The Visual Re-creation of Black People in a “White” Country: Oscar Micheaux and Swedish Film Culture in the 1920s

by Tommy Gustafsson

Abstract: This article examines the fate of three films made by black independent filmmaker Oscar Micheaux that were exported to Sweden in the 1920s. The article also aims to analyze Swedish silent film culture, and, by means of its structure explain the treatment, when it came to censorship and advertising practices, that Micheaux’s films received in Sweden.

During the promotion of his films in the United States in 1920 and 1921, black independent director Oscar Micheaux often bragged about “world distribution” and that he had sold all foreign rights to Within Our Gates (1920), The Brute (1920) and The Symbol of the Unconquered (1920). He also claimed that his films were “now being shown in all of the leading countries of Europe,” including England, France, Italy and Spain.1 The biographers of Micheaux in Writing Himself into History, Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence, cite this aggressive form of advertising, but they imply that this might in reality have been part of a publicity stunt, dismissing the adverts with: “how lucrative Europe must have seemed to [Micheaux].”2 However, the fact that one of Micheaux’s films, Within Our Gates, was recovered with Spanish intertitles in the 1980s, and that a second film, The Symbol of the Unconquered, later was found in Brussels at the Cinémathèque Royale, more than implies that Micheaux really did sell some of his films abroad, and that the advertisements, if somewhat exaggerated, contained some truth. The peculiar circumstances that surround these surviving silent films of Micheaux’s sparked an interest that led me to make inquiries into the possibility of some of his films having made their way to Sweden. It transpired that three of his early films had passed through the Swedish Board of Censorship, and that at least two of them were shown in Swedish cinemas in the 1920s.

The three films that were exported to Sweden were Within Our Gates, The Brute, and The Symbol of the Unconquered, the very titles that Micheaux himself mentioned. Considering that Micheaux, and other independent black filmmakers

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during the second and third decades of the twentieth century, struggled against censorship, worked with small-scale productions, and had vast problems with distribution—often traveling in between states themselves, catering to those few hundred black cinemas that screened race films—it appears quite puzzling that Micheaux succeeded in exporting some of his films abroad without the assistance of a major studio’s distribution channels.

Although Sweden imported thousands of American films in this period, these are the only three race films that made it into the country. Following the filmography in *Black Manhood on the Silent Screen*, by Gerald R. Butters Jr., which contains the titles of over a hundred race films—among them *The Burden of Race* (1921) and *The Spirit of Gods* (Paul Cazeneuve, 1921) from Reol productions, and *A Prince of His Race* (Roy Calnek, 1927) and *The Scar of Shame* (Frank Peregini, 1927) from Colored Players Film Corporation—I carried out a more thorough search, but could not find that any of these were shown in Sweden. This fact, of course, makes Michueax’s presence in Swedish film culture even more astonishing.3

But what did this presence constitute? How did Micheaux’s films generate meaning in a Swedish context? The first part of this essay will explore the circumstances concerning the distribution of these films, how the censors handled them, and, finally, how they were advertised, exhibited and reviewed. As a consequence of this investigation, the second part will deal more closely with Swedish film culture and its use of black people as the prime Other throughout the 1920s.

**Distribution and the Re-creation through Censorship.** Oscar Micheaux’s audacious promotion campaign in black U.S. newspapers, cited in the introduction, suggests that some sort of package deal was completed regarding his early films: *The Symbol of the Unconquered*, *The Brute*, and *Within Our Gates*. In Sweden, however, these films were imported by three different distributors and, furthermore, censored at different times between 1921 and 1925. So, even if Micheaux did sell these three films as a package, something, yet to be fully investigated, apparently happened on the way that split them up. The Swedish distributors who imported Micheaux’s films were among those who catered to second- and third-run cinemas. In other words, they dealt with supplement bookings and sensational foreign melodramas like the German *Aufklärungsfilme* (Enlightenment films), which gained some popularity in Sweden in the 1910s and 1920s.4 The distributors also made heavy cuts to *The Symbol of the Unconquered* (606 meters) and minor cuts to *The Brute* (20 meters) before these films ever were submitted to the Swedish Board of censorship.5 The actual reasons for this pre-censorship are impossible to discern, since there are no records preserved.

Consequently, the handling of Micheaux’s films and the cuts made by the Swedish Board of censorship become most interesting. While U.S. censors came down on two major themes, Micheaux’s mockery of religion and his explicit display of violence against black people (worrying that this would lead to race riots if shown in turbulent and racially mixed areas),6 Swedish censors notoriously edited
out violence and harsh language. They did not do this in order to prevent riots, but with the notion that such expressions would harm the morality of youth, women, and members of the working class. The Swedish policy against screen violence did have a direct impact on Micheaux’s way of telling a story; it altered the meanings of his films. Whereas most other race films displayed a highly idealized image of black people, Micheaux represented African American life as he saw it, with representations of both good and bad. In an effort to raise consciousness about social injustice, he often used screen violence as a means of agitation.

