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Cross-Dressing and Transgender Representation in Swedish Cinema, 1908–2017

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Abstract: Today’s explosion of Swedish films made by and about transgender people is sometimes considered in a vacuum. This article explores the long history of cross-gender performance in Swedish cinema and the relationship of these new films to older traditions. In this article, I will outline the contours of cross-gender performance in Swedish films from the 1908 to today, using some exemplary films to display the variety of styles, genres, and meanings that can be found: the short dance film *Dances Through the Ages* (*Skilda tiders danser*, Walfrid Bergström, 1909); the swashbuckler *Lasse-Maja* (Gunnar Olsson, 1941); the romantic comedy *Up With Little Märta* (*Fram för Lilla Märta*, Hasse Ekman, 1945); the dramatic art film *The Magician* (*Ansiktet*, Ingmar Bergman, 1958); the recent romantic comedy *Cockpit* (Mårten Klingberg, 2012); and the trans art film *Everything Falls Apart* (*Nånting måste gå sönder*, Ester Martin Bergsmark, 2016). I will show that the two main shifts in Swedish cinema’s representation of cross-gender performance occurred in the mid-1950s and in the 1990s, due to social changes and changes in the structure of the Swedish film industry. In Swedish cinema, as elsewhere, cross-dressing has never meant any one thing, so we must attend to the specific contexts of its expression in order to understand what it meant.

“It’s as if I’m destroying myself. To become her. My dream sister: Ellie,” speaks the voice on the soundtrack. A young person lies in a bathtub. We cut to a view through a fence of a dark landscape, a pink sky glowing over empty railroad tracks. The voice belongs to the protagonist of *Everything Falls Apart* (*Nånting måste gå sönder*, Ester Martin Bergsmark, 2016), played by Swedish trans actor Saga Becker. It guides us through the character’s haphazard search for sex, love, and meaning. Although transgender and gender non-conforming characters have only entered Swedish cinema in recent decades, Swedish cinema has a long history of cross-gender performance.

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Over more than one hundred years, cross-gender performances in Swedish cinema have been highly varied, ranging from cross-gender casting to characters that disguise their gender in romantic comedies, swashbucklers, dramas, and art films, to recent representations of transgender and gender non-conforming people. Altogether, at least 94 Swedish films have featured some kind of cross-gender performance (see appendix for a list of these films). Cross-dressing used to be a familiar staple of the Swedish film industry. However, these performances were not necessarily subversive or queer. Most appeared in gender disguise romantic comedies, cross-dressing's most conventional genre. Between 1914 and 1956, Swedish companies produced, on average, a cross-dressing film every year. In the late 1950s, cross-dressing became less frequent and, starting in the 1970s, Swedish films began to represent actual trans and other gender non-conforming people.

Most research on cross-gender performance in cinema has focused on American film. Film scholars Annette Kuhn (1985) and Chris Straayer (1992, 1996) have insightfully outlined the conventions of Hollywood cross-dressing comedies and thrillers, some of which are shared with Swedish cinema, as I will discuss. My book, *Girls Will Be Boys: Cross-Dressed Women, Lesbians, and American Cinema, 1908–1934*, explores the historically specific meanings of cross-dressing in American silent cinema and the reasons for its popularity during this time (Horak 2016). In contrast, cultural theorist Marjorie Garber argues that “transvestism is a space of possibility structuring and confounding culture” that works similarly across dramatically different times, places, and media (Garber 1992, 17). Trans scholars like Viviane Namaste have taken Garber to task for conceiving of transvestism as an exclusively rhetorical device and “undermin[ing] the possibility of ‘transvestite’ as a viable identity in and of itself” (Namaste 2000, 14–15). More recently, scholars have begun to investigate transgender cinematic aesthetics in American and Chinese media (Halberstam 2005; Keegan 2015, 2016a; Leung 2012, 2014) and the aesthetic strategies of particular American and European trans filmmakers (Ford 2016; Muñoz 1999; Steinbock 2011, 2014). Some trans scholars have also begun to investigate trans people's experiences as spectators (Clayman 2015; Keegan 2016b; Williams 2011). Several American trans filmmakers have also written about their own and others' work (Feder and Juhasz 2016; George 2014; Johnson 2014; Roskam 2014).

Despite its prevalence, there has not been as much attention to cross-gender performance in Swedish cinema. Perhaps the most famous scholar of cross-dressing in Sweden is queer feminist scholar and politician Tiina Rosenberg. She has written about female-to-male cross-dressing in theater (Rosenberg 1996, 2000) and translated two books by gender theorist Judith Butler (Butler 2005, 2010). Swedish film scholars have described cross-dressing in Swedish silent film and transgender representation in recent film, but have not attended to the many

films in between these poles. Film historians Tommy Gustafsson and Erik Hedling (2008) note the frequency of men playing women's roles in the carnival films made by Lund University students starting in 1908, a continuation of the long-standing *spex* (student farce) tradition. Gustafsson (2015, 123–125) also points out the surprisingly queer representations of desire between male characters and female characters played by men in *The Tale of Fritiof* (*Fritiofs saga*, Morits Tyster, 1924) and *Black Rudolf* (*Svarte Rudolf*, Gustaf Edgren, 1928). Flashing forward, film and sexuality scholar Louise Wallenberg has celebrated what she calls “new Scandinavian trans cinema” that began in 2002, including significant contributions from Sweden (Wallenberg 2015). However, these investigations leave the vast majority of cross-gender performances unaccounted for. A wider scope allows us to see how they fit into a broad and varied history.

