

# Waiting for Abortion: Narratives of Passing Time, Decision-Making, and Late Abortions in Swedish TV Theater of the Late 1960s and Early 1970s

Elisabet Björklund

*English abstract: This article examines two Swedish TV theater plays from the late 1960s and early 1970s, which both portray the experience of waiting for an abortion. In the early 1960s, a major debate on abortion started in Sweden, which resulted in the creation of a public inquiry into the matter in 1965 and eventually the introduction of abortion on demand in 1975. In the period between 1965 and 1975, attitudes to abortion were changing, but women still had to follow a complicated procedure when applying for legal abortion. Through an analysis of narrative form and reception, the article explores how the two TV plays represent the experience of waiting for abortion caused by this legal and social framework and further discusses the plays as expressions of a form of waiting for political change. Moreover, the article argues that early television has been an overlooked source for Swedish historical studies on abortion.*

Pregnancy is often described as a time of waiting. Expressions such as “expecting” or “awaiting” a child speak of the temporal aspects of being pregnant, while at the same time suggesting a transitional condition. In their exploration of the cultural practices of waiting, ethnologists Billy Ehn and Orvar Löfgren characterized the waiting of pregnancy thus:

Pregnancy has in many ways become the dramatic archetype of being “in waiting” [. . .]. All over the world pregnancy is an organized wait that is directed by cultural rules, practices, and ideas. It is not a typical “non-event”; the nine months are, on the contrary, full of symbolic elaborations. The months illustrate dimensions of waiting related to time awareness, human control of the course of events, and varying modes of emotionality.<sup>1</sup>

When the desired end of a pregnancy is not the delivery of a child but an abortion, the waiting connected with being pregnant becomes – needless to say – entirely different. Legal, medical, and social frameworks regulating the possibilities for reproductive decision-making shape the conditions for this type of waiting in important ways.

This article examines how experiences of waiting for abortion within such frameworks were expressed in the media during the ten years preceding the introduction of abortion on demand in Sweden in 1975. This

---

1 Billy Ehn and Orvar Löfgren, *The Secret World of Doing Nothing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 64.

is accomplished through an analysis of two TV theater productions from the period, which both thematize the destructive effects of the lengthy procedure of applying for a legal abortion at the time. The first play, broadcast in 1967, was called *Förrädare mördare* (Traitors murderers, Håkan Ersgård) and was an adaptation of a novel by author Clas Engström, published in 1965 and built on personal experiences.<sup>2</sup> The second, broadcast in 1970, was called *Var god vänta* (Please wait), and was based on a letter sent to the TV theater production unit by a woman who had undergone a legal abortion.<sup>3</sup> As dramatizations of the consequences of the long wait for a legal abortion at this moment, the plays provide apt source material for studying how experiences of the passing of time during an unwanted pregnancy related to women's agency in reproductive decision-making.

The 1960s and 1970s were a crucial moment in the history of reproduction, when demands for liberalized abortion laws were raised and legal reform was eventually pushed through in many Western countries.<sup>4</sup> In Sweden, legal abortion had been introduced in 1938, but was only allowed under certain conditions. In the early 1960s, this law came into question in the context of public debates on topics related to sexuality.<sup>5</sup> The debate on abortion was the largest and most controversial of these, and in 1965 a public inquiry into the abortion issue was commissioned.<sup>6</sup> The committee presented its report in 1971, recommending the liberalization of abortion law. In 1974, abortion on demand was legislated in Sweden, and the new law came into force in 1975.<sup>7</sup> Between 1965 and 1975, Swedish abortion policy was thus “in limbo.” While the existing legislation formally allowed abortion only in exceptional cases, changing attitudes in the 1960s had resulted in medical praxis becoming more lenient in the interpretation of the law. By 1970, almost every

---

2 Clas Engström, *Förrädare mördare* (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1965).

3 All translations of Swedish sources into English are my own.

4 Dagmar Herzog, *Sexuality in Europe: A Twentieth-Century History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 156–61; Leslie J. Reagan, *When Abortion Was a Crime: Women, Medicine, and Law in the United States, 1867–1973* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 216–45; Martin S. Johnson and Nick Hopwood, “Modern Law and Regulation,” in *Reproduction: Antiquity to the Present Day*, ed. Nick Hopwood, Rebecca Flemming, and Lauren Kassell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 602–605.

5 Lena Lennerhed, *Frihet att njuta: Sexualdebatten i Sverige på 1960-talet* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1994).

6 In Sweden, a public commission of inquiry is usually appointed to analyze an issue before a new law on the matter can be introduced. Olof Petersson, “Rational Politics: Commissions of Inquiry and the Referral System in Sweden,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Swedish Politics*, ed. Jon Pierre (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 650–662.

7 Lennerhed, *Frihet att njuta*, 141–152; 1965 års abortkommitté, *Rätten till abort*, SOU 1971: 58 (Stockholm, 1971).

woman (97 percent) who applied for a legal abortion was given permission to abort.<sup>8</sup> Although the application procedure also became quicker,<sup>9</sup> it was still lengthy and bureaucratic.

This article shows how the two TV theater productions represent the specific experience of waiting constructed by the legal framework, medical praxis, and cultural conceptions of abortion during this period—factors crucial to the choices women were able to make. Moreover, it discusses their role in the larger abortion debate. While both plays deal with the long waiting time to which women who applied for abortion were subjected, they are also expressions of more widespread experiences—waiting for the report from the public inquiry, which was repeatedly postponed, and waiting for a decision about reformed legislation.<sup>10</sup> This approach has been inspired by a study by Adam Brenthel and Kristofer Hansson, which uses film clips from the Face of AIDS Film Archive in Sweden to discuss the different types of waiting in the early years of the AIDS epidemic. During this time, patients were waiting for death at the same time that they and the medical community were waiting for a cure.<sup>11</sup> In a similar vein, this article elucidates the relationship between waiting as a personal, albeit culturally and socially contingent, experience, and waiting on a larger societal level.

Methodologically, the analysis focuses on narrative form, especially using the distinction between the terms “plot” and “story” in narratology (or *syuzhet* and *fabula*, as originally termed by the Russian formalists), as they have been applied to the analysis of film. Plot is here defined as the presentation of the events in the film, while story is the viewer’s mental construction of every event depicted or inferred in the plot in chronological order, linked causally within a temporal and spatial frame.<sup>12</sup> By paying attention to the temporal aspects of how the plot organizes the story as well as to how this temporality interacts with stylistic choices in the representation of bodies, the analysis demonstrates that waiting for abortion in these plays is constructed as a destructive and humiliating experience depriving women of their possibilities for

8 Stefan Swärd, *Varför Sverige fick fri abort: Ett studium av en policyprocess* (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 1984), 41; Lennerhed, *Frihet att njuta*, 145; Lena Lennerhed, *Kvinnotrubbel: Abort i Sverige 1938–1975* (Möklinta: Gidlunds förlag, 2017), 122–124.

9 Lennerhed, *Kvinnotrubbel*, 122–123.

10 At first, the report was expected in 1968. It was then delayed to the turn of the year 1969/1970, and finally presented in 1971. Swärd, *Varför Sverige fick fri abort*, 40.

11 Adam Brenthel and Kristofer Hansson, “Waiting for a Cure: Cultural Perspectives on AIDS in the 1980s,” in *A Visual History of HIV/AIDS: Exploring the Face of AIDS Film Archive*, ed. Elisabet Björklund and Mariah Larsson (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 123–134.