The Swedish policy becomes evident in *The Symbol of the Unconquered*, censored on July 26, 1921, where, firstly, a fight between Eve (Iris Hall), Hugh Van Allen (Walker Thompson) and Jefferson Driscoll (Lawrence Chenault), and then a fight between Van Allen and Driscoll, were cut entirely—thereby concealing the villain Driscoll’s personal motive for revenge. Later, the attempted murder on Van Allen by Driscoll, and the ensuing shooting of Driscoll by Eve, were cut. Even the actual content in the threatening letters to Van Allen had to be censored since these, at least in the Swedish translations, contained curse words. The Swedish head of the Board of Censorship, Gunnar Bjurman, instead suggested a title that read: “A threatening letter with a request to sell his land.”

This censoring of violence, combined with the substantial cuts made by the distributor, altered the narrative of *The Symbol of the Unconquered*, which originally problematized racial self-hatred, the legacy of passing, and the atrocities of the Ku Klux Klan. Here, Micheaux’s political message seems to have been turned into a romance and a success story, which, according to the Swedish censors, only “seems to have a tendency to benefit the Negro situation in America.”

Film scholar Jane M. Gaines discusses *The Symbol of the Unconquered* on yet another level, putting emphasis on the passing theme and on the fact that Micheaux used light-skinned black actors, even to play white characters, for example, when it came to the leading roles of Eve and Driscoll. In the Swedish Board of Censorship’s retelling of the film’s plot, two of the characters can be identified: Eve, who is named as the “white girl with one drop of negro blood in her veins,” and Van Allen, also a light-skinned actor, but who nevertheless is identified as “the Negro.” The Swedish intertitles had apparently revealed, as in the Micheaux version, Eve’s “true” origin at the beginning of the film, but does that mean that Swedes read Iris Hall as “white”? This is actually most probably the case, as will be indicated.

The cuts made to *Within Our Gates*, censored on September 26, 1925, were even more harmful. They left the educational theme untouched, while the powerful lynching story with its motifs of greed was cut away. In fact, the Swedish censors did not bother to cut just bits and pieces out of the most violent parts of Sylvia’s almost thirty-minute flashback, which gives the whole background, but instead simply removed the entire flashback—leaving a confusing love story, stereotyping of black thieves and gamblers, and the obedient Uncle Tom–ish black priest, Old Ned. In essence, the film’s aim to untangle the common image of
black sexuality as the threat to white supremacy and replace it with a notion of black autonomy and self-determination was lost in Sweden.\(^\text{14}\)

In comparison, *The Brute* (censored on January 5, 1922), with its themes of boxing, racketeering, and wife-beating had only two cuts, totaling only seven meters. The first cut shortened a whipping, and the second removed a shot of “the wounded Bull” Magee (A. B. DeComathiere). Since *The Brute* is lost, it is tricky to reconstruct what it really looked like, but it is known that this film contained more negative portrayals of black people, bordering on the stereotyping common in white films, than most of Micheaux’s other films.\(^\text{15}\) Surviving stills also tell us of Micheaux’s use of an opulent *mise-en-scène*, placing the main characters in an upper middle-class milieu.\(^\text{16}\) The Swedish Board of Censorship’s retelling of the plot thus becomes interesting for future research on Micheaux and is here rendered in its entirety:

Mildred [in fact, the character’s name was Evelyn Preer, played by Mildred Carrison], who believes her fiancé Herbert [Lawrence Chenault] to be dead, is persuaded to marry Bull, who maltreats her. When Bull later is ruined, he suspects Mildred and Herbert of having taken part in a plot against him and seeks revenge against Mildred. However, Mildred gets help from Herbert and her aunt. She is freed from Bull and remarries Herbert.\(^\text{17}\)

**Continued Re-creation: Advertisement and Exhibition.** When it comes to the advertising and exhibition of Micheaux’s films in Sweden, two things can be said. To begin with, they were shown, as indicated earlier, at second- and third-run cinemas in Stockholm, but that did not mean that they did not attract a large audience. In 1921, *The Symbol of the Unconquered* (a title that was translated to *De obesegrades symbol*, a direct translation) was the first picture exhibited at a brand new cinema called Ugglan (The Owl), which seated 450 people and had three screenings every evening.\(^\text{18}\) In 1922, *The Brute* was exhibited at a similar cinema, but with four screenings every evening. Both these films stayed a week before they probably moved on into the countryside, where it becomes difficult to track them (Figure 1).

Furthermore, *The Symbol of the Unconquered* was marketed as an adventure film, while *The Brute* was marketed as a boxing film. The advertising in Swedish daily papers for *The Brute* (or *Boxarkungen*, The King of Boxing, into which it was translated) consisted of an image of a big black boxer with the alluring words: “Love—Gambling—Boxing in six reels. In the lead role, the negro boxer Sam Langford.”\(^\text{19}\) Some issues could be underlined here. First, the displaying of real black boxer Sam Langford—who had a role in *The Brute* and who had had a successful boxing career up until the 1920s, but now was on a downhill slope\(^\text{20}\)—should be linked to the popularity of boxing, and also to the documentary recordings of boxing matches, which were recurrent events in Sweden, as elsewhere, during the interwar period.\(^\text{21}\) Second, the discrepancy between the film’s plot and the advertising should be observed since the latter highlights the race of the boxer, while
the Swedish Board of Censorship’s assessment did not even bring up boxing. Third, there was an apparent contradiction in the execution of Swedish policy: images of boxing, violent as they were, were not censored. Swedish feature-length boxing documentaries, such as Carpentier (Raoul Le Mat, 1921) and Harry Persson—Bud Gorman (1927) were in fact rated suitable for children.22 This leads up to the conclusion that, according to the adverts and the content of The Brute, black masculinity is linked to violence (Figure 2).

