

DOMITOR 2020
Crafts, Trades, and techniques of Early Cinema, Paris 12-15 June 2020

**Censorship Performers: Standards and Techniques Developed by the Swedish Board of
Film Censors 1911**

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IMAGE 1

For this paper I have chosen a topic that not necessarily run smoothly with the theme of this conference. It did not occur behind factory doors nor is it considered part of the craft, trade or techniques of moving picture production. But it definitely shaped what was presented on screen as well as audiences' experiences.

I will start with a news item published in the very first Swedish film journal—*Nordisk Filmtidning*—in November 1909

IMAGE 2

This news item or rather humoristic anecdote from Kristiania—the capitol of Norway—or Oslo as it is called nowadays concerns a censorship decision that came to an astonishing outcome. The film in question was accordingly a beautiful film showing a festival in Tyrol in memory of the Austrian war of liberation of 1809. The ending of the festival, where the execution of Andreas Hofer was orchestrated, was naturally included in the film as well. However, the censor in charge, a policeman, found this final scene too barbaric, why it was prohibited from Public screenings. The manager of the moving picture theater in question obeyed of course, but wanted, according to the article writer, to announce the policeman's mild and sensitive mind. Therefore, when the film came to the point where the soldiers presented their weapons and aimed, the images ended and instead the audience could read a newly inserted intertitle which read: "The execution of the death sentence of Andreas Hofer is cancelled by the decision of Kristiania police."

This rather drastic course of action by the theater manager brought about much laughter locally in Kristiania and later on in Sweden as well. The intervention of censorship bodies either locally or on a national level could result in rather devastating and extensive changes of film narrative and esthetics in the early days. Not least in Sweden where a heated debate concerning the possible need for control instances resulted in a national censorship body, the Swedish Board of Film Censors—Statens biografbyrå, as early as in 1911. What happened to narrative continuity, style and intention when—as the critics would call them—a rather merciless or crude control instance reshaped the film content? The radical change this particular film narrative underwent from a traditional historical genre into an almost comic one due to a censorship decision and later the intervention of the theater manager is, however, as far as I know quite scarce during the early years in Sweden.

This paper analyzes techniques and standardizations of assessment and "editing" practice established by the three censors of the Board of Film Censors during its first months of activities in 1911. Former pedagogical activists Walter Fevrell and Marie-Louise Gagner together with Jakob Billström, as a medical and psychological expert, were to inspect and classify all films shown in Swedish theaters. To analyze censorship as a craft and as techniques, in comparison with the norms of the film industry, is a challenging way to examine the actual hands-on skill and profession developed by censorship performers which highly shaped the audience experience of as well as the understanding of the medium.

IMAGE 4

But can censorship even be called a craft. Definitely not if we ask the critics. Even though a national censorship were welcomed even by the industry itself the films that had undergone censorship cuts were often ridiculed as were the censors themselves. As we can see an example of in this illustration of Gustaf Berg, who became one of the censors later on in 1911. In this illustration we find him busy with his pairs of scissors as he inspects a filmstrip showing a lightly dressed girl.

Or the Swedish comic magazine *Puck* that dedicated an issue in January of 1912 to the esteem and admiration of the kinematografie doctor Fevrell, one of the three original censors and the director of the bureau.

IMAGE 5

To the left we find the three censors at work with their scissors. On top they are a bit downhearted as they had to pass a film. The same goes for the second illustration. But then finally they happily raise their scissors as they watch a film they absolutely can cut into.

And to the right—on top—the censors are seen before censorship was established and then below after five years of censorship work. Why these dramatic changes had come about —was it due to the films they had seen or had they become more malicious—is not completely clear.

The purpose of editing or cuts made by the film industry or the editors is of course fundamentally different: one being to create narrative clarity/dramatic or esthetic effects etcetera. The other assessing whether to remove images that are in any way problematic.

But for some background.