In this article, I will outline the contours of cross-gender performance in Swedish films from the early 1900s to today, using some exemplary films to display the variety of styles, genres, and meanings that can be found: the short dance film *Dances Through the Ages* (*Skilda tiders danser*, Walfrid Bergström, 1909); the swashbuckler *Lasse-Maja* (Gunnar Olsson, 1941); the romantic comedy *Up With Little Märta* (*Fram för Lilla Märta*, Hasse Ekman, 1945); the dramatic art film *The Magician* (*Ansiktet*, Ingmar Bergman, 1958); the recent romantic comedy *Cockpit* (Mårten Klingberg, 2012); and the trans art film *Everything Falls Apart*. I will show that the two main shifts in Swedish cinema's representation of cross-gender performance occurred in the mid-1950s and in the 1990s, due to social changes and changes in the structure of the Swedish film industry. In Swedish cinema, as elsewhere, cross-dressing has never meant any one thing, so we must attend to the specific contexts of its expression in order to understand what it meant.

Cross-Gender Casting

Some of Sweden's first films continued theatrical traditions of cross-gender casting. In the early 1900s, film production in Sweden was haphazard, consisting primarily of non-fiction actualities, local views, synchronized sound experiments, local performers, and student farces (Dahlquist 2005, 29–31; Olsson 1999, 140–147). Professional production of films did not begin until 1909. Several of the early genres were already associated with cross-gender performance. Beginning in 1908, the Lund University student carnival committee produced a series of film farces with male students in every role, similar to the live stage performances, *spex*, that they had long put on. Based on Gustafsson and Hedling's

descriptions of these films, the cross-gender casting extended the genre's anarchistic, parodic style to gender roles (Gustafsson/Hedling 2008, 119–126). Humor was generated through the comic juxtaposition of obviously male bodies with female personae and through the expression of accidental same-sex desire.

However, when women performers played men, the effect was different. On stage, women disguised as men were often considered attractive and daring, rather than comic. Men's clothing was more revealing than women's clothing and female performers dressed as men often did not wear corsets. Furthermore, ballet, burlesque, musicals, and variety provided opportunities for women to dance together by playing both female and male parts. In one of the early dance films produced in Sweden, *Dances Through the Ages* (1909), two female operetta performers dance a "Boston waltz" together.¹ Rosa Grünberg, hair pinned up, in black tails, trousers, and a white bowtie, plays the "cavalier" to Emma Meissner's lady, in a white dress. The Stockholm daily newspaper *Aftonbladet* described the scene: "En mjuk, glidande boston utgör början. [...] Kavaljeren, fr. Grünberg, bjuder på det mest manliga sätt upp sin dam, som förväntansfullt afbidar hans ankomst" ("Divorna på biografduken", *Aftonbladet* 21.10.1909).² When this three-minute scene begins, Meissner sits coquettishly in front of a black curtain on the left side of the frame, looking happily over to Grünberg, who stands in front of a light-colored wallpaper on the right. Grünberg walks over and bows, Meissner stands and curtsies, then Grünberg takes her partner's hands and sweeps her into a waltz. As they turn, the women switch places in front of the dark and light backgrounds – first they contrast with the background, then blend in, then they contrast again. While the dark- and light-colored backdrops initially suggest a strict binary, the movement of the dance confuses this distinction. They change places again and again, suggesting that this simple binary between light and dark, cavalier and lady, man and woman, is insufficient.

Like many films made during the first decades of cinema, there is no narrative; the film simply presents something interesting to look at, a style that has been called a "cinema of attractions" (Gunning 1986). The film doesn't use narrative to tell viewers how to understand what they see. Film scholar Susan Potter has argued of a French dance film like this one that, "the film's playful erotics

¹ This section of the film can be viewed online on Filmarkivet: <http://www.filmarkivet.se/movies/skilda-tiders-danser/>.

² Translation: "A supple, sliding 'Boston' begins. [...] The cavalier, Miss Grünberg, invites his lady to dance in the most manly way, while she expectantly awaits his arrival."

are inherently fleeting and multi-layered, countering any effort to resolve or fix them into any one definitive interpretation or experience” (Potter 2012, 94). This type of performance was very common in the early 1900s, so audiences would not have been surprised to see two women performing a romantic dance. Yet, the performers’ obvious pleasure may have suggested intriguing possibilities to women who were attracted to women and people assigned female who were masculine-identified.

Cross-gender casting became less common in the fiction films produced after 1909. However, male performers occasionally still played women in comedies, as when Swedish actor Victor Arfvidson played the title female role in *Agaton and Fina* (*Agaton och Fina*, Eric Malmberg, 1912). What’s more, the most popular Swedish character in American film comedies, “Sweedie, the Swedish maid,” was played by burly American actor Wallace Beery. Beery played Sweedie in thirty American films between 1914 and 1916. Thus, American stereotypes of the Swedish immigrant women who were flooding Chicago and other US cities at this time became embodied through the stocky, awkward physicality of a male performer.

Although cross-gender casting largely disappeared from Swedish cinema, it has been revived occasionally, most often when men play comedic women’s roles. For example, Swedish actor Olof Ås played a chambermaid in the adventure film *Harald Handfaste* (Erik “Hampe” Faustman, 1946) and two Lund carnival films from the 1950s featured men in women’s roles. The surreal Hasse and Tage comedy *The Adventures of Picasso* (*Picassos äventyr*, Tage Danielsson, 1978) cast British comedian Bernard Cribbins and Irish actor Wilfrid Brambell as Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas. In a rare example of a female performer in a male role, the eleven-year-old Swedish actor Amanda Davin played look-alike characters Martin and Julia, who impersonate each other, in the children’s comedy *Immediate Boarding* (*Tur & Retur*, Ella Lemhagen, 2003). This layered performance of gender (e. g., a girl playing a boy playing a girl) harkened back to Elizabethan gender disguise comedies like *Twelfth Night*.

