

short subject

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Intimacies: Spaces of work, life and sexuality in *The Norrtull Gang*

ABSTRACT

Norrtullsligan/The Norrtull Gang (1923) departs from Hollywood's representations of flamboyant city girls and succeeds in developing a decidedly female perspective on femininity, city life, sexuality and work in 1920s Sweden. Based on a novel by Elin Wägner (1908), it explores the microeconomics of power and intimacy in the relationship between bodies and spaces.

Depending on one's definition of the term, *Norrtullsligan/The Norrtull Gang* (Lindberg, 1923b) seems devoid of interest in sexuality, the focus of this special issue of JSKA. Instead of

exploiting explicitness, sexuality is understood in a much broader sense. Compared with the way Hollywood's cinematic dominance has managed to manufacture stereotypes of the 'New Woman' of the 1920s, highlighting her fashion skills, smoking habits and dancing legs, *The Norrtull Gang* emphasizes female community and solidarity and the physical realities of working lives at home and in the office. It shows the women as autonomous sexual beings and refrains from showcasing their visual attraction as sexual objects. Instead the settings and rhythms of the film present the characters as subjects who strive to negotiate the discrepancies between (day-) dreams and daily necessities – just as

KEYWORDS

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1. The retrospective *City Girls: Images of Women in Silent Film* was accompanied by a book publication, in which I wrote about 'Working Girls' in films and literature of the 1920s.
2. Since its screening at the Berlin Film Festival in 2007, the film has generated renewed interest, and in 2014 a restored version was screened in Bologna at the Cinema Ritrovato festival.

the film itself offers both: an insight into fantasy and reality alike.

The Norrtull Gang follows the lives of four working-class women who share a flat on Norrtullsgatan in Stockholm that, at the end of their working day, serves as an alternative, protected and communal space for reading, cooking and looking after one another. Pegg (Tora Teje) is the oldest of the gang, and the narrator of the story. The others are Eva (Renée Björling), Emmy (Linnea Hillberg) and the youngest, Baby (Inga Tidblad). Theirs is a decidedly feminine space not only by proclamation – signs on the wall read: 'Men may under no circumstances have a seat in a ladies' compartment' – but also through the ease of physical intimacy and relaxed bodily behaviour among the women, which departs from the control necessarily exercised at work, more often than not in defence against men crossing the line. This shared space, set apart from economic necessity, also represents a living arrangement that departs from the bourgeois model of the nuclear family. But the community of women can also be seen as a 'rebutal to the conventional idea of a solitary woman living for and through men' (Nina Auerbach, quoted in Forsås-Scott 2009: 146). The film devotes a lot of attention to this female space of solidarity and closeness.

In 2007 *The Norrtull Gang* was screened in the Berlin Film Festival's retrospective on 'The New Woman' and thus placed in a context of cinema, gender and modernity.¹ It is no accident that within the entertainment industry the 1920s are labelled as 'roaring' or 'golden'. New star images promoted the 'It-Girl' or the flapper. These women were true 'city girls' who moved quickly in a newly found bodily expression of mobility and flexibility. Employment and fun went hand in hand. Hollywood capitalized on the concept of the 'New Woman' in roles that developed and enjoyed the newly acquired freedoms as sexual spectacles. Actresses like Colleen Moore or Clara Bow became icons for a conception of women's newfound sexual freedoms and conquest of the public sphere.

Compared with many 'city girl' or 'New Woman' films that came out of Hollywood, such as the proverbial *It* (Badger, 1927), Per Lindberg's little known *The Norrtull Gang* sets a different tone and has a political agenda.² Instead of privileging the flamboyant spectacle of liberated femininity it manages to portray the everyday lives of working women in a way that reveals poverty and exploitation without rendering it sordid. An early scene shows postcards of movie stars on the wall of the gang's flat as the camera moves



Frame grabs from *Norrtullsligan* (Per Lindberg, Bonnierfilm, 1923).

Images 1–3: Against a hierarchy of orderly rows, strict functionality and restricted movement, the 'female space' of the flat provides pleasures of relaxation, community and disarray.

to one woman reading a magazine on the couch. Her legs are in the air, exposing a big hole in the heel of her stocking: Glamour versus reality. At the same time the daily routines of these working women are presented as both interesting and entertaining:

At once a subversive comedy, feminist tract and acerbic drama, it follows the women as they [...] try to navigate a social world that tolerates them only as secretaries, wives or mistresses. In so doing, the film manages a rare double feat. It depicts the quotidian rhythms of their lives as worthy of being filmed and discussed separate from possible sexual intrigue.

