

# Nykvist

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Sven Nykvist in *Light Keeps Me Company*, courtesy of First Run Features

**STAN  
SCHWARTZ**  
*on Sven  
Nykvist and  
Palpable light*

‘Feeling wrapped in light gives me a sense of spiritual atmosphere. [If] you have light, you needn’t feel alone. Spoken by Sven Nykvist himself, you’d be hard pressed to find a better entry point into the work of the famed Swedish cinematographer. In all of Nykvist’s films, a charged luminosity leaps off the screen so palpably, almost sensually, that it practically becomes a flesh-and-blood character, an indelible presence.

Nykvist’s filmography lists an astounding 120-plus films to his credit, with American and international productions popping up regularly since the mid-70s. But Nykvist is first and foremost internationally renowned as the cameraman for the great Swedish film director Ingmar Bergman. “There is no doubt that it was Bergman who taught me respect for light—real, true, living light,” Nykvist has said, and any consideration of the Bergman oeuvre clearly bears this out. Throughout their close collaboration, spanning three decades and 22 films, Nykvist and Bergman pushed both black-and-white and color cinematography to their most radiant extremes. Just look at *Persona* (1965) with its striking blacks, whites, and all imaginable grays in between, and then *Cries and Whispers* (1971) with its unforgettable use of red. Even the most casual viewer will find it difficult to resist slipping into hyperbole: Nykvist is unquestionably a true artist of light.

Nykvist’s parents worked as missionaries in the Congo—obligated to spend a four-year term off in Africa for every one year back home where their children awaited them—and in view of these less-than-ideal circumstances, Nykvist’s notion of light keeping him company is both telling and poignant. The young Nykvist developed an interest in photography which,

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*The Tenant*, courtesy of MoMA Film Stills Archive

in turn, led him to enter the film industry in the early 40s as an assistant cameraman. His first project with Bergman was the 1953 film *The Naked Night*, when Nykvist came on board as a replacement. Bergman was immediately impressed with the young cameraman's technical facility as well as his calmness on the set (a useful counterbalance, one imagines, to Bergman's well-known temper in those early days). By the time of *Winter Light* (1961), a truly symbiotic relationship had gelled. In *Light Keeps Me Company*, Carl-Gustaf Nykvist's moving documentary about his father, Bergman himself recounts the famous story of sitting with Nykvist for an entire day in *Winter Light*'s church, carefully watching the minute changes in light as Nykvist snapped away with his still camera. In the same documentary, Woody Allen poignantly describes the emotional effect the changing light had on him when he first saw the film.

What makes Nykvist's work so magical? It's hard to pinpoint, but it has something to do with its natural beauty achieved through simplicity. Nykvist increasingly pioneered the use of natural light whenever possible, and when artificial light was called for, he kept the setups simple and minimal. But it would be a mistake to limit Nykvist's achievement to technical expertise. He is an artist blessed with a painterly eye and a heightened sensitivity to discerning just the right kind of beauty most appropriate for any particular film. For example, both Bergman's *Fanny and Alexander* (1981) and Andrei Tarkovsky's *The Sacrifice* (1985) are easily among the most ravishing color films in cinema history, and yet each comprise a very different look that is perfectly matched to the respective sensibilities of those films.

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Pretty Baby, courtesy of MoMA Film Stills Archive

The four English-language films in this program further attest to Nykvist's ability to customize his talents to a particular project. What four films could be more different in setting and tone? And yet Nykvist brings a striking and distinctive look to each of them. Roman Polanski's *The Tenant* (1976), a gothic horror/psychological thriller set in contemporary Paris, is permeated with dark, menacing grays and blues. Philip Kaufman's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1988), based on Milan Kundera's acclaimed novel set in Prague during the 1968 Soviet invasion, also has its generous share of grays and blues. But here, they shimmer with a pearlescent luster in keeping with the film's piquant mix of eroticism, melancholy, and irony. Different, still, is Louis Malle's *Pretty Baby* (1978), which Nykvist fills with pinks, cream tones, and pale greens mixed with dappled sunlight, lusciously evoking the sultry decadence of a New Orleans brothel during World War I. And for Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989), one of the director's more somber efforts, Nykvist uses autumnal shadings of gold and orange to reflect the darker moral quandaries of its affluent Manhattanites.

As Roman Polanski himself says in *Light Keeps Me Company*, "You can see the air in his movies." And perhaps that's the best description of Nykvist's magic. He makes the invisible visible. ♦

*Stan Schwartz has written about film and theater for such publications as The New York Times, Time Out New York, and Filmmaker Magazine.*

BAMcinématek presents *By the Light of Nykvist*, a seven-film series continuing through September dedicated to director/cinematographer Sven Nykvist. Check the schedule at [www.bam.org](http://www.bam.org) or call 718.636.4157.