Cross-gender casting was also sometimes used to unsettle audiences. For example, when the Finnish actress Stina Ekblad plays the caged, possibly mad Ismael in *Fanny and Alexander* (*Fanny och Alexander*, Ingmar Bergman, 1982), the character’s mixed gender signs are not comic, but uncanny. Likewise, the choice to cast the Swedish actor Sven Lindberg as the title character of *Asta Nilsson’s Companion* (*Asta Nilssons sällskap*, Marie-Louise Ekman and Gösta Ekman, 2005) is one of this perplexing film’s many mysteries. After the first years of Swedish film, cross-gender casting became a minor practice revived only occasionally in comedies and art films.

Cross-Dressing Characters

Throughout most of Swedish film history, the most common type of cross-gender performance has been characters who, within the world of the film, decide to don the clothes of another gender. At least 54 Swedish films feature this type of narrative cross-dressing. The vast majority (around 80 %) were produced between 1914 and 1956, from the silent era to the post-WWII era, two periods when Swedish film production was strong and the films were popular with Swedish audiences. Most of these films were gender disguise comedies, a genre that Chris Straayer has termed the “temporary transvestite film” (Straayer 1992, 1996). In these films, cross-dressing is used as a plot device to generate a variety of funny situations and performances. Of the Swedish films of this period, a little more than half featured men disguised as women, around a third women disguised as men, and the rest had both women and men disguising their gender. Thus, while humor was regularly generated by both types of cross-dressing, the most popular scenario seems to have been cross-dressing men, perhaps because they enacted a descent down the social hierarchy or perhaps because effeminacy in men was more worrisome and thus more comic than masculinity in women.

As Straayer has discussed, most gender disguise comedies adhere to a number of fairly strict narrative and aesthetic conventions. Many of these conventions were established in theater centuries before cinema was invented, but they have cohered in particular ways in film. The popular, mid-century Swedish comedy *Up with Little Märta* exemplifies these conventions. The film was inspired by the well-known British play *Charley's Aunt* (1892), which had already been adapted to film in Sweden in 1926. While Straayer and others have used *Some Like It Hot* (Billy Wilder, 1959) as an archetypal gender disguise comedy (Kuhn 1985; Phillips 2006; Straayer 1996), *Up With Little Märta* was released fourteen years earlier and anticipates the later film's narrative set-up and many of its gags.

In gender disguise comedies, there is always narrative motivation for a character to masquerade as another gender—to get a job, escape detection, play a trick, or sneak into a gender-segregated world like the military or an all-girls music troupe (Straayer 1996, 44–46). In *Up with Little Märta*, Sture Letterström (Stig Järrel) and Kurre Swenson (Hasse Ekman) are out-of-work musicians who spot an ad for a female cellist. Kurre convinces Sture, a cellist, to apply for the job in the guise of woman. Interestingly, Kurre points out that Sture had played female roles in university *spex*, so the film invokes this old tradition as partial explanation for Sture's willingness to disguise himself as a woman.

In gender disguise comedies, the disguise is believable to the other characters in the film, but not to the film's viewers (Straayer 1996, 47–48). Märta's disguise is immediately believed by almost every character in the film, with the exception of

two children who comment on her odd appearance. At the same time, Märta retains Sture's thick, dark eyebrows, doesn't wear much makeup, and doesn't seem to wear any body-contouring undergarments – all of which reminds the film's viewers that she is actually a man in disguise.

The film provides viewers with visual, auditory, behavioral, and narrative clues to the character's "real" gender (Straayer 1996, 47–48, 50–51). Märta sometimes forgets that she is supposed to be female and gets physically aggressive with another man or asks for sherry rather than sweet liqueur – signs of her inherent maleness, we are meant to assume. The film viewer also gets to see Märta when she lets down her disguise – when she takes off her wig to sleep, when she wakes up in the morning with black stubble, and when she – now wearing women's clothing – shaves in front of a mirror.

The cross-dressed character becomes sensitized to the plight and pleasures of another gender (Straayer 1996, 48–50). Märta becomes politicized on behalf of women's rights through her encounters with the mayor's wife, Mrs. Lovise Granlund (Gull Natorp), and the feminist Miss Wiklund (Margit Andelius). She accidentally volunteers to run for parliament, then gives a rousing speech in favor of women's rights, particularly rights for overworked, underappreciated wives.

The disguise creates opportunities for accidental same-sex desire and stands in the way of heterosexual desire (Straayer 1996, 51–61). This is one of the key comic gags of gender disguise comedies. During Märta's first musical performance, a fat, balding, underwear salesman, Frederiksson (Thor Modéen) makes eyes at her and sends her a note inviting her for a drink in his room after the show. This is a classic example of accidental same-sex desire – Frederiksson thinks he desires a woman, but the viewer knows that he desires a man. At the same time, Sture/Märta falls in love with Inga Bergström (Elsie Albiin), one of his performance partners, but is prevented from acting on his feelings for fear that Inga would interpret his desire as lesbian. In fact, Märta takes advantage of an opportunity to nuzzle her head onto Inga's chest as she comforts her, which at the level of the image looks like lesbian desire, at the same time as we know that it is "really" heterosexual.

Another convention that Straayer describes is the "paradoxical bivalent kiss," when the cross-dressed character and another character kiss, thus creating "a double entendre of simultaneous homosexual and heterosexual readings" (Straayer 1996, 54–56). However, *Up with Little Märta* is careful to avoid such kisses. The closest we get is when Inga and her sister encourage Märta and Kurre (who is allegedly Märta's fiancé), to kiss each other on the lips. The scene fades to black before their faces touch. This example suggests that there may have been more discomfort with accidental male-male kisses in mid-century Swedish come-

dies than later American comedies, although these kinds of kisses had occurred previously in Swedish silent films.