12 David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 49–53.

autonomous decision-making. Studying the reception of the plays in the press, I also show that the dramatization of these experiences drew public attention to the issue and caused a spread of other personal stories of abortion in the media. By focusing on two plays about experiences of abortion and the negative effects of limited abortion access, the article contributes to recent research that seeks to highlight representations of abortion that differ from the ones used by anti-abortion movements.<sup>13</sup>

The article also provides a new perspective on this historical phase in Sweden by demonstrating television's role in the abortion debate. Previous research has provided rich accounts of public debates, changing attitudes, and political struggles over the matter during the twentieth century.<sup>14</sup> Audiovisual sources, however, have not been given much attention in this research, especially not in studies of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>15</sup> This is surprising, as film and television were media of great influence during this period. Film scholar Eric Schaefer argues that the "sexual revolution" was largely a media revolution.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, scholars studying television in particular claim that this medium was a significant force in the sexual revolution, not least because of its massive popularity.<sup>17</sup> In the 1960s and 1970s, television's impact was at its peak in Europe and the United States, thanks to its wide reach and a limited choice of channels.<sup>18</sup> In Sweden, there was only one television channel until 1969, and only two until the late 1980s, when the monopoly on broad-

13 Rachel Alpha Johnston Hurst, ed., *Representing Abortion* (London: Routledge, 2021).

14 Swärd, *Varför Sverige fick fri abort*; Lennerhed, *Frihet att njuta*; Elisabeth Elgán, *Genus och politik: En jämförelse mellan svensk och fransk abort- och preventivmedelspolitik från sekelskiftet till andra världskriget* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1994); Eva Palmblad, *Den disciplinerade reproduktionen: Abort- och steriliseringspolitikens dolda dagordning* (Stockholm: Carlsson, 2000); Lena Lennerhed, *Historier om ett brott: Illegal abort i Sverige på 1900-talet* (Stockholm: Atlas, 2008); Lena Lennerhed, "Sherri Finkbine's Choice: Abortion, Sex-Liberalism and Feminism in Sweden in the 1960s and 1970s," *Women's History Magazine* 73 (Autumn 2013): 13–18; Lennerhed, *Kvinnotrubbel*.

15 For discussions of abortion films in Sweden before the 1960s, see Tytti Soila, "Valborgsmässoafton: Melodrama and Gender Politics in Swedish Cinema," in *Popular European Cinema*, ed. Richard Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau (London: Routledge, 1992), 232–244; Lennerhed, *Historier om ett brott*, 134–147; Elisabet Björklund, "The Most Delicate Subject: A History of Sex Education Films in Sweden" (PhD diss., Lund University, 2012), 126–50; Solveig Jülich, "Picturing Abortion Opposition in Sweden: Lennart Nilsson's Early Photographs of Embryos and Fetuses," *Social History of Medicine* 31, no. 2 (2017): 288–289.

16 Eric Schaefer, "Introduction: Sex Seen: 1968 and the Rise of 'Public' Sex," in *Sex Scene: Media and the Sexual Revolution*, ed. Eric Schaefer (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 1–22.

17 Elana Levine, "The New Sexual Culture of American Television in the 1970s," in Schaefer, *Sex Scene*, 81–102; Christina von Hodenberg, *Television's Moment: Sitcom Audiences and the Sixties Cultural Revolution* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015).

18 Von Hodenberg, *Television's Moment*, 75.

cast media held by the public service enterprise was broken. Still, Swedish television of the 1960s and 1970s remains underexplored.

TV theater was one of the most popular TV formats.<sup>19</sup> The TV theater productions of the 1960s and 1970s were prerecorded plays mainly shot in studio and produced specifically for television. Rather than being broadcasts of performances at actual theatres, they were productions taking advantage of the media-specific qualities of television.<sup>20</sup> Generally, TV theater by far surpassed both theater and cinema in audience numbers. Only a dozen Swedish films in theatrical distribution attracted an audience of more than one million between 1963 and 1972, but more than a million viewers—around one-eighth of the entire population—was quite ordinary for TV theater plays.<sup>21</sup> One ambition for the format was that it would reach an audience who otherwise did not visit the theater, and audience studies of the 1970s confirm that it did indeed attract viewers of all social classes.<sup>22</sup>

The plays were also connected to what has been described as the radicalization and liberation of Swedish broadcasting.<sup>23</sup> From the mid-1960s, social criticism became a central characteristic of much TV production, not least through documentary films.<sup>24</sup> In these years, TV theater also changed. From then on, the majority of these plays were originally written for television, and productions set in contemporary Sweden and aimed at creating debate became a central part of the repertoire.<sup>25</sup> These changes were connected to international developments within television. In Britain, social criticism was the staple of much television drama in this period, propelled by the plays *Up the Junction* in 1965 (which also thematized abortion) and the immensely influential *Cathy Come Home* in 1966, both directed by Ken Loach.<sup>26</sup> Hence, the

19 Stefan Valmin, *TV-teater* (Stockholm: Sveriges Radios förlag, 1972), 187.

20 Niklas Persson Webjörn, *Bo Widerbergs tv-teater* (Lund: Sekel, 2011), 28–29.

21 Leif Furhammar, *Filmen i Sverige: En historia i tio kapitel och en fortsättning*, 3rd ed. (1991; Stockholm: Dialogos, 2003), 310; Gunnar Hallingberg, *Radio och TVdramatik* (Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1973), 221, 225; Valmin, *TV-teater*, 188.

22 Persson Webjörn, *Bo Widerbergs tv-teater*, 29; Hallingberg, *Radio och TVdramatik*, 232.

23 Furhammar, *Filmen i Sverige*, 289.

24 Leif Furhammar, "From Affluence to Poverty: The Early Swedish TV Documentary," in *A History of Swedish Broadcasting: Communicative Ethos, Genres and Institutional Change*, ed. Monika Djerf-Pierre and Mats Ekström (Göteborg: Nordicom, 2013), 241–259; Malin Wahlberg, "Vietnam in Transmission: Documentary Film and Solidarity Programming in Swedish Broadcasting Culture (1967–72)," *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema* 7, no. 1 (2017): 43–64.

25 Furhammar, *Filmen i Sverige*, 289–290; Hallingberg, *Radio och TVdramatik*, 83–84; Valmin, *TV-teater*, 117–118, 138–154.

26 John Caughie, *Television Drama: Realism, Modernism, and British Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

plays analyzed here were made at a time when television in general had a huge impact, and TV theater was an important platform for public debate.

In the sections that follow, I first present Swedish abortion policy until the introduction of abortion on demand in 1974 and discuss the role of film and television in public debate. The plays are then analyzed, and their reception discussed. The results are summed up and discussed in a conclusion.

## Swedish Abortion Policy and Public Debate, 1938–1974

After much public debate, political struggle, and a number of public inquiries, legal abortion was introduced in Sweden in 1938.<sup>27</sup> This legislation was passed while the Swedish welfare state was being constructed through social and legal reforms. Fueled by the view that Sweden had to encourage its citizens to have “more children of better quality,” many policies focused on the family and sexuality, greatly influenced by eugenic ideas.<sup>28</sup> According to the new law, abortion was allowed on medical, humanitarian, or eugenic conditions: if the pregnancy or delivery posed a risk to the life or health of the pregnant woman, if the pregnancy was the result of rape or incest, or if the woman or the father had a hereditary illness. Abortion was not allowed on social grounds, for example if the woman’s economic situation was difficult. Instead, such reasons for wanting an abortion were meant to be addressed by social reforms. The law was amended twice. From 1946, an abortion could also be allowed in case of the “predicted weakness” of the woman (this was a combined socio-medical indication).<sup>29</sup> And in 1963, after thousands of babies (in Sweden around 150) were born with birth defects because their mothers had used the drug thalidomide during pregnancy, the law was revised to also allow abortion in cases of fetal damage.<sup>30</sup> Still, the legal possibilities for abortion were very limited. “The abortion law can

---

27 Palmblad, *Den disciplinerade reproduktionen*, 18–19; Lennerhed, *Kvinnotrubbel*, 24–25. For a detailed discussion, see Elgán, *Genus och politik*, especially chapters 8 and 9, 123–183.

28 Ann-Sofie Källemark, *More Children of Better Quality: Aspects on Swedish Population Policy in the 1930's* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1980). On eugenics in Sweden, see Gunnar Broberg and Mattias Tydén, “Eugenics in Sweden: Efficient Care,” in *Eugenics and the Welfare State: Sterilization Policy in Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland*, ed. Gunnar Broberg and Nils Roll-Hansen (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2005), 77–149.

29 Elgán, *Genus och politik*, 80; Palmblad, *Den disciplinerade reproduktionen*, 19; Lennerhed, *Kvinnotrubbel*, 26–28.

30 Lennerhed, *Kvinnotrubbel*, 102–114.

be described as a law admitting exceptions, not providing rights,” Lena Lennerhed, an expert in Swedish abortion history, states.<sup>31</sup>

Applying for an abortion was a complicated process. A woman who wanted an abortion was subjected to a thorough investigation. This generally involved several visits: to a gynecologist, a psychiatrist, and a social welfare officer, before an application with a recommendation or rejection by the doctor was sent to the Royal Medical Board, who took the final decision. If the application was approved, she had to find a doctor who would agree to perform the abortion. The process could be sped up if the woman obtained a certificate from two medical doctors. She could then get the approval from the board after the abortion.<sup>32</sup> Lennerhed notes that the lengthy application process might have been a deliberate strategy to convince women not to have an abortion or to delay until it was too late.<sup>33</sup> Great efforts were made to reduce the number of legal and illegal abortions. In the 1940s, social welfare officers were employed whose core mission was to inform women who were considering abortion about the help offered by society, thus convincing them to go through with their pregnancies.<sup>34</sup> This led to a climate in which many women opted for illegal abortions in the 1940s and 1950s, which is also reflected in the film culture of the time.

