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Cutting Bordello Scenes and Dances: Local Regulation and Film Censorship in Norway before 1913

Gunnar Iversen

When Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery's *Film History: Theory and Practice* was published in 1985, one of the issues that was most startling was the discussion of local film history. Many readers reacted with surprise or incredulity when they read in the preface: 'One exciting thing about film historical research that sets it apart from some other branches of history is that it can be conducted nearly anywhere.'¹ The discussions about the object of historical study, what counted as evidence and what was being explained in film history, changed after the publication of Allen and Gomery's book, and the new practice that followed was often named 'revisionist film history' or 'the new film history'.² The focus on local film history, and how local film history could be fruitful to historical research in film, was often singled out as one of the most important contributions of Allen and Gomery's book.³

Local film history has been important in Cinema Studies since 1985, and especially in the study of early film. This has been seen as a sign that the practice of film history changed, not only from a top-down to a bottom-up practice, using new sources and more thorough research methods, but also a change of policy and explanation; from the survey to the minutiae of history. However, it has also in recent years been seen as a sign that the important issues have already been covered, and in their search for new topics, scholars are forced to work with issues and material that are increasingly more minute and marginal, and of interest only to the very few.

Local film history, however, is not only 'stamp collecting', or an alternative to film history proper, but a new optic; a method and perspective, an opportunity to view and question the big issues and institutionalised histories of cinema, through the small, the local and the marginal. Local film history offers a good way to rethink many of the fundamental questions of film history.

In this essay, I will discuss local regulation and censorship of film in Norway before a central Norwegian Board of Film Censors was established in October 1913. Through a case study, or a local historical 'snapshot', I will discuss the institutionalised historical version of the establishing of the Norwegian Board of Film Censors. Local censorship before a national board of film censors was established is one concern that needs more study internationally, and an area that can illustrate the need for and value of local film history.

A 'snapshot' of local censorship

On 11 November 1911, the police superintendent in the city of Trondhjem, a small town on the west coast of Norway, wrote a telegram to his colleague the police superintendent in Kristiania, Norway's capital: 'The approved bordello scene cut, the dance of Per Krohg dropped.'⁴ This telegram is one of the very few

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proofs of actual film censorship in Norway before the central Board of Film Censors was established.

The film the police superintendent in Trondhjem censored was one of the very first Norwegian feature films, *Dæmonen* (*The Demon*), produced, written and directed by the cinema-owner and distributor, Jens Christian Gundersen, in 1911.⁵ Obviously, the police superintendent in Trondhjem considered that the bordello scene the police superintendent in Kristiania had approved should be cut for the audience in his smaller town, and that the later famous French *apache*-dance of the painter, Per Krohg, son of the even more famous Norwegian naturalistic painter, Christian Krohg, had to be cut altogether.

The cutting of these two scenes, and especially the dance of Per Krohg, probably disappointed the cinema-owner Martin Carstens who in his advertisement for the film drew attention to the dance and the dancers as well as the audience that came to see this erotic dance inspired by *Afgrunden* (*The Abyss*, Urban Gad, 1910) and other popular Danish erotic sensational melodramas. Ironically, the only two surviving scenes of *Dæmonen* are the scenes cut by the police superintendent in Trondhjem because the rest of the film has been lost.

The scene the police superintendent in Trondhjem called the 'bordello scene', offers an interesting hermeneutic problem for the historian today. According to the programme printed to accompany the premiere, the scene depicted a carnival in Berlin where a man and his wife, who are separately taking out their respective lover and mistress, accidentally meet. The scene in which couples drink and kiss (Fig. 1), and some women briefly dance hand in hand in a large room and by a *chambre séparé*, is followed by an erotic dance as part of the entertainment at the carnival (Fig. 2). To the modern eye, the scenes certainly look innocent, but the police superintendent in 1911 described the place as a 'bordello'. Thus, it could be defined as indecent and consequently censored by the police. Indeed, the erotic intensity of the kisses and embraces, and the erotic dance certainly imply a bordello scene.