Although another convention of the gender disguise comedy is that the cross-dressed character is dramatically unmasked (Straayer 1996, 44, 47), this never happens in *Up with Little Märta*. Instead, we see a newspaper headline announcing that Märta died suddenly and tragically and then we see Sture and Inga embrace. The film is bookended by a sequence set in 2006, in which an old man (revealed to be Sture) tells his granddaughter the whole story while sitting in front of a giant marble statue of Märta on the town square. The statue suggests that the public's memory of Märta (as real and as really female) lives on long after her supposed death.

However, one of the most fundamental conventions of the gender disguise comedy – that the cross-dressed character abandon the disguise and form a heterosexual, gender-normative couple – appears here, too (Straayer 1996, 44–55). Sture and Inga become a couple and Sture abandons any pretense to femininity. Thus, despite their celebration of cross-dressing and accidental same sex desire, these types of films promise a return to gender and sexual norms and suggest that gender change can only be temporary.

Straayer argues that this formula has remained popular because it allows viewers to vicariously experience a fantasy of freedom from normative gender and sexual roles, even while it ultimately reinstates those norms (Straayer 1996, 42–43). For Straayer, gender disguise comedies are therefore partially progressive and partially conservative. During the genre's greatest popularity in Sweden, from the 1910s to the 1950s, gender disguise comedies were one of the few strategies available to represent same-sex desire and something like transgender embodiment in mainstream media. At the same time, these films were not considered subversive or controversial; critics received them as wholesome family fun.

One of the most interesting films from this period was the 1941 film *Lasse-Maja*, based on the autobiography of the legendary Swedish bandit of the same name, because it breaks many of the conventions of the gender disguise comedy. The film was likely inspired by the Norwegian film *Gjest Baardsen* (Tancred Ibsen, 1939), which was likewise based on the story of a legendary cross-dressing Norwegian bandit. *Lasse-Maja* was inspired by the life of Swedish folk hero Lars Larsson Molin, aka Lasse-Maja, who lived from 1785 to 1845. He was a Swedish Robin Hood figure who – according to his popular memoir – robbed from the rich, gave to the poor, and frequently disguised himself in women's clothing. Unlike other gender disguise films, *Lasse-Maja* is not primarily a comedy. It is a swashbuckler, full of drama, tragedy, and romance. When the movie starts, we see an old woman free a captured thief known as Silver-Jan (Emil Fjellström). Only later does the film show us that this old woman is in fact the famous Lasse-Maja (Sture Lagerwall) – though

we likely suspected. Thus, the spectator is not given a privileged view of the character's "real" gender in the beginning of the film, as they would in a gender disguise comedy. Annette Kuhn describes this "view with" the diegetic characters as characteristic of later American cross-dressing thrillers (Kuhn 1985, 62).

The film is divided into three sections. In the first, Lasse-Maja disguises himself as a servant in the house of a brutal tax collector, Niklas Halling (John Ekman). He steals money from Halling and gives some to a poor woman, Lena Andersdotter (Liane Linden), so that she can keep her house. Later, Lena helps Lasse-Maja escape, but she is thrown in jail in his stead. In the second part of the film, Silver-Jan and Lasse-Maja disguise themselves as an aristocratic man and woman, respectively, and ingratiate themselves with Baron Krusenhielm at Sjövik (Rune Carlsten) while they work out a plan to rob him. Lena, who coincidentally works as a maid in the baron's house, convinces Lasse-Maja not to do it. Nonetheless, she is jailed again and convinces Lasse-Maja to give himself up and lead an honest life. He is sentenced to life in Karlsten prison, but is eventually pardoned. In the film's third part, Lasse-Maja seeks out Lena and determines to live an honest life.

Some elements of the film adhere to the conventions of the gender disguise comedy – there is a narrative motivation for Lasse-Maja's gender disguise and he ultimately abandons the disguise to form a heterosexual, gender-normative couple. The film's second part draws the most strongly from the gender disguise comedy, as the disguised Lasse-Maja flirts with the baron (who returns the affection), sometimes forget his femaleness and downs a drink in one gulp, and takes every opportunity to hug the baron's beautiful daughters. An interesting variation of the genre is that Lasse-Maja's disguise only fools the upper-class characters, not the working-class ones. The baron, his daughters, and the king's officers are all fooled. But Silver-Jan and Lena see through his disguise immediately and the baron's housekeeper is also suspicious. Thus, the film uses the structure of the gender disguise comedy to criticize the upper classes and align viewers with the superior knowledge of the working class.

However, the first part of the film is not at all like a gender disguise comedy. Not only is the audience introduced to the character already in costume, but when Lasse-Maja later disguises himself in Lena's clothing, the scene is one of dramatic tension, not comedy. When we see Lasse-Maja wearing women's clothing in Lena's cabin, he still comes off as a handsome hero – the clothing does not make him laughable or ridiculous. His disguise doesn't fool his pursuers, either, but he nonetheless runs through the Swedish countryside wearing a dress and shawl, rows across a lake, and continues running – suggesting his comfort with women's clothing and an unwillingness to give it up that we don't normally see in cross-dressing films. This kind of cross-dressing story, of a folk hero who seems irresistibly drawn to women's clothing, is one that is not often told in mainstream

cinema. However, by concluding with the establishment of an (allegedly) gender-normative heterosexual couple, the film reinstates the dominant order and undercuts its critique of class society.

The Decline of Cross-Dressing in Swedish Cinema

If gender disguise comedies were so popular in Sweden for a half century, why did they suddenly drop off at the end of the 1950s? The shift was likely caused by changes in the Swedish film industry. Television broadcasting began in Sweden in 1956 and, within six years, 1.8 million television sets were registered out of a population of 7 million (Furhammar 2003, 249). During this same interval, the number of movie tickets sold per year fell from 80 million to 40 million (Furhammar 2003, 249). The film industry was in crisis. So, in 1963, the government launched the Swedish Film Reform. The film industry, led by the newly created Swedish Film Institute, turned away from popular genre films like cross-dressing comedies and towards more aesthetically ambitious art cinema. Fewer films were made in the subsequent decades and when they included cross-dressing, it was usually not to get a laugh.