Because these films were considered to be B- or even C-movies, Swedish daily newspapers provided little space for reviews. Normally, all domestic and foreign A-movies were reviewed at length, while smaller films were just mentioned by title and exhibit location. But thanks to the fluke of The Symbol of the Unconquered being the first film to be exhibited at a new cinema, a handful of daily papers in Stockholm did review the film while assessing the merits of the new cinema, Ugglan. All these papers referred to it as an adventure or a Western film with cowboys, “that had a lot of exciting moments, noble heroes, crooks, and a little love at the end.”23 Considering that almost every role in the film is played by a
black actor, it is somewhat peculiar that only two papers mention the presence of “negroes,” and that only one paper seems to have grasped Micheaux’s intention. This occurs when the reviewer points out that the film “partially deals with the race problem.” Nevertheless, the same reviewer thought that the scenes of the “Golden Crusaders” [a Swedish transcription for the Ku Klux Klan] nightly expeditions” were much more exciting.\footnote{These responses to the film, however slim, evidently verify that the distributor and the Swedish Board of Censorship indeed had altered the original meaning of The Symbol of the Unconquered, and that some of the black characters, such as Driscoll, were read as white.}

The most controversial of Micheaux’s films, Within Our Gates, was, to my knowledge, never shown in Sweden, perhaps due to the fact that the censors had chopped out one-third of the film before permitting its release. This assumption is based on a fruitless search for advertisements in Stockholm daily papers between September 26, 1925, and January 18, 1926. The time between the censoring of a film and its release was usually a couple of weeks in Sweden, and occasionally up to two months.\footnote{In spite of this, one last thing concerning the advertising and exhibition of Micheaux’s films can be stated with regard to Within Our Gates. For some reason, the Swedish distributor, O. H. Dahlgren, chose to}
rename it *Chocolate Kiddies* before it was submitted to the Swedish Board of Censorship.26 Obviously, the renaming had something to do with the provocative content of the film. Either the distributor was trying to fool the censors with this uncontentroversial title, or, more likely, the distributor thought that this title would have a more commercial appeal to the Swedish audience. This interpretation also tells us a lot about the overall attitude towards black people (and other non-Swedes) in predominantly white Sweden.

Even if no other race films were imported to Sweden, and although hardly any black people at all lived in Sweden at the time,27 this renaming of the film, and also the censorship that all of Micheaux’s films received, should therefore be regarded in the context of Swedish society and its contemporary film culture. White American filmmaking that depicted black people, of which D. W. Griffith’s racist films such as *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Broken Blossoms* (1919) are the most obvious examples, enjoyed a considerable audience in Sweden. For this reason, the common notion in Swedish historiography has been that images of black people primarily were created elsewhere and imported.28 This, however, does not represent the whole picture. As the censoring of Micheaux’s films reveals, the image of black people was recreated by the various cuts made by the Swedish Board of Censorship. The members of the board were hardly disconnected from the rest of Swedish society, where racist conceptions of black people flourished in science, the media, and advertising. This also pertains to the Swedish feature and documentary films of the 1920s.

This reality has been overlooked by Swedish silent-film history, very much due to its singular emphasis on the art films of the so-called Golden Age canon of Swedish film production between 1917 and 1924, including silent classics such as *Körkarlen/The Stroke of Midnight* (Victor Sjöström, 1921) and *Gösta Berlings saga/The Atonement of Gosta Berling* (Mauritz Stiller, 1924).29 But the overall survey of Swedish film production in the 1920s that I have undertaken in my dissertation did, in fact, reveal that the most common image of otherness, with which the white Swede was juxtaposed, was that of the black man.30

**Ethnicity and Race in Swedish Film History.** Studies on representations of ethnicity and race have been scarce in Swedish film history. In 1995, film scholar Per Olov Qvist claimed that 10 percent of Swedish films produced in the 1930s harbored anti-Semitic images of Jews.31 This observation attracted some attention, at least outside Sweden, since American scholar Rochelle Wright wrote the first historical overview, *The Visible Wall*, on ethnic outsiders in Swedish cinema in 1998. Here, Wright scrutinizes Swedish film production from 1930 to 1995, pinpointing the most common ethnic Other decade by decade. This Other was represented by Jews in the 1930s, Travelers/Gypsies in the 1940s and 1950s, and, to lesser degrees during the same decades, Finns and the Sámi.32 In comparison, Swedish silent film has not been studied at all from an ethnic perspective due to the already-mentioned concentration on the very few films included in the
Golden Age canon. The remaining films have been considered poor movies and, accordingly, not worthy of research. Nevertheless, in the 1910s and 1920s, Swedish society (in its films, and elsewhere) did represent numerous ethnic Others, including stereotypical Travelers, Jews, the Sámi, and also white races such as Finns, Russians, and Southern Europeans.