(Calder Williams 2014: 78)

It is of no small significance for the tone and atmosphere of the film that it is based on a novel by Elin Wägner, published in 1908. Quotations from the book (which first appeared as a serial for the daily *Dagens Nyheter*) provide the text for the intertitles (see Forsås-Scott 2009: 145). Fifteen years later and after World War I, they have not aged, but continue to provide a fresh, witty and sometimes laconic commentary on the situation of single working women in an urban environment that opens up as many possibilities of entertainment, speed and spectacle as dangers of unemployment and exploitation. For the four women portrayed in the film, city life also entails poverty and lack of private space. They have to share a flat and work in crowded offices. Sexuality in *The Norrtull Gang* is not presented as a visual spectacle of glamourized femininity, but shown in small incidents and encounters with men in which spatial relations reveal sexual dynamics as a mix of power and desire. The mostly hierarchical situations between male boss and female worker elicit ironic

commentary in a feminist spirit, revealed in the thoughts of the first-person narrator Pegg, played by Tora Teje, a well-known stage actress.³ Her remarkably subtle performance provides an antidote to the excessiveness with which the iconic Hollywood actresses gave the modern woman a form of representation that highlighted her erotic specularly. If the flappers and 'It' girls of Hollywood cinema carry their sexuality as surplus value and merchandise on display, Teje operates with a different economy. At first sight, her restraint seems to suggest complete sexual abstinence or an old-fashioned romantic notion of female sexuality as yearning for tenderness only. On closer inspection, however, her reserve enables the film to explore sexual relationships in the micro-economics of gestures, the relationship between bodies and spaces and in the discrepancy between female fantasy and everyday reality.

Sexual encounters, mostly in the form of unwanted male advances, are clearly revealed in the office and in public places as a dynamic between gender roles, economic conditions, power relations and particularly spatial arrangements. The boss summons his secretary for a dictation. He uses the pretext of taking a closer look at her typing for a brush of the cheek, a hand on the shoulder. She tries to dodge but there is no room for her to move away, and it is difficult to rebuff him without becoming confrontational. The film takes an observational stance. Who has the right and the opportunity to rule over space? This question is played out in different settings and gendered power relations: the street at night, the restaurant, the office and at home. Whether in the private realm of the house or in the workplace, when the sexes meet it is a dance of male abuse and female deference, of women's struggle for

3. Jon Wengström describes her as one of the most famous Swedish stage actresses at the beginning of the twentieth century 'who only acted in nine silent and one sound films, but her memorable performances contributed to the lasting fame and quality of most of them' (2010).

4. The other film is *Anna-Clara och hennes bröder* 'Anna-Clara and her Brothers' (Lindberg, 1923a).

integrity and men's disregard for boundaries. The female community of the shared flat, however, allows intimacy and sensuality among the women which is as much comforting and relaxing as it provides a model for alternative possibilities of living and moving.

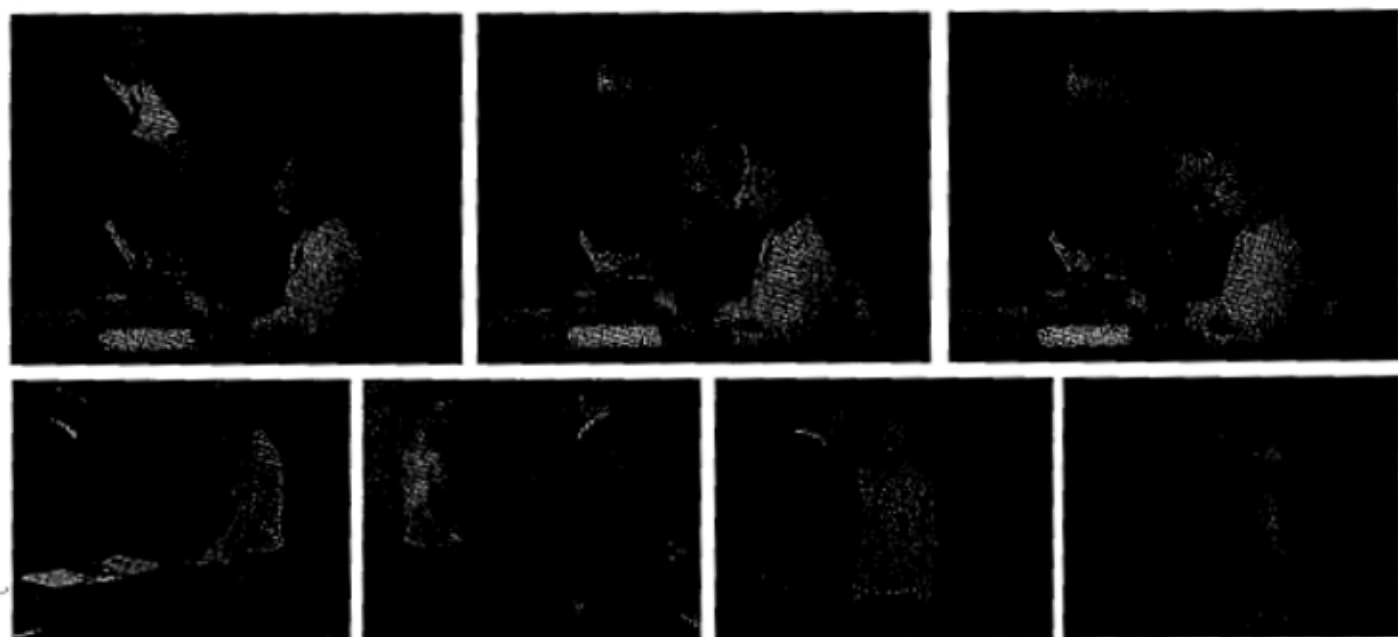
The film abstains from flaunting the signature flapper iconicity of bobbed hair and short skirts. Instead the women appear almost old-fashioned in their outfits. The much propagated 'sex-appeal' of the 'New Woman' on-screen becomes superfluous and is exchanged for subtle tones in acting, particularly by Tora Teje. She commands the screen with a delicately underplayed, yet intense performance. Her restrained acting and the film's emphasis on a homey female atmosphere counteract the predominant images in contemporaneous magazines and advertisements of typists and secretaries as the incarnation of economically independent, sexually liberated and fashion-oriented young urban women. Refraining from melodrama, the film instead employs a form of social realism that is combined with an eye for detail, particularly in the home environment. Objects acquire a status of their own; the abandon with which they are strewn around the flat stands in marked contrast to the topography of the office with its regulated spaces of squares, rows and aisles.

