Directed by Erik Skjoldbjærg
Written by Nikolaj Frobenius and Erik Skjoldbjærg
Produced by Tomas Backström, Petter J. Borgli, and Tom Remlov
Music by Geir Jenssen
Cinematography by Erling Thurmann-Andersen
Film Editing by Håkon Øverås

Maria Mathiesen ... Tanja Lorentzen
Stellan Skarsgård ... Jonas Engström
Sverre Anker Ousdal ... Erik Vik
Gisken Armand ... Hilde Hagen
Kristian Fijenschow ... Arne Zakariassen
Thor Michael Aamodt ... Tom Engen
Frode Rasmussen ... Chief of Police
Bjørn Moan ... Eilert
Maria Bonnevie ... Ane
Marianne O. Ulrichsen ... Frøya
Bjørn Floberg ... Jon Holt


Maria Mathiesen ... Tanja Lorentzen (b. 1978 in Tromsø, Norway) has only appeared in one film—1997 Insomnia.


Sverre Anker Ousdal ...


Jonathan Romney: “Insomnia: Unbearable Lightness” (Criterion Notes)
The 1997 Norwegian detective thriller Insomnia is a paradoxical object—as director and cowriter Erik Skjoldbjærg has described it, “a reversed film noir with light, not darkness, as its dramatic force.” Insomnia is so drenched in light that you could call it a film blanc—blanc meaning “white” but also “blank,” given the film’s detached chill, as opaque as the features of its policeman antithero.

In the press notes for his debut feature, Skjoldbjærg commented, “Insomnia was inspired by a notion on secrecy: when one chooses to conceal from others, one consequently risks losing one’s own perspective. Thus, having created a secret, it may involuntarily begin to occupy an increasing amount of one’s own attention.” Hence a drama in which things—objects and personal secrets alike—tend to remain tantalizingly concealed, and yet in which there are few hiding
The setting is Skjoldbjærg’s hometown of Tromsø, in northern Norway, about two hundred miles north of the Arctic Circle, a place that from spring to late summer has no real night. This is the setting for what is ostensibly a murder mystery—but the killer’s identity emerges relatively quickly, and the focus of the story then shifts to the psyche of the detective, tormented by the constant light. In a telling line, the murderer recounts how his victim died: “She slept and slept and slept . . .” In *Insomnia*—to use a phrase with the ring of the pulpiest paperback title—only the dead sleep well.

In a brief prologue, shot on Super 8, we witness the violent death of seventeen-year-old Tanja Lorentzen (Maria Mathiesen), followed by the killer covering up the traces of his crime. After the film’s title appears, we see two men flying to Tromsø to investigate the case. They are Norwegian policeman Erik Vik (Sverre Anker Ousdal) and senior investigator Jonas Engström (Stellan Skarsgård), a Swede now working in Norway. Soon after their arrival, the film hints at the disgrace that caused Engström to leave Sweden: his Norwegian colleagues gossip about his being found in bed with the chief witness in a case. If Engström is in disgrace, though, he hides it well: solemn, highly organized, and neatly dressed, he walks and talks as befits his image as a top detective. The knowingly bland impassivity of much of Skarsgård’s performance presents us with a waxy, masklike exterior that can’t entirely be trusted. His Engström comes across as an ostensibly good but psychologically weak man, open to corruption—which makes the character’s moments of breakdown and his irruptions of sexual brutality all the more disturbing.

A stranger to the far north, Engström can’t get any sleep, sunlight seeping into his hotel bedroom despite his increasingly absurd attempts to shut it out with adhesive tape and blankets. But it is suggested that his insomnia, which makes Engström increasingly erratic, is also caused by a restless conscience; and he soon has more to be restless about. Hoping to flush out the killer, Engström organizes a stakeout of a hut near the sea, but his prey escapes through a tunnel (one of the film’s few moments of darkness), and the pursuit is foiled by deep fog that is as much metaphorical as climatic. As a result, Engström shoots a man he thinks is the fugitive, only to find that he has accidentally killed Vik.

Thereafter, he devotes his energies equally to pursuing Tanja’s murderer and to hiding his part in Vik’s death, going to elaborate lengths to do so. Why does he not just confess and explain that the shooting was an unavoidable accident? Though there are inklings that he may in part be trying to hide the fact that he was carrying a gun—something police are not allowed to do in Norway—the film never makes this entirely clear, which is part of its fascination. In the 2002 U.S. remake, directed by Christopher Nolan, the mixed motives of the Engström figure are clearly foregrounded: it is intimated that he may have shot his partner because he was about to testify against him in an Internal Affairs investigation.