Also, in 1921, Sweden was the first country in the world to create a Race Biological Institute, financed by the Swedish government, for the study of race hygiene. The institute did not produce much actual research, since the employees, led by the charismatic professor Herman Lundborg, spent most of their time popularizing their results through lecture tours and popular scientific publications.33 The breeding ground for modern Swedish racism was thus set, and it is here that the significance of film culture enters, as it nourished racist conceptions in a way that had no contemporary equal when it came to the popularization and normalization of the images of otherness.

Here, attention will be given to a few of those Swedish documentary and feature films that featured images of black people. Despite influences from American films and discourses connected to European colonialism, Sweden often formed its own logic pertaining to the representation of the black man. How were these images created? What functions did they perform in Swedish society and its film culture? And, finally, how does this connect to the re-creation of Micheaux’s films?

The Documentary Image of Black People. During the 1920s, a variety of Swedish production companies made a total of 180 feature films and feature-length documentary films. Representations of black people occurred in at least twenty-one of these films, or 12 percent, which is a higher figure than the occurrence of anti-Semitic images in 1930s film production.34 These visual representations can be divided into three larger groups: 1) The Natural Savage in documentary films; 2) The Exotic Cannibal in all kinds of films; and 3) The Uncle Tom servant in feature films.

At the time, documentaries received most of the attention, since they recorded a great number of Swedish expeditions around the world. Swedish film scholar Leif Furhammar has named this “the first great period of the Swedish documentary,” while at the same time pointing out that “the foreign peoples were depicted more to astonish than to provide an understanding of their ways of living.” He also claims that it is difficult to separate between “what is original, and what has been provoked by the filmmakers.”35 Two things he does not discuss, however, are that the visual depictions of black people in these documentaries have clear connections with the portrayals of black people in Swedish feature film; and that documentaries, furthermore, did not become dated in the same way that feature films did. They had a longer life span, as they continued to circulate as “scientifically accurate” films in the Swedish school system over the following decades.

One example is Bland vilda och vilda djur/Among Savages and Wild Beasts (Oscar Olsson, 1921). The title directly reveals much about the Swedish patriarchal
attitude towards “dark” Africa. The difference between “savages” and animals is plainly articulated as a difference in degree, which allows for the white Swedish expedition to bring knowledge—the white man’s burden—to “uncivilized” nature. In modern wildlife documentaries, in comparison, this juxtaposition is no longer possible, since filmmakers seldom treat an entire habitat. Instead, the focus is often on a single species—for example, lions or elephants—and not on the native inhabitants. Another variation is that modern wildlife documentaries try to mediate some sort of understanding of the ecological system. The documentaries of the 1920s were all about adventurous exploration and the unveiling of the unknown, which is made very explicit by the fact that the white males in these films are always out in the bush hunting animals—a phenomenon that never takes place in modern documentaries.

It is somewhat awkward that Furhammar had difficulties in differentiating between what is original and what is staged in these films. Through the single takes, the editing and the intertitles, one clearly perceives that it is all arranged and interpreted without the least concern for the people portrayed. The fact is that these films are deliberately organized to show how afraid and how ridiculous the “darkies” are in comparison with the brave white members of the Swedish expeditions.

The Kikuju is the first tribe to be discovered in Among Savages and Wild Beasts. The film begins with people working in a field. Next, there is a cut to a black man who climbs up to a wood hut in a tree, followed by the intertitle: “The men’s not so hard labor consist of guarding the plantation from wood huts in the trees.” This is intercut with a pack of baboons and the associative intertitle: “The baboons as well always have a guard posted to warn against danger.” Thereafter, we are shown a group of men sitting in a circle discussing something. The intertitles explain that “Trials are the amusement of the inactive Kikuju-men,” and “A lawyer twists justice to the extent that he himself starts to believe in what he is saying.” In other words, the native men in the film are represented as not just lazy, but also irrational. The same kind of depiction continues, tribe by tribe, until the filmmakers visit the Masai tribe. The Masai are portrayed as silly cowards, desperately in need of the white man’s guidance and protection against dangerous wild animals such as lions, hippopotami, and crocodiles. Without exception, this is arranged as though the Masai warriors implore the white males to hunt down the beasts. This submission is, moreover, underlined in a scene in which a white Swede shoots a hippopotamus that swims in a river. The intertitles make fun of the native-born’s struggle to salvage the 2,000-kilo beast in the rapid-flowing water. Another noteworthy tableau, frequently used in all of the documentaries, occurs when a group of black men, moving from the background, carry the prey forward and humbly place it in front of the camera.

A further example is Med prins Wilhelm på afrikanska jaktstigar/On Safari in Africa with Prince Wilhelm (Oscar Olsson, 1922). This documentary did not just have a royal flair to it. It was also the recording of a zoological expedition commis-
tionsed to collect animals and plants by the Swedish Museum of Natural History. The main purpose, though, was to kill fourteen mountain gorillas (which were under protection already at that time) and bring them home for study. The approach to the native-born is the same in this film as in Among Savages and Wild Beasts. But there are two scenes that add to the overall picture.

After Prince Wilhelm and the other hunters have killed a couple of adult mountain gorillas, some members of the expedition play around with the dead cadavers in an undignified manner in front of the camera. This is followed by a scene in which the Swedes make one of the native-born “boys,” who seems distressed, sit alongside one of the upright dead gorillas, while the cameraman film their backs together. This is then intercut with intertitles that make fun of the apparent similarity between them (Figure 3).

