he made *Il capitano*, the Swedish answer to *In Cold Blood*. *Everlasting Moments*, based upon a biographical work by his wife, Agneta, and a co-production between Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland and Germany, is about the life of a working-class housewife, Maria Larsson, living in the southern Swedish city of Malmö in the early 20th century. It's narrated by her daughter, Maja, who begins by telling us that shortly before their marriage, her Swedish father, the handsome Sigge Larsson, bought her Finnish mother a raffle ticket with which she won a camera. The marriage proved less than blissful. The charming Sigge, a hard-working docker, turns out to be a brutal, alcoholic womaniser who abuses her. But she remains with him for the whole of her life as a result of guilt, responsibility and religious pressure, bearing him seven children, at least one of them the consequence of marital rape. Even after Sigge goes to jail for assaulting her, she takes him back and we come to see he's the victim of his class and times, not an evil man.



This is a fascinatingly detailed story of impoverished working-class life in the deferential, deeply divided society that preceded the rise of the Social Democrats and the transformation of Sweden in the interwar years. It takes in strikes, the local experience of the First World War, the coming of electricity and the cinema. But it is also, and most especially, about how one day, at a low point in her life, Maria discovers the camera and decides to sell it to feed the family.

But the Danish owner of the photographer's shop, the gentlemanly Sebastian Pedersen, persuades her to keep it and take pictures. This meeting with a fellow exile and outsider changes her life. Over the years, though not without exciting her husband's fury, she forms a quiet and deeply moving friendship with the kindly Pedersen and uses the camera to capture the "everlasting moments" of the title and see the wonders of the world around her. "You have the gift of seeing," he tells her.

There was a widespread fascination with photography in the late 19th century, shared by the Norwegian painter Munch, the Swedish writer Strindberg (who thought the camera magical) and the Danish pioneer of photojournalism, Jacob Riis, who brought the conditions of New York's slums to public attention in his 1891 book *How the Other Half Lives*. The complex relationship between photographers, their subjects and the world has also been the subject of some considerable movies, among them Malle's *Pretty Baby*, Antonioni's *Blow-Up*, Mike Leigh's *Secrets and Lies* and Kieslowski's *Camera Buff*.

Kieslowski's film is not actually about still photography: its hero, a provincial Polish factory worker, transforms the lives of those around him when he acquires a 16mm camera in the Solidarity period. But it's the closest perhaps to Jan Troell's film, whose heroine doesn't become a Margaret Cameron or a Margaret Bourke-White, but she finds through her camera a deeper understanding of her humble surroundings, provides a history for her family and helps her neighbours find solace through observing the beauty of the everyday and giving a permanent form to the transience of life.

There are wonderful moments in this beautiful, tender, truthful film. Maria helps the woman in the next-door flat accept the death of her daughter by taking a photograph of the girl lying at peace in the front parlour; another mother is helped to see the radiance of her Down's syndrome child.

Maria and Pedersen spot each other in the crowd recording a famous meeting between three Scandinavian kings during the First World War. In one remarkable sequence, Maria takes the children to see Chaplin's *Easy Street*. They go home, paint moustaches on their upper lips and impersonate Chaplin. Their family fun is disrupted by the sudden return of drunken Sigge, who thinks they're mocking him and puts a razor to his wife's throat.

Yet the movie ends on a tranquil note, not of happiness exactly, but of fulfilment and understanding, as Maria for the first and last time takes a picture of herself. The acting all around is of the highest order and Maria Heiskanen's magnificent performance as Maria is a portrait of human goodness and decency, utterly lacking in sentimentality, sanctimony or self-conscious martyrdom.