Internationally, abortion has a long cinema history harking back to the silent era, but the topic did not become common in Swedish cinema until the 1940s.<sup>35</sup> Many films from this period stage the meeting between a pregnant woman and a medical doctor or a social welfare officer who convinces the woman to choose motherhood.<sup>36</sup> A large share of these films were also made in collaboration with authorities on sexual issues.<sup>37</sup> For example, the first social welfare officer employed to work specifically with abortion-seeking women in Stockholm, Lis Lagercrantz-Asklund, had cowritten the manuscript for a feature film called *Moderskapets kval och lycka* (The agony and happiness of motherhood, Ivar Johansson, 1945) and also starred as herself in the government-

---

31 Lennerhed, “Sherri Finkbine’s Choice,” 13.

32 Palmblad, *Den disciplinerade reproduktionen*, 56–59; Lennerhed, *Kvinnotrubbel*, 28–30.

33 Lennerhed, *Historier om ett brott*, 164–165. See also Palmblad, *Den disciplinerade reproduktionen*, 58–59.

34 Lennerhed, *Historier om ett brott*, 149–150, 152.

35 See, e.g., Cornelia Osborne, *Cultures of Abortion in Weimar Germany* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007). For the Swedish context, see Lennerhed, *Historier om ett brott*, 134–47; Björklund, “Most Delicate Subject,” 126–150.

36 Björklund, 140–141.

37 Björklund, 105.

sponsored short film *Vi ska ha barn* (We are having children, Egil Holmsen, 1948).<sup>38</sup>

Lennerhed demonstrates that opposition toward abortion was unified in the 1940s and 1950s. Even formerly radical voices, such as the Swedish Association for Sexuality Education, supported the restrictive policy during this time.<sup>39</sup> The change in attitudes that occurred in the 1960s was thus truly momentous. Abortion on demand, which in the early 1960s was an extremely controversial idea, would become a solution supported by a majority in Parliament only a decade later. The debates started in the early 1960s, when the liberal and social democratic youth and students' movement began raising the issue and taking a stand for abortion on demand, and culminated in 1965, when the public inquiry was commissioned.<sup>40</sup> After six years of investigation, the proposal that the inquiry eventually presented in 1971 was that women should have the right to an abortion, but that the application procedure be kept. After the proposal was referred to a number of bodies, however, the proposition ultimately presented to Parliament was that a woman should have freedom to decide until the twelfth week of pregnancy, and until the eighteenth week after investigation. Between weeks eighteen and twenty-four, the decision was to be made by the National Board of Health and Welfare. The proposition was accepted with a vote of approximately two-thirds of Parliament in favor and one-third against. The Social Democratic Party and the Communist Party almost unanimously supported the law, while the Moderate Party (formerly the Conservative Party) was generally against it. The parties in the center were divided in their vote.<sup>41</sup>

According to Lennerhed, two larger tendencies enabled this shift: the sexual liberation movement, which demanded political change in a number of sexual issues, and the larger discussion on gender roles that occurred around the same time. While feminist engagement in the abortion issue was not prominent until the new women's movement appeared in the late 1960s, Lennerhed argues that the more general gender debate paved the way for a new view of women that was crucial for changing attitudes to abortion.<sup>42</sup> Another significant factor is that the

---

38 Björklund, 129.

39 Lennerhed, *Historier om ett brott*, 166.

40 Swärd, *Varför Sverige fick fri abort*, 36–38; Lennerhed, *Frihet att njuta*, 141–145; Lennerhed, *Kvinnotrubbel*, 125–130.

41 Swärd, *Varför Sverige fick fri abort*, 38–48; Maud Eduards, *Kroppspolitik: Om Moder Svea och andra kvinnor* (Stockholm: Atlas, 2007), 98–102; Lennerhed, *Kvinnotrubbel*, 137–142.

42 Lennerhed, *Kvinnotrubbel*, 130–35. Two central texts in these debates were Kristina Ahlmark-Michanek's *Jungfrutro och dubbelmoral* (Lund: Cavefors, 1962), and Eva



issue was brought into public awareness through a number of media events. In 1962, American TV host Sherri Finkbine flew to Sweden to have an abortion, as she had taken thalidomide but been denied legal abortion in Arizona, where she lived. The case attracted massive media attention—Lennerhed calls it “probably one of the most recognized [abortions] in history.”<sup>43</sup> Moreover, in 1965, it became publicly known that women in Sweden were traveling to Poland to have abortions, where abortion had been legal since 1959. The police raided the home of Hans Nestius, one of the most active liberal voices in the debate, who had helped women contact Polish doctors, and a prosecution was planned but eventually discontinued.<sup>44</sup> Maud Eduards underlines the importance of this event, arguing that women politicized the abortion issue through their collective travels.<sup>45</sup>

The period from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s, when the Abortion Committee was working, has received less attention. Stefan Swärd notes that the abortion debate was limited during this period, but that it resurfaced in the early 1970s, expressing an “impatience” about the inquiry’s many delays.<sup>46</sup> One aspect that became central during this time was the problem of late abortions.<sup>47</sup> It was also in the mid- to late 1960s that Swedish television began devoting greater attention to the abortion issue. Among the programs aired in this period were two that demonstrated how abortions were carried out.

In an episode of a medical series called *Ronden* (The Round) in 1966, one part focused on abortion and dramatized the procedure for having a legal abortion. This program also included documentary scenes from an actual abortion through dilation and curettage (D&C)—a method in

---

Moberg’s “Kvinnans villkorliga frigivning,” in *Unga liberaler: Nio inlägg i idédebatten*, ed. Hans Hederberg (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1961), 68–86. See also Lennerhed, “Sherri Finkbine’s Choice”; Emma Isaksson, *Kvinnokamp: Synen på underordning och motstånd i den nya kvinnorörelsen* (Stockholm: Atlas, 2007), 79–86; Elisabeth Elgán, *Att ge sig själv makt: Grupp 8 och 1970-talets feminism* (Göteborg: Makadam, 2015), 26–27, 139–142. For general discussions of the debate on gender roles during the period, see Christina Florin and Bengt Nilsson, “Något som liknar en oblodig revolution . . .” *Jämställdhetens politisering under 1960- och 1970-talen* (Umeå: Umeå University, 2000); Jenny Leontine Olsson, “Kön i förändring. Den svenska könsrollsforskningen 1959–1979” (PhD diss., Stockholm University, 2011).

43 Lennerhed, *Historier om ett brott*, 169–173 (for the quotation, see 169); Lennerhed, *Kvinnotrubbel*, 106–107.

44 Lennerhed, *Historier om ett brott*, 174–178; Eduards, *Kroppspolitik*, 95–96.

45 Eduards, *Kroppspolitik*, 96.

46 Swärd, *Varför Sverige fick fri abort*, 43.

47 Jülich, “Picturing Abortion Opposition,” 278–307, 301–302. This was also connected to debates about the uses of aborted fetuses in medical research. Solveig Jülich, “Fosterexperimentens produktiva hemlighet: Medicinsk forskning och vita lögnar i 1960- och 1970-talets Sverige,” *Lychnos* (2018): 10–49.

which the cervix is dilated and the uterus evacuated using various instruments, often used during the first twelve weeks of pregnancy.<sup>48</sup> More controversially, in 1969 the documentary *Abort: Fakta och synpunkter om avbrytande av havandeskap* (Abortion: Facts and Opinions about Terminating Pregnancy) explicitly demonstrated a number of different abortion methods. Among them were two new techniques: vacuum aspiration and saline injection. In vacuum aspiration, the contents of the uterus were sucked out through a tube connected to a pump, a method that gradually replaced earlier methods of D&C during this period. In saline injection, used for later abortions, saline was injected into the uterus, causing a miscarriage.<sup>49</sup> The most controversial scene in the program, however, was when an abdominal hysterotomy was displayed—an operation used for late abortions in which the fetus was removed through incision of the uterus through the abdomen, sometimes called “small caesarean section.”<sup>50</sup> In explicit detail, the viewers could observe how a fetus of seventeen to eighteen weeks was aborted and placed in a metal kidney dish.