During the early years of cinema in Sweden the local police were watching over the film screenings both when it came to order at the venue as well as film content. As elsewhere, many considered the moving pictures theaters to be a threat to culture and pernicious to youth. Moving pictures, were considered to have a possible detrimental effect on children, and working-class youth as it instructed immoral and criminal behavior. As the moving picture theaters began to make a mark on the cityscape around 1905, pedagogical groups in Sweden, and especially the elementary school teachers, launched an intensive debate about the role of moving pictures in society. In 1905 the office of governor issues a number of guidelines for the local police forces concerning what should be prohibited to show. These were images that went against morality of the day, there were a ban on showing murder,

robberies or other serious crimes on the screen, and additionally, when it came to children, there were a ban to show what could awaken horror or in other ways inappropriate content. However, the regulations proved inefficient and led to the conditions that a film title could be shown in one police district but banned in another. There was also a strong public opinion of having better control of the film programs. So, in 1909 three experts were appointed to investigate the issue of a uniform film censorship.

The debate in the press as well as the investigation were eventually instrumental in bringing about an establishing of a national censorship body that took effect on 1 November 1911. There are vivid descriptions of what the moving image can bring to the screen, and what it shouldn't, but how the images were actually combined is less in focus. As many films from the early period are lost, and—Unfortunately—the filmstrip that were cut out has not survived— Swedish film journals together with the rich resources that the Swedish censorship board holds, makes invaluable indications of both aesthetical and ethical norms, as well as its impact on public and institutional discourses. Apart from trade journals newspapers were instrumental for the formation of a Swedish film culture.

Nordisk Film Tidning that started its publication in February 1909 were the first of the in total six rather short-lived film journals in Sweden during the 1910s. Even though it lasted for little more than one year it is an important example of the formation of a new industry, as it really was the first fora in Sweden where issues concerning the film medium were discussed collectively. Exhibitors could here find unified ways to work in favor of the industry and by that better meet criticism. The most prominent issue at this time was the alleged need of film control and censorship. *Nordisk Filmtidning*, initially, holds a very critical stance towards the implementation of a control instance and also of its advocates, especially Marie-Louise Gagner who is practically heckled in several articles. Gagner had as the spokesperson of the Pedagogic Society, Pedagogiska sällskapet, and its film section, in February 1908 begun a campaign against movie theaters and their "unsuitable" programs for children. But at the same time the need to organize, work for uplift without sensational dramas, was a recurrent topic in *Nordisk Filmtidning*. Especially foreign producers were seen as a supplier of the poor taste that occasionally appeared on the screens. As Axel Ryding, Court Photographer and proprietor of a moving picture theater in Uppsala, writes in a letter to the editor in December 1909:

IMAGE 6

“The reprehension of the moving picture theaters should, however... be to the film producers. Of the numerous films that are imported each year you can find at the very most 2% of really good pictures, 8% rather good, 20% useful and 70 % simple, stupid or inaptly made”

These devastating statistics would not go unchallenged. For instance did the newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet*, that in most article were in favor for censorship, write that no moving picture critic had been that critical and derogatory. To reform the moving picture culture Ryding advocated “good Swedish titles”, preferably historical ones, or dramatic films where crimes and vice has a definite discouraging effect. This was a direction that also the Stockholm newspapers called upon. Numerous articles in favor of censorship were written in the Stockholm newspapers, constantly encouraging the Swedish film industry to produce historical dramas. In an editorial *Nordisk Filmtidning* replies to this request that making historical films was virtually impossible by the standards of the day, as if you depict important historical events most points would be censored. And If you reduce all exciting parts in a film— what do you have left?—absolutely nothing.

This direction would, however, be similar to what the Swedish film industry would take some years later. But instead of historical dramas the adaption of literary works became the objective. Even if Ryding’s statement of the allegedly bad quality of foreign films was challenged what was an unambiguous fact was that the domestic production in Sweden was rather scarce during the early period, at least before 1909. So, to talk about a transitional period of Swedish films is not very meaningful. Most films on the repertoire were imported with Pathé Frères, here as elsewhere, dominating most film programs during the years 1905-1909. This is also the case for the early 1910s but it will slowly change during this decade.