Like the later use of cross-gender casting in *Fanny and Alexander* and *Asta Nilsson's Companion*, art films like Ingmar Bergman's *The Magician* used narrative cross-dressing to create a sense of the uncanny. Even though *The Magician* was released in 1958, before the reform, it was emblematic of the films to come. The film uses cross-dressing as part of a broader exploration of masquerade, acting, and identity. Set in 1846, it depicts the encounter between a group of traveling showmen, Herr Vogler's Magnetic Health Theater, and a group of skeptics consisting of a local consul, his wife, a constable, and a medical advisor. As in *Lasse-Maja*, we are first introduced to the cross-dressed character in costume. In the film's first scene, we see the five members of Herr Vogler's troupe, including his young male assistant, Aman (Ingrid Thulin). The character Aman (perhaps a play on "a man") has smooth, androgynous features, but is treated by everyone in the film as male. Viewers who are unaware of the casting may well read this character as male. Only midway through the film does Aman remove his dark wig to reveal long, blond hair and announce that he is actually Manda, Vogler's wife. The film's failure to acknowledge Manda/Aman's gender disguise for so long unsettles the viewer's sense of mastery, making us question what we see and believe – just as the characters in the film do.

What's more, Aman discusses trickery and authenticity in an early scene, making clear that the character's gender masquerade is meant to make us ques-

tion human identity more generally. In the carriage, an ailing actor, Johan Spegel (Bengt Ekerot), asks Aman what he's reading. (The word *spegel* means "mirror" in Swedish, multiplying the word play.) Aman replies: "A novel about swindlers (*falskspelare*)."¹ "Colleagues of yours?" asks Spegel. The troupe's salesman answers in the negative. Then Aman reads a quote from the book: "Deception is so prevalent that those who speak the truth are usually branded as the greatest liars." Spegel responds: "The author presumes there's a great general thing called truth somewhere out there. That theory is pure illusion." During this discussion, the head of the troupe, Vogler, wears a wig and false beard, goes by a false name, and pretends he is unable to speak. Spegel is an actor – and thus a kind of professional liar. The troupe itself makes money selling fake herbal concoctions. Whether or not Vogler is capable of performing magic the film leaves open. Thus, gender disguise becomes one strategy among many to explore the nature of performance, trickery, and truth – not a structure used to generate laughter or accidental homosexual desire, as in previous films. Furthermore, Thulin's attractive androgyny in the role hearkens back to actresses like Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich, who wore male clothing in the 1930s without trying to disguise their gender. This kind of seriousness is typical of cross-dressing in Swedish films after the mid-1950s, on the rare occasions that it does occur.

The Rise of Transgender Representation

In the 1970s, for the first time, Swedish cinema began to directly represent gender variant people. Gay and lesbian activism was "dynamic and lively" during the 1970s, catapulting alternative forms of gendered embodiment into new public attention (Ryberg 2015, 139). However, film representations were ambivalent. Vilgot Sjöman, who had pushed the boundaries of sexual representation in films like *491* (1964), *My Sister, My Love* (*Syskonbädd* 1782, 1966) and *I am Curious Yellow* (*Jag är nyfiken gul*, 1967), featured a group of heterosexual male transvestites in his cavalcade of sexual non-conformity, *Taboo* (*Tabu*, 1977). Although the film depicts one of the transvestites, Margaretha/Lennart (Halvar Björk), fairly sympathetically, the film's presentation of an orgiastic transvestite dance party is distinctly prurient. The film ultimately presents transvestism as one of a litany of perversions, alongside sadomasochism, exhibitionism, incest, pedophilia, and necrophilia. A collectively-produced lesbian activist film released the same year, *The Woman in Your Life is You* (*Kvinnan i ditt liv är du*, Lesbisk front, 1977), featured women parodying the dynamics of butch-femme seduction. The narrator complains about lesbians who are "more like men," as well as their femme partners, described as

“upper class girls who need to spice up their life.”³ Film and sexuality scholar Ingrid Ryberg argues that, while “the butch/femme couple is presented as a stereotype to be ridiculed and rejected,” it also “becomes an opportunity for a lustful and campy performance of lesbian desire and seduction” (Ryberg 2015, 146). In this film, lesbians also parodically enact several nuclear families, including father figures played by women. This type of cross-dressing is more closely aligned to the narrative cross-dressing we saw before, although it is used in this case to make a political critique of the patriarchal family.

In the 1990s and 2000s, there was a small revival of cross-dressing films specifically in films made for children. The introduction of the VCR had launched another crisis in cinema-going in the 1980s. In response, the Swedish Film Institute began to prioritize popular genre films as well as art cinema. This policy shift may partially explain cross-dressing’s comeback. However, cross-dressing may have come across as less “innocent” for adults who were aware of gay, lesbian, transvestite and transsexual identities, so it was largely confined to films made for children. The first film of this small wave was *The Master Thief’s Apprentice* (*Stortjuvens pojke*, Henry Meyer, 1992). Set in 1808, the film follows an impoverished young girl, Jossi (Sara Möller), who passes as a boy and becomes friends with none other than master thief Lasse-Maja (Carlo Schmidt), who, despite his own gender tricks, doesn’t see through her disguise until the end of the film. In the film’s conclusion, Jossi renounces thievery and goes back to women’s clothing. Over the next few years, the popular children’s series *The Little Jönsson Band* included cross-dressed boys on the run in *The Little Jönsson Band on a Tightrope* (*Lilla Jönssonligan på styva linan*, Christjan Wegner, 1997); a bullied white boy disguised himself as an Arab woman in *Best in Sweden!* (*Bäst i Sverige!*, Ulf Malmros, 2002); and, as described earlier, Amanda Davin plays a boy and girl who switch places in *Immediate Boarding* (2003). After this small wave, cross-dressing characters became infrequent again.