Reports in the press recurrently referred to the program as a “shock” to the viewers, and many criticized its use of fetal images.<sup>51</sup> Visual representations of human fetuses have a long history, but the 1960s are often understood as a moment when the fetus started to be more widely visible in public. This heightened visibility is often connected to the wide dissemination of Swedish photographer Lennart Nilsson’s famous images of human fetuses following their publication in *Life* magazine and the pregnancy advice book *Ett barn blir till* (*A Child is Born*) in 1965. Feminist scholars have argued that this new “public fetus” had negative consequences for women’s reproductive rights. For instance, fetal images, not least the ones by Nilsson, have since the 1970s been an important tool for the US anti-abortion movement.<sup>52</sup> The practice of using fetal im-

---

48 Morag Ramsey, “The Swedish Abortion Pill: Co-Producing Medical Abortion and Values, ca. 1965–1992” (PhD diss., Uppsala University, 2021), 49; SOU 1971: 58, 39, 44.

49 Ramsey, “Swedish Abortion Pill,” 49–50; SOU 1971: 58, 39–40, 44–47.

50 Ramsey, “Swedish Abortion Pill,” 49; SOU 1971: 58, 40, 47–48.

51 E.g., Pia Gadd, “Abort-chock i TV i kväll,” *Expressen*, October 15, 1969; Torbjörn Wahlstedt, “Efter TV-chocken i går: Alla som vill får fri abort till 12:e veckan,” *Aftonbladet*, October 16, 1969.

52 E.g., Rosalind Petchesky, “Fetal Images: The Power of Visual Culture in the Politics of Reproduction,” *Feminist Studies* 13, no. 2 (1987): 263–292; Barbara Duden, *Disembodying Women: Perspectives on Pregnancy and the Unborn* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 50–55; Carole Stabile, “Shooting the Mother – Fetal Photography and the Politics of Disappearance,” in *The Visible Woman – Imaging Technologies, Gender, and Science*, ed. Paula A. Treichler, Lisa Cartwright, and Constance Penley (1992; New York: New York University Press, 1998), 171–197; Richard L. Hughes, “Burning Birth Certificates and Atomic Tupperware Parties: Crea-

ages in anti-abortion campaigns was, however, not new; Nilsson's images were first published in connection with magazine articles critical of abortion in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>53</sup>

When *Förrädare mördare* and *Var god vänta* were shown in 1967 and 1970 respectively, the plays were hence part of a process in which the abortion debate had spread from the press into the relatively new public space of television. The issue of late abortions had also become a topic of growing concern, and images of fetal bodies were spreading in the media.

### Delays and Interruptions: *Förrädare mördare* (1967)

*Förrädare mördare* is a play of approximately one hour and forty minutes, which tells the story of how Rut (Pia Rydvall) and Klas (Hans Wigren), a married couple with two children—Malin and Mia (Lena and Åsa Holst)—experience the bureaucratic and lengthy procedure of applying for legal abortion. Because Klas has developed a sore on his penis, probably caused by Rut's diaphragm, Klas and Rut have sex one night using only spermicide, which results in an unwanted pregnancy. As Rut, a substitute teacher, is informed that she might lose her job if pregnant, and Klas, an artist, does not have a steady income, they decide to apply for an abortion. The plot spans the time from a happy evening before Rut gets pregnant until the day when Klas visits her at the hospital after the abortion. At this point, not only has Rut and Klas's relationship been strained to breaking point, but also the abortion that was supposed to be a "simple scraping" at the beginning turned into a hysterotomy owing to the delays—an operation that Rut was furthermore never informed about.

The state of waiting is thematized in many ways in the play and is generally represented as a borderland. The first shot shows the building outside a railway station—clearly a place of waiting—after which the camera tilts down to display a crosswalk while the title of the play is superimposed over the image. The crosswalk is of course also a place where you wait, and can furthermore be seen to symbolize a liminal state between one path and another. The story is also set during the summer holidays, a break in between the ordinary day-to-day routines of the spring and autumn semesters.

---

ting the Antiabortion Movement in the Shadow of the Vietnam War," *The Historian* 68, no. 3 (2006): 541–558.

53 Jülich, "Picturing Abortion Opposition."



*The crosswalk at the beginning of Förrädare mördare. Published with permission from SVT – Sveriges Television AB.*

The primary way in which the experience of waiting is staged, however, is through the organization of plot and story. There are a number of scenes shot outdoors in the play, and the ending scenes depict the hospital environment, but the plot is mainly concentrated within the moments when Rut and Klas are at home. Through the course of the play, Rut and Klas talk to and visit various persons in power: Rut's gynecologist; her cousin Åke, who is a medical doctor; the social welfare officer; and the staff at the hospital. In all, they have fifteen contacts with medical or social authorities. All are significant parts of the story, but the authorities are never visually present in the plot. In some cases, they are represented as an unheard voice at the other end of a telephone. But mostly the meetings are retold by Rut or Klas in conversation. The drama is consequently spatially constrained, as it is set almost entirely in Rut and Klas's four-room apartment, and the crucial moments in the story when Rut and Klas meet with various authorities and in which important information is provided are presented in retrospect through conversation. This narrative structure has a number of implications.

First, depriving the authorities of a physical presence constructs power as invisible and impersonal. The only adult person aside from Rut and Klas that we meet in the play is Rut's boss, the headmaster at the school where she works. All the other characters are present only through Rut and Klas's conversations. One function of this absence is to foreground the system, rather than certain individuals, as the root of the problem. But it also functions to represent medical authority in particular as callous and unavailable. This quality is further articulated in the last scene of the film, when Rut tells Klas about the abortion. Here, she mentions that all the doctors and nurses that she met at the hospital wore masks

and that no one introduced him- or herself. This choice differs markedly from earlier representations of abortion in Swedish film, in which the meeting between a woman and a doctor or a social worker was central and probably aimed at building up trust in welfare institutions.<sup>54</sup>

Second, not giving the authorities a visual presence also means that Rut's bodily examinations and the abortion at the end of the play are never shown. This omission shifts the emphasis from the audience's perception of these events to Rut's subjective experiences of them, which she expresses verbally as well as through facial expressions and body language. Moreover, it contributes to the focus on the effect the waiting has on Rut and Klas's relationship—a focus that is supported by the frequent use of medium shots and close-ups of Klas and Rut when they talk. Certainly a choice connected to the limitations of the small frame of television sets in this era, it nevertheless grants an intimacy to the drama, which highlights the emotional aspects of the events.

Finally, and most importantly, the narrative structure is crucial in constructing the experience of waiting as destructive. The narration is built around a strategy of restricting the range of knowledge to what Rut and Klas know. Furthermore, this restriction alternates between Rut's and Klas' perspectives at different moments in the play.<sup>55</sup> As the authorities who confer information are never directly represented, the viewer shares the characters' respective lack of knowledge at certain points in time. Moreover, the communication of information is constantly delayed in a way that makes the audience share the frustrating experience of waiting with the character who, at a given moment, knows less. For instance, when Rut arrives home after having visited the social welfare officer, Klas is eager to know what happened, but Rut tells him to wait and first goes into the bathroom. The larger waiting that Rut and Klas go through is thus mirrored in the many smaller delays in which one character waits for the other to communicate. The sheer number of contacts to be narrated, moreover, creates a structure of repeated waiting times. Further adding to the wearisome experience is that some of the contacts are futile. For example, in one scene that depicts Rut's frustration when waiting for a call from Åke, Rut finally decides to make the call herself. The only answer she gets is that Åke has not yet received the expected report from the social welfare officer.

---

54 Björklund, "Most Delicate Subject," 140–141.

55 On narration and range of knowledge, see Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 57–58.



*Rut (Pia Rydvall) waiting while Klas (Hans Wigren) talks on the phone. Published with permission from SVT – Sveriges Television AB.*

Apart from the structure of the plot, the role of the children also contributes to the construction of waiting as a frustrating and destructive process. Rut and Klas's communication is not only constantly delayed; it is also repeatedly interrupted by Malin and Mia. In one scene, when Rut is tired after a visit to the gynecologist and struggles to tell Klas about the meeting, the children come running into their bedroom, where they have resorted to talk, and start jumping and playing on their bed. But the children are not only represented as interfering with communication. An important theme is also how the process affects the children and the family as a whole, which plays out through a motif of fire and water. For example, the children accidentally set fire to a curtain when Rut and Klas are busy talking about the abortion, and later they run away to go swimming—a very dangerous idea, as the younger sister has not yet learned how. While these mishaps never result in any greater harm, they symbolize how the situation sends the whole family into a downward spiral.