This brief 'snapshot' of the censoring of *Dæmonen* shows that censorship certainly did take place locally in Norway before 1913, and that censorship was coordinated between police superintendents in different cities. The telegram about the censoring of *Dæmonen* and local archival sources



Fig. 1 (top). Couples kissing in the so-called bordello scene, *Dæmonen* (*The Demon*, 1911).



Fig. 2 (bottom). Dance scene, *Dæmonen* (*The Demon*, 1911), featuring Per Krohg and Carla Rasmussen.

can be used to question the traditional picture of early cinema in Norway. Many writers have painted a picture of anarchy before 1913, where the police only examined the premises when a prospective cinema-owner wanted to establish a cinema and, subsequently, had no authority except in extreme cases.⁶ *Dæmonen* could be an extreme case, but the early years of cinema in Norway were certainly not a period of anarchy.

The cinema and the law in Norway

The first public film show in Norway took place in April 1896 when Max Skladanowsky presented his Bioscop and nine films at the Circus Variété in Kristiania as a part of a variety theatre show. Seventeen years were to pass before a bill, aimed at regulating cinematograph exhibitions as well as the content of the films shown, passed through Parliament as the Film Theatres Act of 1913. In the interim period, film shows had moved out of variety theatres and into new, purpose-built cinemas, and film-going had become a popular leisure pursuit, perhaps even *the*

favourite popular entertainment in Norway. No film industry emerged in Norway, but the film trade was beginning to develop into an industry of some substance.

The first permanent cinema opened in 1904, and the years 1905 and 1906 saw a veritable 'cinema fever' in Norway when many small, cheap and somewhat rudimentary cinemas sprang up in large numbers, and the film trade underwent a huge expansion, especially on the exhibition side. Most of the businesses established in these years were small, but some larger companies and networks emerged, especially around the two exhibitors Hugo Hermansen and Jens Christian Gundersen. They owned several companies and cinemas, and distributed films to other exhibitors. French, Danish and American films dominated the screens in Norway; only sixteen fiction films were produced in Norway between 1906 and 1919.

As in so many other countries, the cinemas changed the cities and towns of Norway, and many complained about the new permanent cinemas, their business practices and the films that were shown. In 1907, there were frequent complaints in the newspapers in Trondhjem concerning the aggressive advertisement campaigns used by permanent-site exhibitors. The numerous hand-outs that littered the streets were seen as a particular problem.⁷

By 1910, reactions from concerned teachers were frequent in newspapers all over Norway. Complaints against the cinema's harmful effect on learning and upbringing, and its corrupting influence on the younger generation were typical. These local initiatives by teachers and school authorities were followed by attacks on a nation-wide scale by the Foreningen til Sædelighetens Fremme (Society for the Promotion of Morality), a national body established in 1880.

In 1910, the Kristiania division of the society passed a resolution calling for municipal bylaws to limit the number of cinemas, and recommending that a municipally-appointed committee should oversee programming. The idea that the municipalities should take over cinema operations was symptomatic of the times, largely because Norwegian municipalities, since 1837, had won a fair measure of local self-determination, guaranteed by law. The call for control over the cinema thus tied in with a tradition of local licensing.

In 1913, after a period when debates concerning cinema resembled a 'moral panic', Parliament

passed The Film Theatres Act which brought together political expediency and constitutional tradition. The Act established a National Board of Film Censors in Kristiania while the municipal councils were responsible for licensing the public exhibition of films within the area of their jurisdiction, thus controlling the rapid growth of the exhibition sector. Shortly after the Film Theatres Act had been passed, local municipalities started to take over the cinemas in most cities and larger towns in Norway, buying out private owners. Municipalization could have been restricted to giving licences to private owners, but many local authorities were moved by reasons other than moral anxiety. They saw the financial possibilities in running cinemas themselves, thereby controlling the new and powerful medium, and at the same time earning a profit that could be used for other cultural or municipal purposes.⁸

The two different aspects of the Film Theatres Act, on the one hand, the municipal licensing of the cinemas and on the other hand, the central censorship organisation, have traditionally been discussed as separate issues, both arising from the situation of 'anarchy' regarding the new media. However, both these aspects of the development of the cinematic institution were taken care of in an earlier law.