By contrast, why Engström might have wanted, even unconsciously, to kill Vik remains nebulous. But Vik’s death is the point at which Engström’s disturbance begins to fully emerge. Torn by his contradictory activity—working to uncover one truth while hiding another—the policeman is increasingly troubled, his days and nights haunted by hallucinations, notably of the dead but still garrulous Vik.

Meanwhile, Tanja’s killer—local thriller writer Jon Holt (Bjørn Floberg)—seems to know more about the detective’s psyche than he knows himself. Holt emerges on a metaphorical level as a sort of tormenting doppelgänger, a living embodiment of Engström’s bad conscience (after all, what is a crime writer’s vocation if not to keep people awake?). Following a tense pursuit, the adversaries start to collude in “rewriting” the Tanja case, planning to plant evidence to incriminate the dead girl’s boyfriend. As it develops, *Insomnia* becomes a story not so much about deciphering a mystery as about “writing” a new one. The wall of Holt’s apartment is covered in sheets of paper and Post-it notes, presumably the plans for a novel, but it’s tempting to imagine that they really map out the intrigue of *Insomnia* itself. The whiteness that floods the film is partly the whiteness of the paper on which a crime narrative is written.

*Insomnia* is a complex drama, yet executed with great stylistic economy and simplicity, through which Skjoldbjærg and his collaborators—including cowriter Nikolaj Frobenius—develop a profound sense of enigma. The visual style, notably the use of whiteness, constantly evokes the unreadability of Engström’s psyche, reversing the convention of identifying the unconscious with darkness. Erling Thurmann-Andersen’s cinematography emphasizes the daylit mundanity of the urban location, downplaying the natural grandeur of Tromsø and its environs. The setting becomes a blank canvas for a study in white: Engström is frequently framed against windows that blaze with cold light, or placed in antisceptically clean, geometrically neat settings,
notably Holt’s stark apartment, divided up into a Mondrian-like grid.

The film repeatedly plays perceptual tricks on us. Driving Tanja’s schoolmate Frøya (Marianne O. Ulrichsen) in his car, Engström can’t resist putting his hand on her naked thigh—or can he? The close-up of his hand on her leg is shot initially from his POV, then briefly from hers—but since the gesture is never integrated into a wider shot, we can’t be sure whether this is really happening or is his sexual reverie. Similarly disorienting are a cut when Engström recounts the shooting of Vik, as if he is suddenly split in two by his lying; a scene that seems at first a nightmare of Engström’s, then turns out to be the police reconstruction of Vik’s death; and an interior shot toward the end, in Holt’s seaside house, that uses a 360-degree pan to disconcerting effect, warping our sense of space and time. Such economical stylization adds to Insomnia’s subtly unnerving power, and places it outside the field of generic police drama, bringing it closer to the glacial modernism of Michelangelo Antonioni (that 360-degree shot recalling the ending of The Passenger, or a scene in a decaying shack similar to the cabin in Red Desert, another fog-bound drama).

Released internationally in 1998, Insomnia attracted much attention and was considered a prime exhibit in what appeared to be a resurgence in Norway’s cinema. Other Norwegian filmmakers then emerging were Pål Sletaune, with the downbeat black comedy Junk Mail (1997); Bent Hamer, who had made his debut with the surreal miniature Eggs (1995); and Hans Petter Moland, who had cast Skarsgård in his 1995 film Zero Kelvin. This new wave never quite sustained its initial momentum, although Hamer and Moland, in particular, continue to have considerable profiles on the festival circuit. Skjoldbjærg, meanwhile, made an uneasy transatlantic move with Prozac Nation (2001), then returned to Norway, teaming with cowriter Frobenius on a modern-day version of Ibsen’s An Enemy of the People in 2005; his latest film, Pioneer (2013), is an energetic and fairly commercial hybrid of conspiracy drama and deep-sea adventure.

Insomnia now also looks very much like a founding text of what can be called the new wave of “Nordic noir”—a cinematic and literary phenomenon properly launched by the novels of Henning Mankell (the Wallander series) and Stieg Larsson (The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo) and their screen adaptations. But though Nordic noir has recently become a globally recognizable brand, it is hardly a new phenomenon. Scandinavia’s best-known detective writers, the Swedish duo Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö, began their internationally successful Martin Beck detective series in 1965; in Insomnia, the cop Zakariassen is seen reading one of their books. Insomnia may lack the social-political aspect so prominent in much recent Scandinavian crime fiction—notably in Jo Nesbo’s novels about Norwegian cop Harry Hole. But the dysfunctional sleuths of the TV series The Killing and The Bridge, not to mention Hole and Wallander, have a close relative in Jonas Engström. Insomnia also brings into play another common theme—the ironic playing off of national identities. In The Bridge, for example, an aggressive, macho Danish cop is improbably paired with a quasi-autistic Swedish female counterpart. Insomnia’s Swedish detective is exiled and misunderstood; although it’s not usually evident from the subtitles, much of the film plays on accents and the similarities and differences between the Swedish and Norwegian languages (following his address to Tanja’s classmates, Frøya taunts Engström that no one understood a word he was saying).