While the main temporal dimensions of the play thus deal with the experience of passing time in the present, another level of temporality exists as well. In order to get the abortion application approved, Rut and Klas bring up, inflate, and fabricate problems in their relationship during interactions with authorities. These issues revolve around two related events: Rut's experience of what can be interpreted as postpartum depression after her first pregnancy and Klas's relationship with another woman following this episode. While exaggerating the negative influence of these events on their relationship to make an abortion seem necessary, Rut and Klas simultaneously start to question and reinterpret the narrative of their shared past. The agonizing application process to

determine the future of the ongoing pregnancy thus involves a revisiting of the past, which in itself affects both the present and the future.

A central point in the play is that the application process deprives women of all autonomy in decision-making. When Rut finally receives the letter from the Royal Medical Board with the approval, Klas declares that she is now free to make the decision herself. Rut is confused and shocked by this statement, arguing that the process on the contrary has made it impossible for her to decide for herself. “For every day that has passed, this abortion has become more and more necessary,” she exclaims. While the lengthy application procedure can be interpreted as an effort to make women change their minds, as the growing fetus made an abortion more and more problematic with time, Rut’s experience is that the agonizing process has paradoxically made an abortion inescapable. Hence, the procedure has in itself produced reasons for the abortion that might not have been there in the first place. “The investigation has created the ‘weakness’ that is the motivation for the abortion,” as critic Sven Lindqvist noted in his review of Engström’s novel.<sup>56</sup> Consequently, *Förrädare mördare* expresses not only how waiting for a decision to be made by someone else is a frustrating experience but also how waiting for an abortion at this historical moment functioned to further minimize women’s already limited reproductive agency. By avoiding representations of Rut’s examinations and the abortion itself and instead focusing on Rut’s and Klas’ expressions of their feelings through an intimate use of cinematography, the narrative furthermore privileges the subjective experiences of waiting for an abortion—a choice which differed from other representations of pregnancy and abortion circulating during this time.

### **Loneliness and Abandonment: *Var god vänta* (1970)**

The second play, *Var god vänta*, is also centrally about waiting—which is explicit in its title (Please wait)—but its narrative form is different from that of *Förrädare mördare*. First of all, the play is much shorter—only sixteen minutes long—and it is much simpler in style and production, consisting of a monologue by actress Helena Brodin. The play begins with a voiceover briefly stating statistics about abortion in Sweden—that fourteen thousand women had an abortion in 1969 and that these were 94 percent of the applications—and explaining that one woman who had gone through an abortion had written to the TV theater unit about her experiences. After this, the narrative is divided into eight

---

56 Sven Lindqvist, “Roman om en abort,” *Dagens Nyheter*, August 30, 1965.

shorter segments, clearly marked by the insertion of intertitles indicating the present week of the pregnancy (from week seven to week eighteen). The viewers thus follow the woman from week to week in scenes where she looks back and recounts her experiences of the process, from the moment when she first finds out that she is pregnant to a few weeks after the abortion, when she has started working again.

One of the most conspicuous differences between *Förrädare mördare* and *Var god vänta* is that the latter tells the story of a single woman. In *Förrädare mördare*, a central theme is that waiting negatively affects the relationship between Rut and Klas, and their family as a whole. Moreover, the agonizing experience of waiting is constructed in the communication between them. *Var god vänta*, on the other hand, depicts the difficulties that the waiting entails for a woman who is alone. This is most clearly represented through the play's minimal mise-en-scène. Throughout the play, Brodin is seated in front of a steady camera, framed at the center of the picture in a medium shot so that only her head, shoulders, and upper body are displayed. The part of her body that the play centrally concerns (where her uterus is located) is thus left completely out of the frame. She is dressed in a green shirt and has shoulder-length hair. Behind her is nothing but a white wall or screen. While talking, Brodin looks either straight into the camera, a bit to the side of it, or at the floor, as if she were in conversation with the audience. The lack of any kind of context or surroundings is one part of the play's construction of the woman as lonely. The formal choice of the monologue is another. As Brodin never receives any kind of answer or reaction to her story, the play comes across as being her private thoughts, diary notes, or a letter (as its original)—a lonely narration without direct contact with a listener. This sense of isolation is further underlined by the medium itself—a monologue at a theater has an actual audience, while the actor is alone in a television performance.





*Helena Brodin as the anonymous woman in Var god vänta. Published with permission from SVT – Sveriges Television AB.*

One similarity with *Förrädare mördare* is that *Var god vänta* also shows how the lengthy application procedure transforms something that seems uncomplicated into a trauma. In the beginning of the play, the woman calls her situation “simple”—she has been abandoned by the man who impregnated her, has problems with work and housing, and hence has no difficulty deciding about an abortion. When she is required to visit the Mental Health Bureau (as the counseling bureaus for abortion-seeking women were called), she does not understand why, probably as she does not consider her problem to pertain to mental health. When recounting her visits to the psychiatrist, the gynecologist, and the social welfare officer, she says that they all judged her case as being decided. After numerous delays and an uncertainty about the duration of the pregnancy, the vacuum aspiration method that was originally planned is deemed too late. The woman thus has to wait even longer to have an abortion through saline injection. After further delay, the abortion is carried out in the sixteenth week and is a painful and brutal experience. In the last section of the play, the woman talks about being afraid to go outside, about having nightmares, and about her confusion about suddenly having milk in her breasts. There is no care after an abortion, she tells us. What was once a “simple” situation has consequently turned into a psychologically complex one. In the beginning of the play, the woman did not understand the relevance of psychological or psychiatric care, but at the end, when she expresses a need for it, she is left completely alone.

Another similarity with *Förrädare mördare* is the absence and lack of individuality of the authorities that the woman meets, as well as the choice not to show the bodily examinations and the abortion. The narration is organized in a similar way as in Engström's play, with the character recounting the meetings with anonymous doctors and social workers, referred to only as "the psychiatrist," "the gynecologist," and so on. Some of the meetings are also described as cruel and humiliating. For instance, in the scene when the woman recounts the visit with the doctor when she was first supposed to have the abortion, she describes how she had to wait for another doctor for half an hour in the gynecological chair and was addressed in a degrading way by the nurse. In her account of the actual abortion, the woman relates that she was not given any pain relief and that she was rolled away into a washing room when the contractions started. When she was experiencing how something "hung out of her," a nurse came and told her that it was "only the feet," whereupon she was helped when finally bearing down the fetus. When, three days afterward, she was allowed to walk and could eat with the other patients, she had to share a table with women who had just become mothers—"they were mostly talking about baby food," she notes. Just as in Engström's play, the structuring of time in *Var god vänta* thus forms a criticism of a heartless system of anonymous and insensitive authorities and caregivers while giving voice to the woman's perspective. In this case, however, this criticism is articulated most clearly by showing how a system aimed at social support resulted in social abandonment. As in *Förrädare mördare*, the body of the woman is also deemphasized through the narrative structure and the stylistic choices, and instead, her subjective experience is placed center stage.

## Reception

The play that undoubtedly received the most attention of the two was *Förrädare mördare*. When published as a book in 1965, it had met with positive reviews and was the topic of some debate, but this was nothing compared with the response to the play two years later. Being an adaptation, the play had been announced long before its broadcast, which probably raised expectations and interest.<sup>57</sup> Another factor is that the play was an important part of a process of sexual liberation in Swedish television. Since the 1950s, Swedish cinema had started being associated with nudity and sexual freedom, and this reputation intensified in the

---

57 See, e.g., JIBE, "TV-pjäs om fri abort efter Clas Engströms roman," *Dagens Nyheter*, July 29, 1966; Ulf Ridefelt, "Abortpjäs repeteras för TV," *Expressen*, August 11, 1966.