When films were introduced to the Norwegian entertainment market by travelling showmen, the new medium was already subject to regulation and control. In 1875, Parliament passed the Lov angaaende Adgang til at give dramatiske og andre offentlige Forestillinger (Law Regarding Dramatic and other Public Performances), regulating not only operatic or theatrical performances and concerts, but also all other types of public entertainment such as magic shows, horse races, panoramas or bazaars and lotteries. The Law gave the local municipal authorities the power to determine the conditions under which public entertainment was arranged, and all forms of entertainment were subject to the licensing conditions. Anyone showing a film programme, or arranging a concert, or a lottery, had to pay a fee to the police and fire departments so that the police and fire authorities could control the public sphere during the activity. The Law did not give authority to censor films in advance, unless of course they suspected that this entertainment type was not suitable for the public because of indecency and obscenity.

How then were entertainment and, especially, film shows regulated before the Film Theatres Act in 1913 in a small town like Trondhjem, with approxi-

mately 60,000 inhabitants? Using previously neglected local archival sources, municipal archives (especially the archives of the chief financial officer as well as the archives of the police department and the fire department) and the archives of the Justice Department in Oslo, the picture that can be drawn is not a picture of anarchy and instability. The archive of the police department in Trondhjem has been most useful, especially carbon copies of the outgoing correspondence of the police superintendent and his officers. This unique source contains considerable information that enables us to establish a richer understanding of regulation and control before 1913, as well as the business history of early film which has been so lacking in scholarship on early film to date.

Regulation and film censorship in Trondhjem before 1913

Most aspects of the cinema business were regulated or controlled in the period before 1913. The Act of 1875 gave licensing authority to the municipalities which delegated the day-to-day regulation of public entertainment to the police superintendent and the fire department, overseen by the municipal chief financial officer. Under the Act, the licensing authority was given wide-ranging powers. The places in which films were shown were public, in the sense that they were open to any passer-by who chose to walk in and buy a ticket, so films that were suspected or defined as injurious to morality could be censored. Thus, not only the cinemas, but also the number of cinemas, where they were located, and finally the content shown, were subject to regulation and control in Trondhjem before 1913. Let me briefly look at these four types of regulation of early cinema.

1. *Safety control and control of cinema buildings.* On 14 October 1911, a violent nitrate fire nearly destroyed the cinema Biograftheateret, owned by photographer O. Skjevlo. It was Saturday night, and in the last part of the last show, the film jammed in the projector gate and was immediately set on fire. The film in the projector, as well as film not protected on the floor and on a bench, started to burn. The fire was so strong that the operator had to run out of the projection booth. The operator and the manager tried to stop the fire, but not until the projection room was completely destroyed could they extinguish the fire. The operator

and the manager were severely burned, but no one in the audience was injured.⁹ This was the only large nitrate fire in Trondhjem, and the control over buildings, electrical installations and equipment was more rigorously enforced after this dramatic fire. However, right from the very start, itinerant showmen as well as cinema-owners later on, had to apply to the police superintendent and the fire chief before a cinema show could be arranged. The venue was inspected, and the police and fire departments decided how many people were allowed to sit or stand in the premises, as well as supervise the lay-out of the room (where the chairs or benches were placed) and the electric installations and exit signs. The police archive is full of letters from the police to exhibitors demanding that they follow agreed regulations. Police officers conducted spot safety checks on their evening rounds, and often found something that had to be reported. In 1909, it was suggested, in a letter from the fire chief to the municipalities, that the person operating a projector should be at least twenty-one years old, but this requirement was not enforced. However, from 1910 on, all operators had to pass a test at the fire department, and numerous letters about these tests can be found in the correspondence of the fire chief. Thus, most aspects of the buildings and premises were controlled and regulated.