A national censorship was more and more seen as the solution to an arbitrary local censorship by the police as well as to avert malicious comments from censorship enthusiasts. The Swedish cinema business appears to have expedited the establishment of

film censorship and *Nordisk Filmtidning* actually—initiated a petition demanding the founding of a state-run national censorship in 1909.

Jan Olsson has discussed and documented the debates leading up to the establishing of the Board of Censors, as well as the regulation of the Swedish film market due to the policies implemented by the Board. As elsewhere, the critical rationale for censorship was the conviction that moving images exerted an immoral and detrimental influence on its audience—especially on the underage and immature—and risked dimming their conceptions of justice and morality and thus ruining their character.

The years before 1911 were full of activities investigating the qualities of film programs on the theaters. At the National Archives billboards and programs from 1908 until May 1911 in Stockholm have survived with notes by inspectors from the Pedagogical Society. Around 40 volunteers went to “every” new program commenting directly on the program the quality of the films together with audience composition when it comes to the number of children as well as adults in the audience, audience reactions, etcetera. If they found any title that stood in conflict with the police guidelines another one or two inspectors visited the program after which a notification were made to the police. Over 400 examples of programs during this period have survived. Most of them with notes.

IMAGE 7

Here we see two examples from moving picture theaters in Stockholm—Kosmorama and Cleve-Biografen. Some of the ideas behind how the censors would later work, and actually the vocabulary is to be found in these comments on the programs and billboards. Such as comments on quality, degree of suspense, comic effects etcetera

IMAGE 8

Here are two programs from Kornhamnbiografen

On the top of the left program it is noted that the theater was visited on 7th of January 1909 at 8-9 PM. There were accordingly 80 persons at the show of which 22 were children.

The air was very bad but the music good. So, this material is amazingly rich especially as it includes a large number of screenings and theaters with information that would otherwise be very difficult to get hold on. On the right we can find the same laconic descriptions that are commonly found in the later censorship cards. The film from Peary's expedition to the north pole is found to be unpleasantly exciting while the comic after according to the inspector where exaggerated and the drama thereafter not suitable for children.

IMAGE 9

On this billboard the inspector notes a comment from a young boy sitting next to her who did not at all enjoy one number as it was not pleasant in any way. So, the audience and their reactions are very present when it comes to the inspector's evaluation of one specific film program.

The intervention of a censorship body became central to Swedish film discourse the years before and after 1911 and gave raise to extensive discussions in the Swedish press. The most prominent issue at this time was the alleged need of film control and censorship but also what the censorship editing resulted in as the most spectacular images, the climax of a scene, or even explanatory images without which the narrative could become blurred and diffuse, were removed as my example from Kristiania shows. Many of the images cut by the censors were close ups or enlargements.

Another example brought about just one year before national censorship was established was the popular Indian and cowboy films as almost all climax scenes were cut. Especially so when a revolver was used to keep a person in line or just seen hanging loose. A censors' meticulous work was criticized by *Nordisk Filmtidning* in April 1910. As absolute decisive parts of an Indian or Cowboy narrative were removed, all thrilling movements would in principle be diminished. The problems with the local censors were that, at times banned films were shown at another theater in the very same neighborhood but with a new title, which was the case with an Indian film with the title *Den hvita liljan* or "*The White Lily* " *in English* , that was forbidden by the police after a remark from the pedagogues that the film was harmful.

IMAGE 10

The popularity of Indian and Cowboy films was considerable at this time in Sweden As Richard Abel and others have shown was also the case in for example the US. This is evident by the number of titled advertised and screened. But as mentioned they also became a target of the Swedish censors.