1960s as a number of sexually explicit art films broke through “the sex barrier” and triggered a liberalization of Swedish film censorship.<sup>58</sup> Sexual content was a much more sensitive issue in television.<sup>59</sup> Yet, in the mid-1960s, taboos started being challenged, and one of the more famous incidents occurred when actor Per Oscarsson stripped to his underpants in the immensely popular TV show *Hylands hörna* (Hyland’s Corner) in 1966. The year after that, *Förrädare mördare* also roused a great deal of reaction by mentioning certain “dirty words” (“cock,” “condom,” and “diaphragm”) and two (nonexplicit) depictions of sexual intercourse at the beginning of the play.<sup>60</sup> Another storm of protest broke out when Oscarsson and Engström appeared together in a program accompanying the opening of the art exhibition *Multikonst* (Multi Art) in February the same year, using the word “fuck” as they were discussing erotic art together with artists Inga Bagge and Pye Engström (who was married to Clas Engström).<sup>61</sup> After this broadcast, Clas and Pye Engström and their family were given much attention in the press, and Clas Engström became known as a provocative author and playwright.<sup>62</sup>

The abortion theme was definitely also at the center of the discussions. For example, the front page of the newspaper *Aftonbladet* read, “Why should others decide over my unborn child? Yesterday’s TV theater play gave new fire to the abortion debate.”<sup>63</sup> Critics generally reacted positively to the play, and some even emphasized its potential to make an impact. In the broadsheet *Svenska Dagbladet*, Gunnar Falk wrote that the play does not argue but “highlights a piece of life, a problem, in such

---

58 See, e.g., Elisabet Björklund and Mariah Larsson, eds., *Swedish Cinema and the Sexual Revolution: Critical Essays* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland 2016).

59 Madeleine Kleberg, “Skötsam kvinnosyn: Hem- och familjereportage i svensk TV åren 1960–1969” (PhD diss., Stockholm University, 1999), 170–179.

60 See, e.g., Lars Rundkvist, “Folkstorm igår mot Clas Engströms ‘fula ord,’” *Aftonbladet*, January 24, 1967; Lars Ohngren, “Bra teater igår, men onödiga detaljer,” *Expressen*, January 24, 1967.

61 E.g., Ronny Nygren, “Per vållade ny TV-chock: ‘Varför reagerar folk så starkt för ordet knulla?’” *Expressen*, February 12, 1967; Bertil G. Nilsson, “Dubbel tittarstorm när Per Oscarsson sa ‘sex-ord’ i TV,” *Aftonbladet*, February 12, 1967. See also David Rynell Åhlén, *Samtida konst på bästa sändningstid: Konst i svensk television 1956–1969* (Lund: Mediehistoriskt arkiv, 2016), 202–203.

62 E.g. Lars Widding, “Familjen som retar folkstormen,” *Expressen*, February 18, 1967; Elisabeth Frankl, “Han skrev abortpjäsen. Hon gör ‘porrskulptur’ . . . vad är det för sorts folk egentligen?” *Aftonbladet*, February 19, 1967.

63 “Varför ska andra bestämma över mitt ofödda barn? Tv-pjäsen igår satte ny fart på abortdebatten,” *Aftonbladet*, January 24, 1967. See also, e.g., Anne Palmers, “Apropå TV-pjäsen i går kväll: 85 proc. får abort – men det tar 8 veckor,” *Göteborgs-Tidningen*, January 24, 1967.

strong light that no one can close their eyes in indifference.”<sup>64</sup> And in the tabloid *Expressen*, Bo Strömstedt called *Förrädare mördare* “a TV play [. . .] that really—with a crash—*reaches* the people.”<sup>65</sup> In the wake of the play, newspapers also published stories from women who had applied for abortion themselves and experienced the waiting time.<sup>66</sup> After one such story, *Expressen* encouraged readers to call them and state their opinions, and the newspaper later reported that they had talked to hundreds of women, of whom a number were quoted in the article, and that the majority thought that abortion cases should be prioritized.<sup>67</sup>

Through his willingness to talk to the media, Clas Engström himself also contributed to the play’s publicity. Engström participated in many interviews, sometimes with his family, and he was clear about his own opinions—stating explicitly that he thought abortion on demand was the only reasonable option.<sup>68</sup> He and his wife were also open about the novel and the play being based on their personal experiences.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, Engström wrote articles in the press. When the play was criticized by theater critic Bengt Jahnsson for being “peep-show realism,” Engström published a response, arguing that this was the whole point: the play aimed to convey a sense of entrapment and suffocation. He also found television to be “a very suitable medium” for staging this atmosphere.<sup>70</sup> Engström was also active in the continued abortion debate. In 1969, he was one among many who criticized the program *Abort* for showing images of aborted fetuses.<sup>71</sup>

*Var god vänta* itself did not attract as much attention as *Förrädare mördare*, but it had a snowball effect. The play was aired on a Tuesday evening and reprised the day after. On the Thursday of the same week, it was followed by a debate program on the abortion issue—*Målet gäller*

64 Gunnar Falk, “TV-teatern: Kärlekslycka under utredning,” *Svenska Dagbladet*, 24 January, 1967.

65 Bo Strömstedt, “Ett samtalsämne,” *Expressen*, January 26, 1967. Emphasis in original.

66 E.g., Marianne Lundgren, “Hon fick ja till abort – då kände hon redan barnet röra sig,” *Göteborgs-Tidningen*, January 25, 1967; “Jag har fått abort,” *Expressen*, February 3, 1967.

67 Folke Lind, “Fick abort-ja i femte månaden!,” *Expressen*, February 1, 1967; “Expressen-läsarna tycker: Abortfall ska snabb-behandlas,” *Expressen*, February 2, 1967.

68 E.g., Grand, “Åttonde boken genombrottet. Clas Engström: Ändra abortlagen!,” *Dagens Nyheter*, September 6, 1965; JIBE, “TV-pjäs om fri abort”; Bernt Nilsson, “Hur känns det idag då Clas Engström,” *Aftonbladet*, January 25, 1967.

69 Bernt Nilsson, “Här kommer mannen bakom TV:s abortpjäs,” *Aftonbladet*, January 28, 1967; Frankl, “Han skrev abortpjäsen.”

70 Bengt Jahnsson, “Lång väntan på abort,” *Dagens Nyheter*, January 24, 1967; Bengt Jahnsson, “Tittskåpsteater som skrämmar,” *Dagens Nyheter*, February 1, 1967; Clas Engström, “TV-teatern är tittskåp!,” *Dagens Nyheter*, February 18, 1967.

71 Clas Engström, “Skamgrepp i abortdebatten,” *Expressen*, November 8, 1969.

(The Case Concerns)—staged as a courtroom drama with one side against abortion and the other in favor. “An enterprise aimed at creating debate cannot be organized in a better way,” one critic commented about the scheduling.<sup>72</sup> The debate program attracted a great deal of attention in the press and was followed by an opinion poll by Swedish Radio, which showed that 86 percent of those who had seen the program supported reformed abortion legislation.<sup>73</sup> Women with experiences like the one presented in the play also made their voices heard. For example, *Expressen* interviewed a woman who was in the same situation as Brodin’s character and had seen the play and the debate program, and also published a series of extracts from her diary.<sup>74</sup> Swedish Radio received many letters after the debate program, and subsequently forwarded them to the public inquiry. It was reported that a majority of these letters reacted negatively to a change in legislation, but many also included stories from women who had gone through abortions themselves.<sup>75</sup> The following year, journalist Ann Wilkens also published a short debate book—“motivated by anger and impatience,” according to the foreword—titled *Abort i Sverige: Var god vänta* (Abortion in Sweden: Please wait).<sup>76</sup> The book dealt with the issue of the lengthy approval procedures as well as the long-running investigation of the Abortion Committee, explicitly referring to both *Var god vänta* and the debate program.<sup>77</sup> *Var god vänta* thus sparked renewed discussion on the abortion issue in the early 1970s.

Waiting and its effects on physical and mental health thus also played an important role in discussions after the plays were aired and triggered the sharing of personal experiences of abortion in public. This phenomenon can be related to international trends in discussions of abortion during this era, in which women’s own experiences were given expression in the media and started being used as an important political tool

---

72 Stig Göran Gustafsson, “Initiativ som lovar gott,” *Göteborgs-Tidningen*, November 11, 1970.

73 See, e.g., Maria-Pia Boëthius, “Fri abort eller ingen alls? Oförenliga parter i kvällens TV-debatt,” *Expressen*, November 12, 1970; “Abortlagen förnedrande,” editorial, *Expressen*, November 13, 1970; Bosse Gustafson, “Barn som syndastraff,” *Aftonbladet*, November 19, 1970; “Dagmar Heurlin tror inte på TV 2:s opinionsundersökare,” *Aftonbladet*, November 23, 1970.