2. *Control of the number of cinemas.* An important part of police work in Trondhjem in this period included the control of taxation on public entertainment. Until 1911, a daily tax existed that was called police- and fire-tax, but after 1911, a heavier taxation on the income from cinemas was established by the municipal council. This tax was collected from 1911 to 1918 when all the private cinema-owners in Trondhjem were bought out and the municipality became the only cinema owner in town. From 1911 on, and also after 1918, a percentage of the entertainment tax was used to subsidise and support a permanent theatre in Trondhjem. No permanent theatres existed in Trondhjem between 1865 and 1911, and the entertainment tax on cinemas was one way of securing a permanent theatre company after 1911. In the period from 1911 to 1918, the

Fig. 3.
Advertisement for
Dæmonen (*The
Demon*, 1911).
The last line
reads: 'Children
are not allowed in
this show!'



police superintendent controlled the accounts of the cinema-owners, and once a month reported the accounts to the chief financial officer who was responsible for taxation. Cinema was entertainment, but theatre was culture, and the cinema was used to ensure that Trondhjem too had a theatre. In the light of this, the control of the number of cinemas in the town could seem something of a contradiction. If the municipality earned good money on taxation why set a limit on the number of cinemas? The correspondence of the police superintendent contains many letters refusing licences to open cinemas which suggests that the limit of five cinemas was a way of protecting business, at least that is the way the police superintendent saw the practice of limiting the number of cinemas. By restricting the number of cinemas and controlling the buildings, the people of Trondhjem were assured of cinemas of high quality.

3. *Control of the location of cinemas.* During this

period, strategies for defining and regulating cinema were guided by assumptions about *who* cinema was for, in other words, the class and age profile of the people who frequented cinemas. In Trondhjem, not only was the *number* of cinemas regulated by the police, but the police also decided in which *part* of the town cinemas could be opened. The first permanent cinemas in Trondhjem opened in the summer and autumn of 1906, and for a period, in 1907, between six and eight cinemas existed; two cinemas being opened in the working-class part of town. After 1908, the police superintendent not only limited the number of cinemas in town to five, but also restricted the location of the cinemas to the centre of town. No cinemas were allowed in the working-class part of town, Østbyen. In several letters, the police superintendent stated that the reason for this limit was that he did not want cinemas too close to the large number of working-class children. Cultural or moral policy as well as trade policy guided the control and regulation of cinema in Trondhjem.

4. *Content control.* The police also controlled content in the cinemas. In a certificate given to the cinema-owner Carl Köpke in January 1908, the police superintendent wrote that Köpke's cinema had been subject to numerous spot checks, but the police officers had 'never found any fault with his moving pictures'.¹⁰ Before 1911, building and safety control as well as location control were more important than content control, but in the years 1910–11, the cinema programmes changed in Trondhjem and content control became more important. In the correspondence of the police superintendent one finds many answers to letters from other police superintendents or chairmen of other municipalities who wondered how licensing was practiced in Trondhjem. In a letter to the chairman of the municipality of Vaagen in 1911, the police superintendent explains the practice of content control in the cinemas of Trondhjem. The programmes and the hand-outs printed by the cinema owners were examined by the police superintendent when a cinema programme was changed, and on the basis of this material, he decided which cinemas were to be

visited for a spot check. Sometimes films were cut by the police, as the case of *Dæmonen* illustrates. In an answer to a survey by the Police and Justice Department in Kristiania in 1911, designed to map the practices of the local police regarding regulation and censorship (the survey being used in preparation for the Film Theatres Act of 1913), the police superintendent in Trondhjem doubted the effect of local censorship. He wrote:

When the police cut a film, this fact is always communicated to the public, and the cutting works as an advertisement for the piece so that everybody now wants to see the film, and it is a temptation for the cinema owner to try to make the police work as his promotor.¹¹

This letter to the central authorities was written less than two weeks after the cutting of *Dæmonen*, and may have been describing the counter measures cinema-owner Martin Carstens took when the police removed the scene he had mentioned in newspaper advertisements (Fig. 3), but it could also reflect a more frequent practice.

