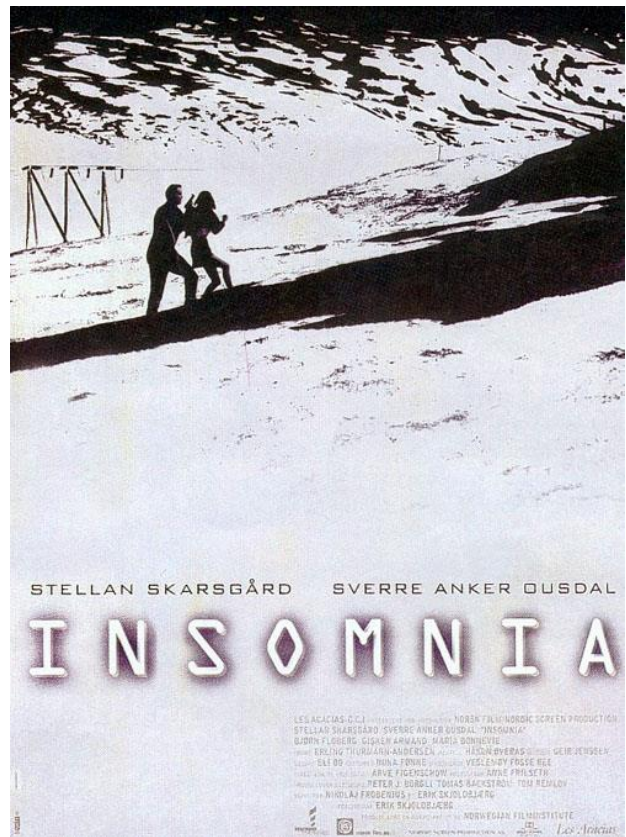


Norway Cert 15 97 minutes

Released in the UK on 13 November 1998

Director	Erik Skjoldbjærg
Cinematography	Erling Thurmman-Andersen
Music	Geir Jenssen
Editing	Håkon Øverås

Character:	Actor:
Stellan Skarsgård	Jonas Engström
Sverre Anker Ousdal	Erik Vik
Bjørn Floberg	John Holt
Gisken Armand	Hilde Hagen
Maria Bonnevie	Ane
Kristian Fr. Figenschow	Arne Zakariassen
Thor Michael Aamodt	Tom Engen
Bjørn Moan	Eilert
Marianne O. Ulrichsen	Frøya Selmer
Frode Rasmussen	Chief of Police



Christopher Nolan's 2002 remake for Hollywood with Al Pacino and Robin Williams may be better known but the original, a stark procedural psychodrama, is an impressively sinister debut by Swedish writer-director Erik Skjoldbjærg with a strong sense of mood and atmosphere that builds inexorably to a finish that is as impossible to predict as it is satisfying

Most people could be forgiven for only being aware of the remake, especially when the difference in distribution and promotion budgets is taken into account!

However when looking at the original perhaps the most impressive aspect is how much tension it builds using very little action. It's that rare psychological thriller that actually spends most of its time rattling around the human psyche and if your attention wanders at just the wrong moment you can miss something that will prove to be a major development.

As shadows cannot exist without light, some critics came to describe the film as 'film blanc' rather than film noir. As it is set during the summer in Norway, when daylight shines twenty-three hours a day, the film demonstrates that a bright Norwegian sun can be just as menacing as any shadows in Hollywood.



We tend to associate film noirs with movies such as *The Third Man*, *Out of the Past*, and *The Maltese Falcon*, where shadows fall across the faces of hard-boiled detectives and femme fatales suggest the inescapable corruption of the human heart. *Insomnia* inverts the classic noir formula: instead of a detective rooting out corruption in the dark corners of the city, the film presents us with a detective forced to examine his own black conscience thrown into relief by a midnight sun.

The look of the film is almost a character in itself. The director, Erik Skjoldbjærg, (a graduate of our National Film and TV School) looks for grays and browns, dark greens and a washed-out drabness. The midnight sun casts an unremitting bright light. There is no place to hide, not even in sleep.

For a first time director, Skjoldbaerg does a fantastic job of conveying information without resorting to scene after scene of dialogue. Here, Skjoldbaerg allows the characters and the camera to convey the thoughts and emotions of the scenes—focusing in on one face while cutting another out of the shot entirely. The technique certainly adds to the ambiguity of the characters' motives throughout the film, and increases the audience's feeling of paranoia as well.

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.

Insomnia was filmed in the director's home town of Tromsø. "So many crews had used the landscape in an epic manner, 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."

The film also has an incredibly bleak, menacing tone at work in it. This is heavy stuff, ponderous and occasionally, slow moving.



Stellan Skarsgård, who you may recognise from *Breaking the Waves* or *Good Will Hunting*, is outstanding as Engström. His character is something akin to the traditional noir film protagonist—he's more of an antihero than a heroic figure, and he's just as dark and flawed as the person he's pursuing. Skarsgård takes these ideas, combines them with stoic acting (he shows little emotion, aside from flashes of rage, throughout much of the film), and creates one of the most interesting cinematic characters to come along in recent memory.

Incidentally a common misconception outside Scandinavia (possibly due to translation problems) is that Skarsgård's character is a Swedish police officer aiding Norwegian police, in a cross-border collaboration. This is wrong; Skarsgård plays a Swedish man employed in the Norwegian police. It is quite common for Swedes to move to neighbouring Norway to find work and vice versa.

One critic commented that when looking at the original and the American remake that anywhere there's an opportunity to make the Engström character (played by Pacino) look better than he does in the original. Starting with the same premise, Skjoldbjærg and Nolan managed to make completely different movies. Nolan's is about a troubled cop regaining his integrity; Skjoldbjærg's is about a man losing his already-tenuous grasp on his humanity. Nolan's version of *Insomnia* is a competent thriller, even a stylish one. Skjoldbjærg's is harrowing.

Iain McGlashan

Club Trivia point – this is the first Norwegian film shown by the club (unless someone knows differently!)

