

Lunde, Arne. 2010. *Nordic Exposures: Scandinavian Identities in Classical Hollywood Cinema*. Seattle: University of Washington Press. 224 pages. ISBN: 978-0295990453.

I presume many books have been written about Jews in Hollywood—or blacks or the Chinese—but research into Scandinavians in Hollywood doesn't at first glance strike you as an engaging subject. But it turns out that it is, as Arne Lunde reveals in his book about racial questions facing Nordic film directors and actors who tried their luck in the budding American film industry.

Being considered “white” was, during the first decades of cinematography, predominantly the prerogative of people of British origin, if Arne Lunde is to be believed; people from Scandinavia had to prove themselves to be considered sufficiently white. Here, proper command of English was of the essence, and many immigrants never managed to speak the language without drawing unwanted attention to themselves. Lunde's comments on stock characters like “the dumb Swede” are certainly well substantiated. He also points out that the Swedes, who had the accent that was being mocked, couldn't play these roles themselves. For this an English speaker was needed—in order to have an understanding of what in the Swedes' speech was supposed to be funny and in what way it should be exaggerated.

Lunde's in-depth analysis of Victor Sjöström's *He Who Gets Slapped* detects a certain symbolic meaning in the film. On the face of it, it's the story of a man who is grotesquely betrayed—and frequently slapped—by those closest to him, with the result that he withdraws from society and takes up a job as a clown, who is constantly on the receiving end of slaps from his fellow clowns on stage.

The clown is painted white, as is the flock of clowns round him. This is the clown's way of hiding his identity, which enables him to interact incognito with his enemy and to finally get his revenge. It is, however, questionable whether Sjöström is dealing with whiteness in racial terms. The white faces are certainly very conspicuous and effectively used as a visual tool, not least in the closing scenes, where a group of white-faced clowns watch, without so much as a stir, the dying moments of the protagonist. Symbolically, they're outsiders of some sort, they don't seem to grasp what is happening around them, but whether that necessarily turns them into representatives of some particular group or race is a moot point.

Lunde mentions that *He Who Gets Slapped* also aligns whiteness with death as a recurring thematic, and this is used in the film to great effect. It is, however,

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doubtful, if this particular visual metaphor should be interpreted as something more complex than just that.

Lunde's look at the Hollywood career of this group of Scandinavian actors and directors reveals interesting aspects of race relations. Long after the films have served as entertainment and, in some cases, works of art, they can be seen in the light of history. They reveal the mood of the period, the accepted prejudices of the day, and, in certain cases, the innocence of those who, understandably, didn't know what lay ahead: World War II. Lunde's study of his cases reminds us of the fact that we live in a world of flux, where views and norms are changing all the time. What is accepted today might very well be on tomorrow's blacklist.

Certain human tragedies are revealed in the book, which remained uppermost in this reader's mind after reading it, notably those of the Danish actor Karl Dane and of the Swedish director Mauritz Stiller. Dane was a sought-after character actor in silent movies, but his Danish accent made him unemployable in the talkies. He ended by taking his own life; "his body was later found lying amid numerous clippings, reviews, and old studio contracts from his days of stardom at MGM." Dane clearly staged his own death in a way that would have made an effective scene in a silent melodrama.

Mauritz Stiller proved to be too independent a spirit for the dream factory, at a time when producers and studio heads were taking ever more of the creative control away from the directors and into their own hands. Lunde reveals how this master of the Swedish cinema was misunderstood by his American producers and constantly categorized racially in ways that really didn't fit. He finally gave up on Hollywood—or Hollywood on him. He had moved to Europe and gone back to doing what he did best, when he contracted tuberculosis and died.

Even Greta Garbo had great difficulties being herself in Hollywood. She just about managed to survive the transition to the talkies, but mostly in roles as some unspecified Eastern European aristocrat, similar to the ones she had played in her silent career. In the end, Garbo's response was to retreat from public life altogether, including the movies.

Lunde speaks at length about other actors who played foreign roles, far removed from their original nationality. The example of Charlie Chan is probably the best known. The fact that he was of Swedish extraction hardly reveals any preconceptions or prejudices about Scandinavians, but it is an indication that the dream factory wasn't yet ready to allow an Asian actor to take on such a demanding leading role.

Nordic Exposures is a revealing and often amusing examination of racial questions where we least expect them to arise. Although the author sometimes

reaches too far to find arguments for his case, the book makes, on the whole, a strong case which is further supported by the cited films.

Ágúst Guðmundsson
Reykjavik