IMAGE 11

Here is one examples of the many Indian and Cowboy films from the inspection made by the Pedagogical Society at Karlabiografen on 22 February 1910. In her notes the inspector, Hedvig Carlsson, complains about the images that she found confusing and incoherent. Image number 18 when a sentence was to be executed by hanging was especially elaborated on. This scene, with the last-minute rescue of the criminal, that was in fact innocent, was actually the only part of this film otherwise confusing narrative that the inspector likes. In some length she praises the suspense of the scene as well as the clear narration. This appreciation of a violent action scene is however not typical for the censorship to come.

IMAGE 12

When it comes to this film title *Vilda västerns cowboys*. The inspector Hildur Arvidsson saw it on 24 February 1911 and only commented on it as bad. While the inspector Maria Lindberg who saw the film on the 16th of February liked the film and only wrote the comment good.

IMAGE 13

The Swedish Board of Film Censors started their work six month later on 4 September 1911. Apart from titles completely banned, the first film title that was cut, was the American Kinema production inspected the 6th of September *The Battle at Redwood*, where 15 meters and two cuts were made: of the attack and scalp of one of the agents and 2: the revenge of the Indian. After these cuts the film was allowed for children.

IMAGE 14

Another early example is the Gaumont title *Calino vent etre Cow-Boy* or in Swedish *Petter vill bli cowboy*. It seems like the film was first inspected by the censors on 7 September 1911 and categorized as yellow that is admissible for audiences over 15 years of age. However, on the very same day or at least with the same date we find another censorship card with the same number classified as red and thereby admitted for audiences of all ages. The difference seems to be that out of the film's 125 meters 1,5 meters were cut by Gagner and then allowed for all audiences. It was the revolver scene at the inn that was shortened. Nevertheless, the title seems to have been popular as another three copies were inspected up until 1914.

IMAGE 15

For example, did the film theater in Gamleby on the Swedish east coast advertise for the title for their evening program for the Sunday 2 November 1913 which was not allowed for children. It is here promoted as a very comic title. But also, at the Malmö theater Alhambra as late as 25-31 of March 1914. The different censorship cards probably indicate that there was a dialogue between the industry and the Board of Film Censors from the very start.

TO CONCLUDE

In a text from 1912 *Några ord från Biografcensuren* Gustaf Berg describes the first year of work for the censors, inspecting approximately 6,5 thousand titles, and even more films as each and every film copy had to be examined and accompanied with a card proving the approval of that specific copy. He describes the process of registration, writing a description, stamp, classification either for approval of all audiences, audiences over 15 years of age, cutting or rather trimmed of offensive details and in certain cases banned. Berg also explains the difficulty at times to decide in specific cases where to draw the line of what can be shown and not. However, the film industry did, as he saw it, use problematic topics for sensational purposes as it would attract an audience.

The censors actually edited the most spectacular images, the climax of a scene, or even explanatory images without which the narrative could become blurred and diffuse. Of its victims were Louise Feuillades's serials, and American action serials, of which few were even imported and inspected by the censorship board . Several of the serials were totally banned for example *Juve contre Fantomas* and others such as *The Red Circle*, starring Ruth Roland got mixed censor labels and usually not shown at all., as the narrative would be difficult to follow or as not all parts could be shown for an audience under 15 years of age. Other genres that were exposed were Danish dramas. Many of the images cut by the censors were close ups or enlargements. As elsewhere cut ins or close-ups showing "instructional details, morally questionable content or horrific details were immediately cut". It is in the censorship records you can find a Swedish equivalence to the American debate about close ups. As late as 1916 the censor Gustaf Berg indicates that close ups or enlargements were not seen as part of a narrative coherence but rather as instructive images, teaching the audience criminal or amoral behavior, as nasty things were amplified in its wealth of detail. As Jan Olsson has shown does the motivation of the censors change around 1916-17 as the terminology changes to close ups rather than enlargements, which mirrors a shift in the conception as well as the narrative context. The lack of more extensive discussions about style in reviews or articles from that day makes it difficult to discern how specific stylistic techniques were perceived. But with fragments from a number of sources we can discern the considerations developed by the censors.

THANK YOU!