Nolan’s Insomnia remake, from a script by Hillary Seitz, closely resembles the original, albeit with key differences. Notably, Nolan’s version emphasizes the psychological cat-and-mouse game between Al Pacino’s Detective Dormer and the Holt figure, played by Robin Williams. The film also provides a fuller back-story, involving a previous act of falsification by Dormer (honorably motivated, it turns out) and the impending investigation that threatens him. The experienced female cop Hilde Hagen (Gisken Armand), who sees through Engström, is replaced by a naïve young officer (Hilary Swank) whose own sleuthing at last allows Dormer to reach a conventional point of (to use those dreaded words) redemption and closure—that is, he finally gets to close his eyes.

In Skjoldbjærg’s film, by contrast, the narrative background remains sketchy—a quality visually concretized by the literal absence of background in those shots that frame Engström against walls of light, making the man and the world around him equally mysterious. As for closure, Engström is not redeemed in any obvious sense: he meets an archetypal “good woman,” the angelic-featured hotel proprietor Ane (Maria Bonnevie), who looks momentarily as if she is there to save him, but things end badly and
grotesquely between them. If Engström is finally saved by the completion of his investigation, it is only in the most equivocal way. Will he get to close his eyes? At the end of the film, he drives away into the dark, but as the enigmatic (if somewhat gimmicky) final shot suggests, sleep comes less easily in Scandinavian thrillers than it does in Hollywood.

**Peter Cowie: Insomnia (Criterion Notes)**

Those who felt that Scandinavian cinema had passed into retirement along with Ingmar Bergman should be startled by *Insomnia*. This immaculately constructed psychological thriller sets a benchmark for other Scandinavian directors to match, and is one of the most unusual and gripping films to have emerged from Europe in recent years. As a first feature film by its young director, Erik Skjoldbjærg, *Insomnia* was selected for the prestigious Critics’ Week at the Cannes Film Festival, where it was hailed by critics from around the world. Starring Stellan Skarsgård (*Breaking the Waves, Ronin, Good Will Hunting*), the drama unfolds in the northernmost region of Norway, beyond the Arctic Circle. Here is a land where, in summer, the sun never sets.

As a detective who travels to the coastal town of Tromsø to help solve a local murder, Skarsgård’s Jonas Engström finds himself taunted by locals and climate alike. He cannot sleep as the glaucous light of the midnight sun glares through his hotel window, and he loses himself—and his reason—in the fog-shrouded landscape. This all-pervasive mist forms when the ocean is warmer than the air above it. In the film it creates a mood of claustrophobia as well as ambiguity. Did Engström kill his partner, Vik, during a chase in some rocky wasteland? Is he really interested in the attractive receptionist at the hotel? Does he have a nasty skeleton in the closet of his past?

Skjoldbjærg had been introduced to Skarsgård through Hans Petter Moland, who had made *Zero Kelvin* with the Swedish star. “The moment he walked through the door in Stockholm, I knew I had found the right actor,” says Skjoldbjærg. Like Jean-Louis Trintignant in Bertolucci’s *The Conformist* or Marcello Mastroianni in Visconti’s adaptation of Camus’ *The Stranger*, Skarsgård creates a man who is outwardly assured while harboring profound insecurities within. He cannot handle any kind of intimacy, nor can he come to terms with his responsibility for the death of Vik. He sustains his identity by adhering to certain moral precepts; once he has broken one of these principles, he becomes truly dangerous...

*Insomnia* may be accused by some of perpetrating the same sin as its antithero Engström, for its sleek editing and allusive dialogue leave the audience unnerved and unable to distinguish between good and evil, guilt and innocence. But Skjoldbjærg should be given the benefit of the doubt. A graduate of Britain’s National Film School, he was selected on instinct by the school’s founder, Colin Young, and impressed with two gripping short films, one shot in Norway (Near Winter) and the other in London (Close to Home), where he lived for some years. *Insomnia* was filmed in the director’s home town of Tromsø. “So many crews had used the landscape in an epic manner,” he says, “but I had never experienced that when growing up, so I wanted to give the film a sparse, unspectacular look. We tried not to build classical compositions. Instead we wanted the eye to wander, to create a certain discomfort, almost exasperation at the impenetrability of the enigma.”