74 Maria-Pia Boëthius, “Jag ville bara dö,” *Expressen*, November 13, 1970; “Sista dagen för aborten: ‘Om det hela ändå vore över!’,” *Expressen*, November 19, 1970.

75 Bo Teglund, “Rättvisande om aborter,” *Dagens Nyheter*, November 23, 1970; Lennerhed, *Kvinnotrubbel*, 9–11.

76 Ann Wilkens, *Abort i Sverige: Var god vänta* (Uppsala: Verdandi-debatt, 1971), 7.

77 Wilkens, 21–25.

by the feminist movement.<sup>78</sup> The staging of the plays was hence successful in conveying these ideas and raising attention within a wider audience.

## Conclusion

*Förrädare mördare* and *Var god vänta* thematize the temporal aspects of pregnancy and reproductive decision-making through their staging of experiences of waiting for an abortion. Produced in 1967 and 1970 respectively, they were made at a time when abortion legislation was under examination in Sweden and medical abortion praxis had become more liberal, while women who wanted an abortion still had to go through a complicated application process. *Förrädare mördare* demonstrates how this process destroyed the marriage of a couple with two children, while *Var god vänta* focuses on how the procedure influences a single woman. In both plays, plot and story are organized so that meetings with doctors and other authorities are not directly represented, but only retold, which has a number of effects. In both cases, it renders these authorities faceless and anonymous, which emphasizes the system, rather than individuals, as the core of the problem. At the same time, medical and social authorities are constructed as cold and distant.

In *Förrädare mördare*, the narrative style furthermore enables the audience to share the frustrating experience of waiting with the characters through restricting knowledge and repeatedly delaying and interrupting the communication of information between them. The play also demonstrates how the application process creates reinterpretations of the past in order to impact the future, and how this generates motivations for the abortion. When the waiting for a decision is over, Rut has consequently been deprived of the possibility of making an independent choice. In a similar way, *Var god vänta* demonstrates how waiting transforms a healthy and confident woman into a distressed and humiliated one, and a “simple” situation into an increasingly psychologically complex one. Moreover, the play’s form and style emphasize her loneliness. By making the play a monologue and by using a minimalistic setting, the character comes across as isolated and abandoned, without any communicative ties to a larger community.

Although the debate on abortion might have decreased in the Swedish press after 1965, it was still vibrant in the medium of television.

---

<sup>78</sup> Manon Parry, *Broadcasting Birth Control: Mass Media and Family Planning* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 66; Reagan, *When Abortion was a Crime*, 229–230.

Both *Förrädare mördare* and *Var god vänta* had an impact and triggered further debate. They were hence not exceptions or isolated phenomena, but integral to a continued discussion on this issue. The adaptation of *Förrädare mördare* is in itself illustrative. The book was debated to some extent upon its publication in 1965, but the TV screening of the play received much greater attention and pushed Clas Engström into the public scene. While fictional narratives had been a central strategy in many films about abortion in the past, these plays introduced something new in being based on personal experiences, as opposed to being told from the perspective of medical and social authorities. Moreover, both plays triggered the dissemination of other personal stories—in the press and in letters sent to Swedish Radio. Hence, this study not only points to the value of television material for research on the media history of the 1960s and 1970s but also highlights the role of experience and narration in public debate during this time.

## References

- 1965 års abortkommitté. *Rätten till abort*, SOU 1971: 58. Stockholm, 1971.
- "Abortlagen förnedrande." Editorial. *Expressen*, November 13, 1970.
- Ahlmark-Michanek, Kristina. *Jungfrutro och dubbelmoral*. Lund: Cavefors, 1962.
- Björklund, Elisabet. "The Most Delicate Subject: A History of Sex Education Films in Sweden." PhD diss., Lund University, 2012.
- Björklund, Elisabet, and Mariah Larsson, eds. *Swedish Cinema and the Sexual Revolution: Critical Essays*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2016.
- Boëthius, Maria-Pia. "Fri abort eller ingen alls? Oförenliga parter i kvällens TV-debatt." *Expressen*, November 12, 1970.
- Boëthius, Maria-Pia. "'Jag ville bara dö.'" *Expressen*, November 13, 1970.
- Bordwell, David. *Narration in the Fiction Film*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984.
- Brenthel, Adam, and Kristofer Hansson. "Waiting for a Cure: Cultural Perspectives on AIDS in the 1980s." In *A Visual History of HIV/AIDS: Exploring the Face of AIDS Film Archive*, edited by Elisabet Björklund and Mariah Larsson, 123–134. Abingdon: Routledge, 2019.
- Broberg, Gunnar, and Mattias Tydén. "Eugenics in Sweden: Efficient Care." In *Eugenics and the Welfare State: Sterilization Policy in Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland*, edited by Gunnar Broberg and Nils Roll-Hansen, 77–149. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2005.
- Caughie, John. *Television Drama: Realism, Modernism, and British Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- "Dagmar Heurlin tror inte på TV 2:s opinionsundersökare." *Aftonbladet*, November 23, 1970.
- Duden, Barbara. *Disembodying Women: Perspectives on Pregnancy and the Unborn*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Eduards, Maud. *Kroppspolitik: Om Moder Svea och andra kvinnor*. Stockholm: Atlas, 2007.

- Ehn, Billy, and Orvar Löfgren. *The Secret World of Doing Nothing*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010.
- Elgán, Elisabeth. *Att ge sig själv makt: Grupp 8 och 1970-talets feminism*. Göteborg: Makadam, 2015.
- Elgán, Elisabeth. *Genus och politik: En jämförelse mellan svensk och fransk abort- och preventivmedelspolitik från sekelskiftet till andra världskriget*. Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1994.
- Engström, Clas. *Förrädare mördare*. Stockholm: Bonniers, 1965.
- Engström, Clas. "Skamgrepp i abortdebatten." *Expressen*, November 8, 1969.
- Engström, Clas. "TV-teatern är tittskåp!." *Dagens Nyheter*, February 18, 1967.
- "Expressen-läsarna tycker: Abortfall ska snabb-behandlas." *Expressen*, February 2, 1967.
- Falk, Gunnar. "TV-teatern: Kärlekslycka under utredning." *Svenska Dagbladet*, 24 January, 1967.
- Florin, Christina, and Bengt Nilsson. *"Något som liknar en oblodig revolution . . ." Jämställdhetens politisering under 1960- och 1970-talen*. Umeå: Umeå University, 2000.
- Frankl, Elisabeth. "Han skrev abortpjäsen. Hon gör 'porrskulptur' . . . vad är det för sorts folk egentligen?." *Aftonbladet*, February 19, 1967.
- Furhammar, Leif. *Filmen i Sverige: En historia i tio kapitel och en fortsättning*. 3rd ed. 1991; Stockholm: Dialogos, 2003.
- Furhammar, Leif. "From Affluence to Poverty: The Early Swedish TV Documentary." In *A History of Swedish Broadcasting: Communicative Ethos, Genres and Institutional Change*, edited by Monika Djerf-Pierre and Mats Ekström, 241–259. Göteborg: Nordicom, 2013.
- Gadd, Pia. "Abort-chock i TV i kväll." *Expressen*, October 15, 1969.
- Grand. "Åttonde boken genombrottet. Clas Engström: Ändra abortlagen!." *Dagens Nyheter*, September 6, 1965.
- Gustafson, Bosse. "Barn som syndastraff." *Aftonbladet*, November 19, 1970.
- Gustafsson, Stig Göran. "Initiativ som lovar gott." *Göteborgs-Tidningen*, November 11, 1970.
- Hallingberg, Gunnar. *Radio och TVdramatik*. Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1973.
- Herzog, Dagmar. *Sexuality in Europe: A Twentieth-Century History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- von Hodenberg, Christina. *Television's Moment: Sitcom Audiences and the Sixties Cultural Revolution*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2015.
- Hughes, Richard L. "Burning Birth Certificates and Atomic Tupperware Parties: Creating the Antiabortion Movement in the Shadow of the Vietnam War." *The Historian* 68, no. 3 (2006): 541–58.
- Hurst, Rachel Alpha Johnston, ed. *Representing Abortion*. London: Routledge, 2021.
- Isaksson, Emma. *Kvinnokamp: Synen på underordning och motstånd i den nya kvinnorörelsen*. Stockholm: Atlas, 2007.
- "Jag har fått abort." *Expressen*, February 3, 1967.
- Jahnsson, Bengt. "Lång väntan på abort." *Dagens Nyheter*, January 24, 1967.
- Jahnsson, Bengt. "Tittskåpsteater som skrämmer." *Dagens Nyheter*, February 1, 1967.
- JIBE. "TV-pjäs om fri abort efter Clas Engströms roman." *Dagens Nyheter*, July 29, 1966.
- Johnson, Martin S., and Nick Hopwood. "Modern Law and Regulation." In *Reproduction: Antiquity to the Present Day*, edited by Nick Hopwood, Rebecca Flemming, and Lauren Kassell. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Jülich, Solveig. "Fosterexperimentens produktiva hemlighet: Medicinsk forskning och vita lögner i 1960- och 1970-talets Sverige." *Lychnos* (2018): 10–49.