The second scene revolves around dancing, when, at least according to the film, the native-born tribes “greeted Prince Wilhelm’s arrival with dances and festivities.” At all times, the dancing takes place under the superintendence of the prince and the members of the Swedish expedition in a way that resemble depictions in, for example, The Birth of a Nation, in which the white Cameron family visits the slave quarters to gaze at the bizarre dances performed. The almost obscene concentration on dancing in On Safari in Africa with Prince Wilhelm is turned against the native-born, who seem to prefer to dance and party instead of performing hard labor. The dance in itself is portrayed as something very strange and exotic in comparison to the behavior of the white Swedes in the film, but also, of course, in relation to the cinema audience. There is, for example, a scene in which the natives perform a dance that includes a lot of jumping. To emphasize the exotic element, this segment was run in fast motion, which makes the dancers look ridiculous. The intertitle cries out: “Shimmy!” which is followed by a lengthy take that focuses on the bulging behinds of dancers. To end the scene, the filmmakers put in the ironic intertitle: “The West has still much to learn from the darkies.”

These two documentaries received the highest praise by reviewers in Swedish daily papers. The films were recognized as “scientific” and “instructive,” at the same time as they were seen as “entertaining” and “funny,” especially “The Shimmy!” and the other dance scenes—something that was greeted with peals of laughter in the auditorium, according to the reviews. In addition, several interesting arguments are made in the reviews about how these films worked to convey reality. Noting that wildlife documentaries were frequently shown, especially in shorter one-reel formats, one reviewer writes: “the exiting hunting scenes should not be suspected of being arranged, as the case are with so many other films of this kind.” After seeing On Safari in Africa with Prince Wilhelm, female reviewer Tora Garm wrote:

No-one can, after viewing this remarkable wildlife spectacle, return home without the notion of the film medium’s great importance, when presenting itself from its best side. The moving pictures hereby win a decisive victory over the written word, which in thick volumes already has described the land of the darkies to us. But these books
are tousled up in the dilemma of not always being believed, and furthermore, have stayed in our fantasy as stereotypes, forged by the individual reader's imagination. The responses disclose a high degree of naïve confidence in the documentary genre and the “objective” camera lens, which in turn transforms the moving pictures on the silver screen into unadulterated reality, since viewers can see this “reality” with their own eyes. These film expeditions also resulted in numerous documentary shorts that, along with the full-length films, first had their run at the cinemas and then circulated as mediators of anthropological truth in the Swedish school system well into the 1950s. With this in mind, it becomes quite easy to imagine where much of the Swedish prejudice against black people originated.

One final but important point to be made concerning these documentaries is that their “humorous” construction had a commercial value as well. In contrast to most other European countries, the Swedish state did not intervene in or subsidized its film industry until the 1960s. This meant that Swedish film companies (most notably among them Svensk Filmin industri) who ventured into documentaries had to carry their own expenses on the ordinary circuit before the films were lent out to the school system without charge. Hence, to make these films “funny” was a conscious narrative device aiming to attract paying families into the cinema;

Figure 3. The “humorous” comparison between the backs of a native-born black man and a dead gorilla in *On Safari in Africa with Prince Wilhelm.* (Bland dvärgar och gorillor, 1922).
the genre of wildlife documentaries was otherwise rumored to be too boring in comparison to regular feature films.42

The Exotic Cannibal in Swedish Feature Film. The image of the cannibal does not appear in Swedish documentaries of the 1920s. Even so, the image flourished due to the plentiful presence of so-called ethnological documentary films in Swedish cinemas at the time, such as Martin and Osa Johnson’s infamous Cannibals of the South Seas (1912; released in Sweden in 1919) or the American film Shipwrecked Among Cannibals (William F. Adler, 1920), the latter marketed in a Swedish trade paper thusly: “Fearless explorers might still today encounter man-eaters in the flesh in the darkest spots of our beautiful world. Unfortunately, it is not always possible for the explorers to return to civilization.”43 This both sounds and, in fact, is the same type of exploitation as in the notorious Italian Cannibal Horror films made in the 1970s and 1980s, among them Cannibal Holocaust (Ruggero Deodato, 1980). The vital distinction here is that the films of the 1920s were perceived as scientific ethnological studies, while the Italian films were sold as fictitious horror flicks. Today, modern anthropology questions whether cannibalism has ever existed anywhere in the world, except during times of extreme food shortage. But the fantasy image of the cannibal has certainly served a hegemonic function for “civilized” cultures to assert power over “primitive” cultures. To be able to show that the Other eat each other was first and foremost a way to reduce them to being animal-like and characterized by uncivilized behavior.44