The film's director, Per Lindberg, was better known for his work in the theatre. After 1923, when he made two films, he did not return to cinema until 1939.⁴ In comparison with directors such as Victor Sjöström, Mauritz Stiller and Gustaf Molander, there is little secondary material on his films. Lindberg's background and experience as a stage director did not, however, lead to staginess in *The Norrtull Gang*. There is little rapid editing in this film, but the relatively long, static takes contribute

to creating a sense of the women's autonomy, allowing them the time and space to present their lives in movements that are determined by them, not the camera. There is nevertheless a point of connection between Lindberg's two spheres. His work on the stage was always politically informed (Banham 1988: 589), and in keeping with this orientation, the film shows his keen interest in a realistic chronicling of the situation of modern working women.

The Norrtull Gang opens with a scene on top of a hill overlooking the city. Pegg sends her little brother – after a glance at her watch – off to school and then sits down on a park bench to muse: 'Nothing ever turns out as planned! If anyone had told me five years ago – when I was twenty and in love for the first time – [...] that I would end my days as a secretary'. This thought is offset and commented on by a flashback in blue hues to a romantic scene of courtship. The scene is clearly marked as a reminiscence and, in contrast to the rest of the film, is acted in an exaggerated, histrionic style. This not only relegates the romance to former times, it also refers to certain earlier styles of film-making against which, it seems, Lindberg sets his own form of realism. That realistic approach resides not only in the subject matter – working women – but also in the filmic style, which takes a documentary approach to its locations and settings. In the comparison between past and present, romantic notions of love have been eclipsed by the economic necessity of work. Devoted lovers have been replaced by slimy bosses, intrusive junior executives and voyeuristic landlords.

Men are not, however, unduly denounced or excluded; they remain an integral part of the women's lives. They appear as real-life opponents, but also as imagined hopes, particularly in the protagonists'



Frame grabs from *Norrtullsligan* (Per Lindberg, Bonnierfilm, 1923).

Images 4–10: The ‘intimacy’ of boss and secretary: Hierarchy includes the male ‘right’ to take space and liberties and the female plight of moving cautiously between defiance and evasion. Avoiding conflict means enduring unwanted advances.

dreams. The film reveals the difference between male advances marked by possessiveness, lack of respect and crude grasping for power – or in a more benevolent interpretation, clumsiness – and the way the women imagine sensual contact. Moreover, the portrayal of the female collective turns men into solitary figures, exposed for examination and debate.

Placing the flashback at the very beginning of the film makes it clear that Pegg’s future course departs from an earlier notion of romantic love. The struggle for economic survival in the workforce takes priority; pragmatism replaces illusions. If the film returns to romance at the conclusion, it does so only after having demonstrated the discrepancy between the woman’s wishes and the man’s world. After having watched the gang, and particularly Pegg for the duration of the film we know in spite of the conventional ending that we (and the former boss) are dealing with a self-determined, self-sufficient woman who will not let her future husband get the better of her.

The film conflates the feminist discourse of the 1908 novel with an aesthetics of close observation of female and male spaces at work and at home in the 1920s. Thus it counters the displacement of female emancipation onto erotic specularly in most of Hollywood’s entertainment and instead reconnects physical expressiveness (for which film as a medium acts as an ally) with the political visions of the early twentieth-century feminist movement.

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