- Jülich, Solveig. "Picturing Abortion Opposition in Sweden: Lennart Nilsson's Early Photographs of Embryos and Fetuses." *Social History of Medicine* 31, no. 2 (2017): 278–307.
- Kleberg, Madeleine. "Skötsam kvinnosyn: Hem- och familjereportage i svensk TV åren 1960–1969." PhD diss., Stockholm University, 1999.
- Källemark, Ann-Sofie. *More Children of Better Quality: Aspects on Swedish Population Policy in the 1930's*. Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1980.
- Lennerhed, Lena. *Frihet att njuta: Sexualdebatten i Sverige på 1960-talet*. Stockholm: Norstedts, 1994.
- Lennerhed, Lena. *Historier om ett brott: Illegal abort i Sverige på 1900-talet*. Stockholm: Atlas, 2008.
- Lennerhed, Lena. *Kvinnotrubbel: Abort i Sverige 1938–1975*. Möklinta: Gidlunds förlag, 2017.
- Lennerhed, Lena. "Sherri Finkbine's Choice: Abortion, Sex-Liberalism and Feminism in Sweden in the 1960s and 1970s." *Women's History Magazine* 73 (Autumn 2013): 13–18.
- Levine, Elana. "The New Sexual Culture of American Television in the 1970s." in *Sex Scene: Media and the Sexual Revolution*, edited by Eric Schaefer, 81–102. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014.
- Lind, Folke. "Fick abort-ja i femte månaden!" *Expressen*, February 1, 1967.
- Lindqvist, Sven. "Roman om en abort." *Dagens Nyheter*, August 30, 1965.
- Lundgren, Marianne. "Hon fick ja till abort – då kände hon redan barnet röra sig." *Göteborgs-Tidningen*, January 25, 1967.
- Moberg, Eva. "Kvinnans villkorliga frigivning." In *Unga liberaler: Nio inlägg i idédebatten*, edited by Hans Hederberg, 68–86. Stockholm: Bonnier, 1961.
- Nilsson, Bernt. "Hur känns det idag då Clas Engström." *Aftonbladet*, January 25, 1967.
- Nilsson, Bertil G. "Dubbel tittarstorm när Per Oscarsson sa 'sex-ord' i TV." *Aftonbladet*, February 12, 1967.
- Nygren, Ronny. "Per vållade ny TV-chock: 'Varför reagerar folk så starkt för ordet knulla?'" *Expressen*, February 12, 1967.
- Ohngren, Lars. "Bra teater igår, men onödiga detaljer." *Expressen*, January 24, 1967.
- Olsson, Jenny Leontine. "Kön i förändring. Den svenska könsrollsforskningen 1959–1979." PhD diss., Stockholm University, 2011.
- Palmblad, Eva. *Den disciplinerade reproduktionen: Abort- och steriliseringspolitikens dolda dagordning*. Stockholm: Carlsson, 2000.
- Palmers, Anne. "Apropå TV-pjäsen i går kväll: 85 proc. får abort – men det tar 8 veckor." *Göteborgs-Tidningen*, January 24, 1967.
- Parry, Manon. *Broadcasting Birth Control: Mass Media and Family Planning*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013.
- Persson Webbjörn, Niklas. *Bo Widerbergs tv-teater*. Lund: Sekel, 2011.
- Petchesky, Rosalind. "Fetal Images: The Power of Visual Culture in the Politics of Reproduction." *Feminist Studies* 13, no. 2 (1987): 263–92.
- Petersson, Olof. "Rational Politics: Commissions of Inquiry and the Referral System in Sweden." In *The Oxford Handbook of Swedish Politics*, edited by Jon Pierre, 650–662. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Ramsey, Morag. "The Swedish Abortion Pill: Co-Producing Medical Abortion and Values, ca. 1965–1992." PhD diss., Uppsala University, 2021.
- Reagan, Leslie J. *When Abortion Was a Crime: Women, Medicine, and Law in the United States, 1867–1973*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.
- Ridefelt, Ulf. "Abortpjäs repeteras för TV." *Expressen*, August 11, 1966.
- Rundkvist, Lars. "Folkstorm igår mot Clas Engströms 'fula ord.'" *Aftonbladet*, January 24, 1967.

- Rynell Åhlén, David. *Samtida konst på bästa sändningstid: Konst i svensk television 1956–1969*. Lund: Mediehistoriskt arkiv, 2016.
- Schaefer, Eric. "Introduction: Sex Seen; 1968 and the Rise of 'Public' Sex." In *Sex Scene: Media and the Sexual Revolution*, edited by Eric Schaefer, 1–22. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014.
- "Sista dagen för aborten: 'Om det hela ändå vore över!'" *Expressen*, November 19, 1970.
- Soila, Tytti. "Valborgsmässoafton: Melodrama and Gender Politics in Swedish Cinema." In *Popular European Cinema*, edited by Richard Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau, 232–244. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Stabile, Carole. "Shooting the Mother – Fetal Photography and the Politics of Disappearance." In *The Visible Woman – Imaging Technologies, Gender, and Science*, edited by Paula A. Treichler, Lisa Cartwright, and Constance Penley, 171–197. 1992; New York: New York University Press, 1998.
- Strömstedt, Bo. "Ett samtalsämne." *Expressen*, January 26, 1967.
- Swärd, Stefan. *Varför Sverige fick fri abort: Ett studium av en policyprocess*. Stockholm: Stockholm University, 1984.
- Teglund, Bo. "Rättvisande om aborter." *Dagens Nyheter*, November 23, 1970.
- Usborne, Cornelia. *Cultures of Abortion in Weimar Germany*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2007.
- Valmin, Stefan. *TV-teater*. Stockholm: Sveriges Radios förlag, 1972.
- "Varför ska andra bestämma över mitt ofödda barn? Tv-pjäsen igår satte ny fart på abortdebatten." *Aftonbladet*, January 24, 1967.
- Wahlberg, Malin. "Vietnam in Transmission: Documentary Film and Solidarity Programming in Swedish Broadcasting Culture (1967–72)." *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema* 7, no. 1 (2017): 43–64.
- Wahlstedt, Torbjörn. "Efter TV-chocken i går: Alla som vill får fri abort till 12:e veckan." *Aftonbladet*, October 16, 1969.
- Widding, Lars. "Familjen som retar folkstormen." *Expressen*, February 18, 1967.
- Wilkins, Ann. *Abort i Sverige: Var god vänta*. Uppsala: Verdandi-debatt, 1971.

## Film and TV References

- Abort: Fakta och synpunkter om avbrytande av havandeskap*. Sweden: Sveriges Radio Göteborg, 1969.
- Ersgård, Håkan. *Förrädare mördare*. Sweden: Sveriges Radio, 1967.
- Holmsen, Egil. *Vi ska ha barn*. Sweden: Filmo, 1948.
- Johansson, Ivar. *Moderskapets kval och lycka*. Sweden: Svea Film/Athena Film, 1945.
- Ronden*, episode broadcast October 18. Sweden: Sveriges Radio, 1966.
- Var god vänta*. Sweden: Sveriges Radio, 1970.

## Acknowledgements

This article was written within the research program Medicine at the Borders of Life: Fetal Research and the Emergence of Ethical Controversy in Sweden, funded by the Swedish Research Council, registration number 446–2014–1749. The author thanks the editors and the two anonymous referees for their helpful comments.

*Elisabet Björklund is a senior lecturer in film studies at Lund University, Sweden. Her research focuses on sexuality and reproduction in Swedish film and television history, and she earned her PhD in 2013 with a dissertation on sex education films in Sweden. She is coeditor, with Mariah Larsson, of Swedish Cinema and the Sexual Revolution: Critical Essays (McFarland, 2016) and A Visual History of HIV/AIDS: Exploring the Face of AIDS Film Archive (Routledge, 2019).*