A relatively ignored aspect of the successful Golden Age of Swedish silent film is the animated shorts of Kapten Grogg/Captain Highball by Victor Bergdahl, sold all over the world in between 1916 and 1921. In an interview, Bergdahl proudly speaks of how his shorts were met with cheers by the crowd everywhere. “In the English Colonies,” however, “they are not able to screen Captain Highball shorts because of the niggers who live there—I suppose the darkies cannot stand watching themselves in caricature.”45 The same kind of animation occurs in the feature comedy Robinson i skärgården/Robinson in the Archipelago (Rune Carlsten, 1920), where the fat banker Agathon, by misfortune, ends up on an uninhabited island in the archipelago and is forced to live like Robinson Crusoe before he is rescued. During the first night, Agathon has a nightmare in which he is “hunted by savages and other wild animals,” as one reviewer put it.46 In the animated nightmare sequence, he is captured and placed in a large cauldron by black male cannibals, who then perform a vicious war dance with their spears. The blacks are animated in a typically characteristic way: ghostlike creatures in grass skirts and without perceivable individuality; the drawn faces are dominated by huge lips and staring eyes (Figure 4). The nightmare ends abruptly when the terrified Agathon falls from the tree where he had sought shelter. The animated sequence is described by the reviewers as “screamingly funny,”47 and although no one thought that this sequence showed reality, the relation to the cannibal myth and ethnological science is still apparent.
Already in the advanced publicity for Styrman Karlssons flammor/First-mate Karlsson’s Sweethearts (Gustaf Edgren, 1925), there was fuss created about the fact that the director was going to use “real negroes” found in Marseille. Albert Lesti, and his daughter Yvonne Lesti, were, in no less than three articles, described as the “negroes of southern French descent,” who had received the unusual honor of becoming film stars in Sweden. Albert Lesti, not without pride, is presented as “a wash proof negro,” and as for Yvonne Lesti, “the work before the camera cannot be much more than an amusing game ... because, as everybody knows, most of the black actors have a lively imagination.” The black actors were, in other words, portrayed as childlike; it was presumed that they should have been grateful for the opportunity to be part of a superior Swedish film.

The story of First-mate Karlsson’s Sweethearts is, in short, that Karlsson, a manly man, is deceived by his sweetheart in Gothenburg, and then leaves for a circumnavigation of the globe. This takes him to places like Marseille, Barbados, Rio de Janeiro, and Sydney, where he meets other sweethearts. After a violent bar brawl in Barbados, he returns to the brig and dreams about the black South sea princess Naomi (Yvonne Lesti).

The eight-minute dream sequence that follows begins with a scene in which Naomi performs a dance in front of Karlsson—an unmistakable parallel to the
patriarchal white gaze in the wildlife documentaries. Without their knowledge, the father of Naomi, King Tamotu (Albert Nesti), watches them from behind a tree. After a moment, he summons fifteen warriors: black men dressed in grass skirts, armed with spears, who sneak through the tall grass. At the same time, second-mate Augustsson flirts with another “little negro girl,” who kisses him on the cheek; this revolts him, since he imagines that it has left an enormous lip mark on his cheek.

Meanwhile, Karlsson is confronted by King Tamotu, who commands him to marry Naomi. Karlsson refuses, and this leads to a great scuffle in which Karlsson fights off the horde of savages throwing themselves at him. When Augustsson hears the scuffle, he brusquely chucks away his girl. On his way to rescue, however, he stumbles on a terrifying cannibal in full warrior makeup who threatens him with a spear and grim facial expressions. Augustsson flees, and the savage runs after him. Karlsson has, during this time, been overpowered and tied to a tree. The cannibals dance wildly around him, as King Tamotu looks on with a satisfied grin. All of a sudden, the dance comes to a halt, and the savages line up and start to shoot arrows at the tied-up but resolute-looking Karlsson. Soon the arrows are framed like a halo around his head. He becomes infuriated and tries to loosen himself from the ropes. At that moment, he wakes up in his bed on the brig, entangled in the bedsheets.

In this film, besides Naomi’s dance, there are several straight patterns reminiscent of the cannibals in the animated Captain Highball shorts, the ethnological cannibal documentaries, and the Swedish documentaries on black people. This also reverberated in the reviews of First-mate Karlsson’s Sweethearts. In spite of the appearance of Albert and Yvonne Nesti in the advance publicity, not a single reviewer mentions the couple by name. One reviewer complains that “the negro girl is just seen in a dream,” while another wished that the film would have shown more from “the cannibal’s reception preparations.” A left-wing paper criticized the dream sequence as being “much too subtle, but this should probably be blamed on the First-mate’s lack of imagination and ethnological knowledge.” Apparently, the reviewer had seen other ethnological cannibal documentaries, and now the dream sequence in First-mate Karlsson’s Sweethearts failed to anticipate that “reality.” Convinced of the “authentic framing,” though, was reviewer Carl Björnberg who wrote: “The scenes from the South sea island were, to say the least, most convincing with their wash proof darkies.”

“The Civilized Negro”: The Subordinated Black Servant in Swedish Feature Film. The single most prevalent—and symptomatically, the most neglected—image of black people in Swedish film of the 1920s was the “civilized” Uncle Tom figure. In at least six films, this character appears in different guises: as male or female servants, or, sometimes, as errand boys or piccolos, performed by child actors.
One of these films, *En perfekt gentleman/A Perfect Gentleman* (Vilhelm Bryde and Gösta Ekman, 1927), is more noteworthy than the others. Here, black actress Desdemona Schlichting plays the role of a female servant. In screen time, this was the most significant role a black actor had during the period, and in one scene, this film also reproduced an iconic image of black submission that would become well known in Swedish society throughout this period.