However, in tandem with the rise of transgender activism in the 1990s and 2000s, Swedish cinema developed new interest in representing gender non-conforming people, including transgender, transsexual, transvestite, and genderqueer people. In the last few years, this trend has taken off exponentially – at least 15 Swedish films by and about trans people were released between 2014 and 2017, more than had been made in all the years previously. Gender non-conforming people are often the subject of short documentaries, like *Manhood* (Mia Engberg, 1999), a profile of a young San Francisco trans man; *Dragkingdom of Sweden* (Åsa Ekman and Ingrid Ryberg, 2002), about drag king performers

3 Translation from Swedish by Ingrid Ryberg.

in Sweden, London, and New York; and *A Farmer's Longing* (*En bondes längtan*, Rebecka Rasmusson, 2010), about a Swedish trans woman who works as a dairy farmer. Unlike earlier films, these documentaries portray their subjects in nuanced and compelling ways, although *A Farmer's Longing* falls into some of the clichés that trans activist Julia Serano has critiqued (Serano 2007), such as perpetually showing trans women donning makeup as if to suggest that their femininity is artificial and exhibiting undue interest in the status of their genitals. Two recent documentaries investigate intersections between trans identity, ethnicity, religion, and citizenship status. *(In)Visible* (Miles Rutendo Tanhira, 2014) explores the lives of trans and queer asylum seekers in Sweden, while *Transphobia* (Nur Tatal and Iván Blanco, 2015) presents the friendship between director Nur Tatal, a cisgender woman who came to Sweden as a Kurdish refugee, and Rashaan, a trans woman living in Kurdistan.

Perhaps the most controversial Swedish documentary on the subject of transsexuality is *The Regretters* (*Ångrarna*, Marcus Lindeen, 2010). It focuses on two Swedish men who regret their decision to medically transition from male to female. The highly stylized documentary was scripted by cisgender radio journalist Marcus Lindeen, based on a play that he wrote, inspired by interviews with the two subjects, Mikael and Orlando. The men play themselves in the film. The film was controversial for focusing on the small percentage of people who regret undergoing gender affirmation surgery. Recent estimates place the number of gender affirmation surgery “regretters” between one and two percent (Tannehill 2014), much lower than most elective surgeries. The film has the potential to make these life-saving surgeries more difficult for other trans people to receive.

Sweden is a contradictory place for transgender people. Sweden's health system has long covered the cost of gender affirmation surgery and, in 1972, the country became the first in the world to allow trans people to correct their legal gender – although only post-surgery. However, this 1972 law required trans people to be sterilized in order to receive surgery. This policy echoed Sweden's long history of forcibly sterilizing “undesirable” populations for eugenic purposes, including Roma and Jewish people, poor people, and people with disabilities, between 1935 and 1975 (Ahlander 2017). Only in 2013 was the sterilization requirement for gender affirmation surgery lifted, when the Swedish courts decided that it violated both the Swedish Constitution and the European Convention on Human Rights (Nelson 2013; “Trans People to Receive Compensation for Forced Sterilisation in Sweden” 2016). In 2016, the Swedish government agreed to compensate those who were forcibly sterilized and in March 2017, they proposed individual compensation of 225,000 Swedish crowns to each of the estimated 800 people affected (Ahlander 2017). In April 2017, the European Court of Human Rights officially ruled that this type of sterilization requirement was a violation of human rights and called upon

the twenty-two European countries that still enforced it to change their laws (Stack 2017). Thus, despite Sweden's liberal reputation, trans people have faced significant obstacles to securing the legal recognition and medical treatments they need. The state's ambivalence toward transgender people is reflected in some of the ambivalence toward trans people found in Swedish feature films.

Swedish feature films have taken a variety of perspectives on gender non-conforming people. Some are overtly pathologizing, like *Popular Music (Populärmusik från Vittula)* (Reza Bagher, 2004), which includes a transvestite pedophile. Others are more sympathetic but still exoticizing, such as *Once in a Lifetime (Livet är en schlager)* (Susanne Bier, 2000), which includes an HIV-positive trans character inspired by Warhol superstar Candy Darling. The use of cross-gender identification to evoke the uncanny returns in the vampire film *Let the Right One In (Låt den rätte komma in)* (Tomas Alfredson, 2008), in which the vampire Eli (Lina Leandersson) ambiguously states, "I am not a girl." Later in the movie, in a dramatic jump cut, we see a large scar running down Eli's crotch, but the film offers no other explanation of the character's gender identity.

Only since 2012 have gender non-conforming people themselves begun to make feature films in Sweden. The results are richer, more complex, and more aesthetically ambitious than the representations that came before. The gender-creative artistic team Ester Martin Bergsmark and Eli Levén are responsible for both *She Male Snails (Pojkantanten)* (Ester Martin Bergsmark, 2012) and *Something Must Break (Nånting måste gå sönder)* (2014). Bergsmark and Levén should certainly be added to film scholar Helen Hok-Sze Leung's pantheon of "trans auteurs" who "consciously construct a complex relation between their trans identification and their aesthetic signature on screen" (Leung 2014, 87). *She Male Snails* is an experimental, performative documentary that explores Bergsmark's and Levén's own childhoods, identities, and relationship. Levén proposes the term *pojktant*, which can be roughly translated as *boy-lady*, as a playful label for their experience of gender. *Something Must Break* is a narrative fiction film, punctuated with stylized fantasy sequences. It was directed by Bergsmark and adapted from a semi-autobiographical novel by Levén. Trans actor Saga Becker won a Guldbagge (or Swedish Academy Award) for her performance as the protagonist, Sebastian/Ellie. Becker also recently co-directed her first film, *Fuckgirls* (Becker and Christofer Nilsson, 2016), an experimental short.