Conclusion

The years before 1913 were years of uncertainty and struggle over the means by which cinema was to be understood, defined and regulated. The cinema was beginning to establish itself as a social and economic force, and with its poster-plastered facades and barkers with hand-outs advertising the new programmes, the cinemas changed the face of towns

and cities. The film trade was engaged in a more or less ceaseless quest for respectability, for cinema was quickly and widely looked upon as a social problem. At the same time, however, many exhibitors took advantage of this situation and the 'moral panic' in many cities by offering as spectacular and titillating a programme as they could, even using censorship for publicity purposes.

The Film Theatres Act of 1913 formalised existing arrangements for the control of cinema, and also extended them to more rigorous content control, but the period before 1913 was no period of anarchy in Norway. The traditional representation of this period as a 'lawless' period is definitely wrong. Cinemas were subject to different control and regulation practices. The Film Theatres Act of 1913 could be an answer to the *laissez-faire* attitude of many a local bureaucracy, and local variations in the practice of regulation and censorship certainly existed, but film shows were subject to licensing conditions and regulation from the time of the earliest travelling showmen. The Act of 1913 was meant to bring about national uniformity in the practice of film censorship, but it also proposed the municipalization of cinemas.

As this essay has demonstrated, and as recent essays by Jon Burrows and Richard C. Saylor in *Film History* have also shown, local film history and the scrutiny of neglected local sources such as police archives or municipal records, can certainly help us obtain a richer picture of central issues of film history such as the control and regulation of exhibition.¹² Finding new local sources and interpreting them can certainly be more profitable than mere 'stamp collecting'.

Notes

1. Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), iv.
2. Thomas Elsaesser, 'The New Film History', *Sight and Sound* 55, 4 (Autumn 1986): 246–251.
3. Søren Kjørup, 'Om Filmhistorie – en præsentation af Allen & Gomery, *Film History*, og nogle tanker om norsk filmhistorisk forskning', in Søren Kjørup, Kathrine Skretting and Bjørn Sørenssen, *Mediepedagogikk og Filmhistorie* (Trondheim: Nordisk Institutt, Universitetet i Trondheim, 1987), 89–90.
4. Trondhjem politikammer, Kopibok 1911–1912, letter no. 362 (Statsarkivet, Trondhjem).
5. Concerning *Dæmonen*, see also Gunnar Iversen, 'Den hemmelighetsfulle demon – Jens Christian Gundersens *Dæmonen* og norsk filmhistorieforskning', in Henrik G. Bastiansen and Øystein Meland (eds.), *Fra Eidsvoll til Marienlyst – Studier i norske mediers historie fra Grunnloven til tv-alderen* (Kristiansand: Høyskoleforlaget, 2001), 102–114.
6. Sigurd Evensmo, *Det Store Tivoli* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1967), 53, 60–62.
7. *Trondhjems Adresseavis*, 25 September 1907.
8. Concerning municipalization and its later effects, see Gunnar Iversen, 'Norway', in Tytti Soila, Astrid Söderbergh Widding and Gunnar Iversen, *Nordic National*

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| <p><i>Cinemas</i> (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 102–141.</p> <p>9. Rapport fra underbrandchefen ved Ilens Brandstation i anledning ildløs i Biograftheatret i Cirkus lørdag den 14. Oktober, Branddirektørens kopibok 14, 1909–1912, letter no. 577–578.</p> <p>10. Trondhjem Politikammer, Kopibok 1907–1908, letter no. 731.</p> <p>11. Brev fra Politimester Jelstrup til Justisdepartementet,</p> | <p>22 November 1911, in Justisdepartementets arkiv, Oslo.</p> <p>12. Jon Burrows, 'Penny Pleasures: Film Exhibition in London during the Nickelodeon era, 1906–1914', <i>Film History</i> 16, 1 (2004): 60–91; Jon Burrows, 'Penny Pleasures II: Indecency, anarchy and junk film in London's "Nickelodeons", 1906–1914', <i>Film History</i> 16, 2 (2004): 172–197; Richard C. Saylor, 'Dr. Ellis Paxson Oberholtzer and the early years of the Pennsylvania State Board of Censors (Motion Pictures)', <i>Film History</i> 16, 2 (2004): 142–162.</p> |
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