*Insomnia* represents European cinema at its most challenging, experimenting with form and compelling the viewer to enter its haunting world, where truth slips like an eel through the fingers of a detective riding the edge of hysteria.

---

**Roger Ebert: “Insomnia”**

In northern Norway in the summer, the night is a brief finger of dusk drawn between the day and the dawn. In his hotel room, Jonas the chief investigator struggles for sleep. He tugs at the blackout curtains, but the sunlight streams in at 2 a.m., and he is haunted by unease. He is a veteran Swedish policeman in exile, working out of Oslo after, in a previous case, being discovered in "intimate conversation" with a witness.

His record is not clean, but he is considered a brilliant investigator, and now he is hunting for a killer who leaves no traces—who even washed the hair of his victim, an attractive young woman. After Jonas discovers the woman's knapsack in a shed on the beach, he sets a trap for the killer. He announces on TV that the knapsack is the key to the investigation, trusting that the killer will return to retrieve it.

And so the killer does—falling into Jonas' ambush. But there is a way out of the shed that the police do not know about, and the killer flees. Chasing him in a thick, morning fog, Jonas sees a figure raise a gun, and shoots. Then he discovers he has killed his own colleague.

Jonas is played by *Stellan Skarsgard*, the tall, thoughtful Scandinavian who first drew attention as the oil-rig worker in "Breaking the Waves" and the math professor in "Good Will Hunting." Here he looks thinner, haunted, unsure of himself. Working under the protective blanket of fog, he fakes evidence to make it look as if the other policeman were shot by the escaping killer.

So now we have a police procedural turned in upon itself. Jonas is leading the investigation while at the same time struggling with the guilty knowledge of his cover-up.
His queries take him to a writer named Holt, very full of himself, who had a relationship with the dead woman. And to the woman's best friend Froya, whom he is attracted to. He takes her for a drive and slips his hand between her legs; will this be another intimate conversation with a witness? His key adversary is a fellow police officer, Ane (Maria Bonnevie). He is able to distract the other cops with routine and exhortation, but Ane doesn't just look, she sees. She senses there is something off about Jonas, after the death of the other cop: a certain wariness, a way of changing the subject. Some of her questions do not get good answers. She looks him in the face, and he doesn't like that.

The movie is not a thriller or an action picture, but a psychological study. "Crime and Punishment" comes to mind, with its theme of a man who believes he stands outside the rules that apply to other people. It is not that Jonas is a murderer—he made an honest mistake—but that he does not see himself as an honest man, and cannot trust that others would believe him.

It's easy to make movies with external action, chases and shoot-outs. It is much harder to make a film in which many of the important events take place inside the minds of the characters. Much depends simply on where the actors are arranged in the frame, so that we can see one face and not another. Jonas is sleepless and anguished. Ane is nagged by doubts she cannot silence.

The look of the film is almost a character in itself. The director, Erik Skjoldbjærg, looks for grays and browns, dark greens and a washed-out drabness. The midnight sun casts an unremitting bright light, like the eye of God that will not blink. There is no place to hide, not even in sleep. And all the time, of course, there is the killer, who is the real villain, but figures for Jonas more like a distraction from his shame.

**ONLY ONE MORE IN THE FALL 2014 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS**

Dec 2 Mike Nichols, *CHARLIE WILSON’S WAR*, 2007

**SPRING 2015 PRELIMINARY SCREENING SCHEDULE**

Feb 3 Howard Hawks, *Bringing Up Baby*, 1938
Feb 10 Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, ‘I Know Where I’m Going,’ 1945
Feb 17 Carol Reed, *Odd Man Out*, 1947
Feb 24 Budd Boetticher, *Seven Men from Now*, 1956
March 3 Roger Vadim, *Barbarella*, 1968
Mar 10 Bob Fosse, *All That Jazz*, 1979
Mar 24 George Miller, *Mad Max*, 1979
Apr 7 Gregory Nava, *El Norte*, 1983
Apr 28 Sylvain Chomet, *The Triplets of Belleville*, 2003

**CONTACTS:**

email Diane Christian: engdc@buffalo.edu...email Bruce Jackson bjackson@buffalo.edu...for the series schedule, annotations, links and updates: http://buffalofilmseminars.com...to subscribe to the weekly email informational notes, send an email to addtolist@buffalofilmseminars.com....for cast and crew info on any film: http://imdb.com/

The Buffalo Film Seminars are presented by the State University of New York at Buffalo
And the Dipson Amherst Theatre
with support from the Robert and Patricia Colby Foundation and the Buffalo News