*A Perfect Gentleman* deals with the doppelganger theme. The same actor, Gösta Ekman, plays both the part of the decadent and broke Marquis Robert de Luny and the peasant Jean Coubert. The Marquis is married to Hortense, mainly because her aunt, the vulgarian Charlotte Ponson, is financially able to maintain the old family traditions at de Luny castle. Desdemona Schlichting plays Hortense's personal maid. The first scene in which Schlichting participates shows how the shallow Madame Ponson runs around demonstrating to her impressed friends all the genuine valuables found in the aristocratic castle. All of a sudden, Ponson wonders where her niece is, and the party heads off to Hortense's rooms. One guest opens a door, which leads to the bathroom. The half-dressed niece sits on a stool, while a black female servant, on her knees in the typical servant uniform—black dress, white apron and a white hood—wipes Hortense's feet with a towel. Schlichting turns her head and smiles towards the guest, who reacts by slamming the door with a high-pitch scream, clearly horrified at the sight of a black person. This scene, with a black woman wiping the feet of a white one, was quickly to be recreated as a print ad for a soap brand that circulated in fan magazines and daily papers for years to come.53 This shows an intertextual awareness, since the filmmakers and the admen would not have used this image unless they had believed that the audience could relate to it (Figure 5).

The second scene in which Schlichting appears is when she warns her mistress Hortense: “Madam Ponson is coming—!!!” Hortense, who is having a conversation with a couple of gentlemen, runs off to her quarters along with her servant. However, the villain of the film, Colonel Jacques Renard, follows them. He knocks on the door, and Hortense persuades the servant to hide behind the door. When the eager colonel enters, he embraces Schlichting instead of Hortense, who has locked herself in another room. The colonel reacts with disgust. Schlichting then teases the colonel with the key to the bedroom. The colonel takes the key away from her after some fierce wrestling.

Schlichting’s character is, furthermore, the first one to discover the presence of the two doppelgangers in the household. Towards the end of the film, when the Marquis has been mortally wounded by the colonel in a duel, Schlichting is also the one who has to bring Hortense the dreadful news.

It is fairly remarkable, in the light of the fact that this is a relatively big role, that not a single reviewer mentions Schlichting or the character she plays in their reviews, particularly since it was quite unusual for a black character to appear in such a significant part in a Swedish film. Some of the reviewers even write about
FIGURE 5. The iconic image of black submission, from A Perfect Gentleman, that became well known in Sweden through recurrent advertisements for a Swedish soap brand. (Filmnyheter, no. 17, 1928).

several lesser characters in the film, which, undoubtedly, means that they deliberately must have overlooked Schlichting’s contribution. In addition, the reviews of A Perfect Gentleman were of some quantity, since the film was a Swedish big-budget movie opening on the day after Christmas.54

However, a female journalist did do a short interview with Schlichting for a fan magazine. Here, we are told that she came from Abyssinia, but that she now spoke German and lived in Berlin. Other details put forward as interesting to the reader are the fact that Schlichting is “a genuine female negro,” and that one “perfectly understands why a Marquis’ wife would want someone of her race for a servant.” Finally, asking about Schlichting’s family, the female interviewer confesses that she was in for quite a shock, as the answer was: “My daughter studies music, and my son, my son is a doctor.”55

It is likely that the confusion and surprise that the white interviewer experienced in her meeting with Schlichting in no small degree depended on the stereotypical image of black people produced and mediated in Swedish society at this time. According to Swedish interwar historian Martin Alm: “Even among those in Sweden who spoke appreciatively of the efforts of black people in the arts, there
were biases against the divergent race qualities of black people.” In short, it was more usual than not that black people were exoticized, and that they were seen as childish and as having a lively imagination.

**Conclusions.** The stereotypical images of black people did not have the same functions in Sweden as in the United States in the 1920s. First, Swedish racism depended on the absence of actual black people living in the country. The image of black people as a threat to society and white women, as in the Zip Coon stereotype, does not, therefore, on the whole exist in Swedish film culture. The images of black people were instead constantly created in ways that portray them as lesser human beings, almost without distinction from animals. Throughout, these degrading images can be seen in scientific documentaries and in feature films that, again and again, were recreated in advertisements, newspaper articles, and scientific writing. Thus, the great threat of miscegenation when it came to Jews, Travelers, and the Sámi, posed by the head of the Race Biological Institute in Stockholm, Professor Herman Lundborg, did not apply to black people mixing with whites in Sweden, as it did in the United States.

Second, the perception of black people as lesser human beings was, in fact, so powerful that no objections at all were posed against this image. On the contrary, this image was confirmed and thus legitimated by Swedish film reviewers. In the United States, conversely, this image was contested by African Americans, most notably, as is suggested by this article, in the black silent-film industry, with Oscar Micheaux as its forerunner. The very negative representation of black people in Swedish society also explains to a large extent why Micheaux’s critical view of the black man’s situation in America, which in part was built on a juxtaposition of the ignorant and the educated black, was more or less cut out by the Swedish censors and altered by distributors and in advertisements, leaving a generally more dubious image of black people.

A third thing that should be noted in comparing portrayals of black people in Sweden and the United States is the virtual absence of blackface in Swedish silent film production. Also, one could note that the commonly used clichés of black people constantly eating watermelons, and eating and stealing fried chickens—so evident in White American silent films—do not occur even once in Swedish silent-film production. This indicates that the degrading symbolic connotations of watermelon and chicken eating did not have the same meaning in Sweden as it did in the United States. The common appearance of black people as the Other in Swedish silent films also reveals that the ordinary Swedish notion, that these images were created elsewhere and imported, is incorrect.