Swedish trans films are gaining increasing recognition in Sweden and abroad. The short film *Undress Me (Ta av mej)* (Victor Lindgren, 2013), written by and starring trans actor/screenwriter Jana Bringlöv Ekspong, won the prestigious Teddy Award for best short film at the 2013 Berlinale. The film presents a trans woman's ambivalent romantic encounter with a straight cisgender man. Trans* Film Fest Stockholm, a free, community-run festival founded in 2015, offers a new forum

for films by and about trans people, including films by local high school students, contributing to today's trans filmmaking boom.

We are just at the beginning of an exciting new wave of transgender cinema. As Louise Wallengren has argued, this new wave of trans cinema has “served to illustrate and imagine new ways of thinking and being gendered” (Wallenberg 2015, 179). However, the Swedish Film Institute's laudable recent effort to fund more films helmed by women in order to promote “gender equality” fails to advocate for trans and non-binary filmmakers, who are even more disadvantaged than cisgender women (“Towards Gender Equality in Film Production” 2015). Nevertheless, Swedish films made by and in collaboration with trans artists have introduced wholly new kinds of stories to the screen in recent years and hopefully these opportunities will continue.

Cross-Dressing in the Wake of Transgender Films

This new wave of transgender representation has changed the meaning of cross-dressing in more recent Swedish films. The common premise of gender disguise films – that one cannot *actually* change one's assigned sex and gender – flies in the face of trans embodiment. Thus, these types of films don't work in the same way once society acknowledges the validity of transgender identity. For example, the Swedish comedy *Cockpit* (2012) uses the conventions of the gender disguise comedy to make conservative arguments against Swedish feminism and to render unthinkable the possibility of trans womanhood. The film follows Valle (Jonas Karlsson), an airline pilot who can't find a job until he learns that an airline is hoping to hire a woman pilot and so applies for the job under his sister Maria's name. While this basic scenario is common in gender disguise comedies, in *Cockpit*, the preference given to women is explained as gender-based affirmative action that is, from the film's perspective, manifestly unfair. As a straight, gender-normative man, Valle is also excluded from his lesbian sister Maria's queer community. One of her friends, an androgynous man named Linus (David Bonté Atterberg), insults and makes fun of Valle. Of course, once Valle becomes Maria, he gets the job and is immediately accepted by his sister's friends. The film is typical of gender disguise comedies, with the interesting difference that the woman with whom Valle falls in love is bisexual, so he is able to begin a relationship with her while maintaining his disguise.

Although Valle becomes somewhat sensitized to the plight of women when he experiences sexual harassment, his female identity also grants him magical access to feminist and queer communities from which he was previously excluded.

His mother, who was previously only disappointed in him, happily introduces “Maria” to Gudrun Schyman, real life leader of the Feminist Initiative political party. The film implicitly argues that in Sweden straight white men are discriminated against even more than women or queer people.

However, the most conservative aspect of the film is that when people discover that “Maria” has an apparently male body, no one ever considers the possibility that she could be transgender and that, indeed, this situation is not all that uncommon. When Linus discovers “Maria” masturbating in the bathroom, Linus falls to the ground, dead of shock. The film plays this blatantly transphobic reaction for laughs. When “Maria” removes her wig at a press conference and begins to speak in a lower register, the short hair and deeper voice become immediate and unassailable evidence that she is a man.

Thus, *Cockpit* uses the conventions of the gender disguise comedy to poke fun at Swedish feminism and at queer communities, while rendering transgender people unthinkable. It continues the assumption, always foundational in the genre, that sex and gender are binary, inextricable, fixed, and easily read, even in the face of a broad social recognition that these assumptions are not true.

Conclusion

Cross-gender performances have always had a place in Swedish cinema, from the cross-gender casting of the early 1900s, to the many cross-dressing characters between the 1910s and 1950s, to the recent wave of transgender representation. However, the meanings of these performances have changed dramatically. Many practices that were considered completely wholesome, like cross-gender casting and gender disguise comedies, disappeared or subsided as new sexual and gender identities became more public. The priorities of the Swedish film industry have also affected the nature of cross-gender performance – from the money-making, Swedish-audience-centered production of gender disguise comedies in the first half of the century, to the turn toward art cinema and cross-dressing as aesthetic experiment in the 1960s and 1970s. The crisis of VHS in the 1990s only revived cross-dressing briefly, and today’s mixed industrial emphasis on genre films, art films, and documentaries has provided opportunities for new representations of trans and gender non-conforming people, representations that will likely become even richer and more complex as more trans people participate in film production. Cross-dressing has never meant any one thing and Swedish cinema’s wide variety of cross-gender performances over more than one hundred years demonstrate this crucial point.

Appendix

This list has been compiled from published sources and the online Svensk Film-databas, with help from Magnus Rosborn of the Swedish Film Institute. I have not been able to view every film to check its content. Errors and omissions almost certainly remain. Some of the films are commercially available, some are lost, and others can be viewed at Kungliga Biblioteket in Stockholm.