To sum up, I would like to suggest that future studies of Oscar Micheaux could proceed by locating other countries reached by his films, in Europe or elsewhere. Such research might unveil important information about the distribution routes of these race films, not the least in order to shed light on the international circulation of silent film. Second, for the reason that this type of film is seldom
researched in general. As revealed here, censorship, advertising, and exhibition differed significantly between a predominantly black audience in the United States, and a white one in Sweden. The ideology—narrative, motifs, themes—suggested by films like this could thus change depending on the people who handled them—that is, censors, distributors, or exhibitors.

One can, finally, only wonder what Swedish audience members at the cinema Ugglan really experienced when they viewed the “western movie,” *The Symbol of the Unconquered*, with an all-black cast. Did they think of the characters as black—as degrading “negroes”—or did they regard the light-skinned cast as “white” heroes and villains? As has been indicated here, both readings existed side by side, even though the domestic Board of Censorship made the comprehension of Micheaux’s films very difficult for a Swedish audience.

Notes

2. Ibid, 30.
5. The Swedish Board of Censorship Archive, Censorship cards 27162 and 28443. The censorship card contains, outside of the exact meters cut for each reel, a short retelling of the film’s plot, a description of the cuts that were made, and sometimes an explicit statement which gives the reasons for the cuts made.
9. Swedish Board of Censorship Archive, Censorship card 27162. All Swedish quotations in this article have been translated into English by the author.
10. Ibid.
12. Swedish Board of Censorship Archive, Censorship card 27162.
13. Swedish Board of Censorship Archive, Censorship card 35725.
17. Swedish Board of Censorship Archive, Censorship card 28443.
18. See the ad in Stockholms-Tidningen, August 24, 1921.
19. See the ads in Dagens Nyheter and Social-Demokraten, both January 23, 1922.
21. According to advertisements in daily papers, numerous shorts were also exhibited during the whole silent period. Svensk filmografi 2 1920–1929 (Stockholm: Svenska filminstitutet, 1982), 106.
22. Swedish Board of Censorship Archive, Censorship cards 26426 and 39451.
24. Social-Demokraten and Aftonbladet, both August 23, 1921.
25. Theoretically, though, Within Our Gates could have been screened elsewhere in Sweden, even if this was a most uncommon practice. There is also a chance that the distributor translated the title of Within Our Gates/Chocolate Kiddies to a Swedish one before release, but during these four months no advertisement, either in the title or in its short description of the film, matched the content of Within Our Gates.
26. Swedish Board of Censorship Archive, Censorship card 35725.
29. See, for example, the latest historical overview of Swedish film history, Leif Furhammar, Filmen i Sverige. En historia i tio kapitel och en fortsättning (Stockholm: Dialogos in cooperation with The Swedish Film Institute, 2003).
34. Only 115 of these 180 feature and documentary films is preserved. The number of unrecorded cases could thus be slightly higher than 12 percent when it comes to representations of black people.
35. Furhammar, Filmen i Sverige, 70–72.
37. The royal Prince Wilhelm did also write a book when he returned home, Bland dvärgar och gorillor. Med svenska zoologiska expeditionen till Centralafrika 1921 (Stockholm: P. A. Norstedt & Söner, 1922). Translated, the title reads Among Pygmies and Gorillas, which makes the same degrading connections between human beings and animals as the film Among Savages and Wild Beasts does.
38. See for example, Stockholms-Tidningen, June 29, 1921, and Göteborgs-Posten, March 2, 1922.
39. See for example, Nya Dagligt Allehanda, March 13, 1922; Social-Demokraten, March 14, 1922; and Les duex, Svenska Dagbladet, November 29, 1921.
40. -bis, Stockholms-Tidningen, March 14, 1922.
41. Marque [Tora Garm], *Stockholms Dagblad*, 14 March 1922.


43. Advertisement for *Shipwrecked among Cannibals/Skeppsbrutna bland kannibaler*, *Filmjournalen*, no. 16, 1921.


49. *Stockholms Dagblad*, October 27, 1925.


51. -xon, *Social-Demokraten*, October 27, 1925.

52. Jens Flik [Carl Björnborg], *Nya Dagligt Allehanda*, October 27, 1925.

53. See, for example, the advertisement for “Björktvål Prins av Parma,” *Filmnyheter*, no. 17, 1928.

54. See for example P. J. E. [Per Johan Enström], *Nya Dagligt Allehanda*, December 27, 1927; and Hake [Harald Hansen], *Svenska Dagbladet*, December 27, 1927.


58. There are only a few brief occurrences of black face in Swedish silent film: *Lejonjakten/The Lion Hunt* (Karl Oscar Krantz, 1908), *Emigranten/The Emigrant* (Gustaf Linden, 1910), *Patriks äventyr/The Adventure of Patrik* (Arvid Englund, 1915), *Boman på utställningen/Boman at the Exhibition* (Karin Swanström, 1923), and *Charleys tant/Charley’s Aunt* (Elis Ellis, 1926).