Cross-Gender Casting

- Kvinnliga akademiska fotbollsklubben Virginia (Lund carnival committee, 1908)
- Skilda tiders danser (Walfrid Bergström, 1909)
- Kärlekens list (Lund carnival committee, 1912)
- Med dolk och gift, eller Guldets förbannelse (Lund carnival committee, 1912)
- Agaton och Fina (Eric Malmberg, 1912)
- Fritiofs saga (Lund carnival committee/Morits Tyster, 1924)
- Harald Handfaste (Erik “Hampe” Faustman, 1946)
- Fasorna på Sir Castle (Lund carnival committee, 1950)
- Tre flugor i en smäll (Lund carnival committee, 1954)
- Picassos äventyr (Tage Danielsson, 1978)
- Fanny och Alexander (Ingmar Bergman, 1982)
- Tur & retur (Ella Lemhagen, 2003)
- Asta Nilssons sällskap (Marie-Louise Ekman and Gösta Ekman, 2005)

Cross-Dressing Characters

- Bra flicka reder sig själv (Victor Sjöström, 1914)
- I kronans kläder (Georg af Klercker, 1915)
- På detta numera vanliga sätt (Edmond Hansen, 1916)
- Synnöve Solbakken (John W. Brunius, 1919)
- Löjtnant Galenpannas sista växel (Elis Ellis, 1919)
- En hustru till låns (Lau Lauritzen, 1920)
- Skandal och kärlek i Kråklunda (Gösta Nohre, 1922)
- Boman på utställningen (Karin Swanström, 1923)
- Carl XII:s kurir (Rudolf Anthoni, 1924)
- Karl XII/senare delen (John W. Brunius, 1925)
- Flickan i frack (Karin Swanström, 1926)
- Flickorna Gyurkovics (Ragnar Hyltén-Cavallius, 1926)

- Fänrik Ståls sägner/del II (John W. Brunius, 1926)
- Charleys tant (Elis Ellis, 1926)
- Svarte Rudolf (Gustaf Edgren, 1928)
- Kärlek och landstorm (John Lindlöf, 1931)
- Kärleksexpressen (Lorens Marmstedt, 1932)
- Äventyr på hotell (Gösta Rodin, 1934)
- Atlantäventyret (Edvin Adolphson and Lorens Marmstedt, 1934)
- Släkten är värst (Anders Henrikson, 1936)
- Pensionat Paradiset (Weyler Hildebrand, 1937)
- Lasse-Maja (Gunnar Olsson, 1941)
- Stackars Ferdinand (Nils Jerring, 1941)
- Löjtnantshjärtan (Weyler Hildebrand, 1942)
- Lilla helgonet (Weyler Hildebrand, 1944)
- Dolly tar chansen (Gustaf Edgren, 1944)
- Blåjackor (Rolf Husberg, 1945)
- Fram för Lilla Märta (Hasse Ekman, 1945)
- Hans Majestät får vänta (Gustaf Edgren, 1945)
- Ballongen (Nils Poppe, 1946)
- Peggy på vift (Arne Mattsson, 1946)
- Här kommer vi... (John Zacharias and Sture Lagerwall, 1947)
- Lilla Märta kommer tillbaka (Hasse Ekman, 1948)
- Boman får snurren (Åke Söderblom, 1949)
- Flickan från tredje raden (Hasse Ekman, 1949)
- Salka Valka (Arne Mattsson, 1954)
- Den glade skomakaren (Torgny Anderberg, 1955)
- Flottans muntergökar (Ragnar Frisk, 1955)
- Karusellen i fjällen (Ragnar Frisk, 1955)
- Flicka i kasern (Börje Larsson, 1955)
- Flickan i frack (Arne Mattson, 1956)
- 7 vackra flickor (Håkan Bergström, 1956)
- Ansiktet (Ingmar Bergman, 1958)
- Tystnaden (Ingmar Bergman, 1963)
- För att inte tala om alla dessa kvinnor (Ingmar Bergman, 1964)
- Den röda kappan (Gabriel Axel, 1967)
- Den enfaldige mördaren (Hans Alfredson, 1982)
- Den hemliga vännen (Marie-Louise Ekman, 1990)
- Stortjuvens pojke (Henry Meyer, 1992)
- Petri tårar (Erich Hörtnagl, 1995)
- Lilla Jönssonligan på styva linan (Christjan Wegner, 1997)
- Gossip (Colin Nutley, 2000)

- Bäst i Sverige (Ulf Malmros, 2002)
- Cockpit (Mårten Klingberg, 2012)

Gender Non-Conforming and Transgender Characters

- Tabu (Vilgot Sjöman, 1977)
- Kvinnan i ditt liv är du (Lesbisk Front, 1977)
- Manhood (Mia Engberg, 1999)
- Livet är en schlager (Susanne Bier, 2000)
- Dragkingdom of Sweden (Åsa Ekman and Ingrid Ryberg, 2002)
- Populärmusik från Vittula (Reza Bagher, 2004)
- Låt den rätte komma in (Tomas Alfredson, 2008)
- En bondes längtan (Rebecka Rasmusson, 2010)
- Ångrarna (Marcus Lindeen, 2010)
- Ladyboy (David Sandberg and Claes Lundin, 2012)
- Pojktanten (Ester Martin Bergsmark, 2012)
- Ta av mej (Victor Lindgren, 2013)
- Nånting måste gå sönder (Ester Martin Bergsmark, 2014)
- (In)Visible (Miles Rutendo Tanhira, 2014)
- Push Me (Tove Pils, 2014)
- Boy (Lucas Helth, 2014)
- En vanlig fucking människa (Malin Björkman-Widell, 2015)
- Förstår du vad jag menar? (BlatteQueers i film, 2015)
- Transphobia (Nur Tatal and Iván Blanco, 2015)
- Vägen till Ann-Christine (Helena Isaksson Baeck, 2015)
- Pojkarna (Alexandra-Therese Keining, 2016)
- Exercise One (Victoria Verseau, 2016)
- Felix betyder lycklig (Julian Yderbo, 2016)
- Trans i skolan (Eli Hellström Persson & Sandra Tjörnmark, 2016)
- Fuckgirls (Saga Becker and Christofer Nilsson, 2017)
- Genderness (Anders Ramsell, 2017)
- Vem ska knulla pappa? (Antiffa Vänsterfitta, 2017)

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