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short subject

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The cinematic fauna of Bengt Berg

ABSTRACT

This short subject initiates new research into the career of pioneering Swedish nature documentarian, Bengt Berg. During the silent era, the Swedish zoologist-turned-filmmaker earned international praise for his cinematic studies of the Swedish avifauna. But ties to the eugenics movement and the German Nazi Party have rendered him a problematic figure of Scandinavian film history. Drawing on newly restored film prints, contextual archival findings and previous research on Berg, this article explores new paths of inquiry into Berg's oeuvre.

KEYWORDS

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Swedish zoologist and author Bengt Berg was Scandinavia's first nature documentarian of note. Inspired by Swedish landscape painters such as Bruno Liljefors, Berg sought to depict the wonders of Nordic nature through the photographic lens. Through his work, he became an authority on wildlife preservation from the 1920s through the 1940s. Berg's mission was foremost directed towards protecting the natural fauna of the Nordic countries against the effects of galloping modernity. But as he adapted a similar perspective to his views of human society, he moved towards a dark corner of twentieth-century history. Leif Furhammar called Berg 'our first, and before Arne Sucksdorff, only, nature filmmaker with an international reputation' (2003: 72). Yet Berg and his production remain largely unexplored. This article initiates a revisionist take on an important and

problematic figure in Scandinavian film history.[1]

Bird's eye view

Born in Jönåker in Linköping County in 1885, Berg studied at the University of Bonn and became a forester in the south of Sweden upon graduation in 1908. From an early age, his passion for Nordic fauna was paralleled by an interest in photography and moving pictures. His publications often zoomed in on the endangered species of the Swedish avifauna and were richly illustrated by his own photographs. As Berg moved into filmmaking, his ambition to study and depict Swedish wildlife from up-close led him to make several pioneering technical and stylistic inventions.

His first film, *Storkarna* ('The storks') (Berg, 1920), was shot on several locations in the south of Sweden (Anon. 1920a: 13). During the following two years, Berg produced three shorter films on Swedish water birds for the newly founded SF studios.[2] These films opened at Röda Kvarn, Stockholm's foremost premiere venue, and were shown as preludes to highly anticipated feature film premieres.[3] By 1922, Berg's filmmaking had become so popular that his treatment of intercontinental bird migration, *Som flyttfågel i Afrika* (*Birds of Passage*) (1922a), warranted its own screening slot (Åhlander 1982: 151). For the premiere, Berg introduced and lectured on his expedition to Egypt and Sudan (Marfa 1922; Bel 1922; Quelqu'une 1922). In 1923, he was back with a new cinematic study of the Swedish avifauna, *Sagan om de sista örnarna* ('The saga of the last eagles'), about the dire situation for the endangered white-tail eagle. With innovative techniques, great physical effort and meticulous planning, Berg and his team managed to track down and film the few remaining eagles from up-close in a spectacular manner. Renowned film critic Bengt Idestam-Almqvist ('Robin Hood') wrote:

> To the layman, 'The saga of the last eagles' seems unbelievable: he cannot fathom how the birds could have been photographed in this manner. The spectator finds himself at a meter's distance, but the birds quietly go on with their domestic life. Occasionally, they look up, listen and gaze straight into camera – only to resume their doings as if nothing has passed.
>
> (1923)

The premiere at Röda Kvarn was attended by members of the Swedish royal family as well as Berg's personal hero, Swedish landscape painter Bruno Liljefors (Quelqu'une 1923: 9).

As with his previous projects, material concerning the endangered eagles also appeared in book form as *De sista örnarna* ('The last eagles') (1923). Ever since his first publication, *Sjöfallsboken* ('The Sjöfallet book') (1910), Berg's printed animal studies often featured in-depth commentary on the process of capturing nature through a camera lens. The simultaneous book releases took the form of episodic behind-the-scenes looks at wildlife filmmaking. A recurring issue was how to portray birds from up-close with heavy and bothersome camera equipment. In 'The last eagles', Berg noted that his writings about the eagles 'might become too much a story about failure, about being fooled, about backbreaking work, about climbing trees and falling out of the skies in flying machines' (1923: 83–84). Berg may have feared that such detailed descriptions would become tedious for the contemporary reader, but today such accounts

1. This article has benefitted from the expertise and sage advice of Lucy Schiller and Magnus Rosborn.

2. *Hägrarna* ('The herons'), *Den duktiga ejderhonan* ('The capable eider duck') and 'The storks' have recently been restored by Magnus Rosborn of the Swedish Film Institute archive.

3. 'The storks' opened on 6 December 1920 for *Heart o' the Hills* (De Grasse and Franklin, 1919), 'The herons' on 21 February 1921 for *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (*Dr. Caligari's Cabinet*) (Wiene, 1921), *Vildgässen* ('The greylag geese') on 21 December 1921 for *De landsflyktige* (*Guarded Lips*) (Stiller, 1921) and 'The capable eider duck' on 30 January 1922 for the Mary Pickford vehicle *Through the Back Door* (Green and Pickford, 1921).

provide insight into some of Berg's most groundbreaking cinematic innovations.

One of these innovative contributions to early wildlife filmmaking can be found in the aerial footage made for 'The saga of the last eagles'. In order to give audiences the sensation of soaring through the skies with the eagles, Berg mounted a gyroscopic camera on a Farman aircraft and circled above the Södermanland archipelago. The operation was risky; at one point the ramshackle World War I aircraft lost its propeller, causing Berg and his pilot to plunge into the cold waters below. But the footage provided a breathtaking cinematic experience, offering a first-person view as seen from the eagles' perspective. 'It was about attempting to capture, on film, how the eagles saw their own landscape, the very ocean and earth, as they came speeding through the skies' (Berg 1923: 118). Idestam-Almqvist called this the 'best Swedish film of the season' and wrote appreciatively about Berg's cinematic style:

> Berg manages in a masterful way to make the film full of variety by interspersing small scenes: Liljefors paintings, fishermen […] archipelago images from the bird's point of view […], the ocean glittering in silver, as if covered by fish scales.
>
> (Hood 1923)

Berg's aerial stunts seem to have pleased contemporary audiences, who by the mid-1920s were well versed in cinematic trickery. Around this time, other popular contemporary wildlife film productions, such as that of Martin and Osa Johnson, sought to make nature conform to the conventions of narrative cinema (Mitman 2009: 27). In 1925, the daily *Svenska Dagbladet* reported that a German aeronautic engineer had analysed Berg's cinematic bird studies to better understand the aviation techniques of migratory birds (Rz 1925). Berg himself claimed to have several kilometres of unseen film footage stowed away in a private archive because he was not happy with its composition or it had not accurately captured the species under study (1937: 4). But while Berg innovatively utilized classical cinematic narrative devices such as the point-of-view shot, his main reason for turning to the film medium seems to have been its ability to reach and enlighten younger generations on the delicate state of Swedish fauna (Anon. 1920b). Although he believed in the educational potential of cinema, he also expressed concern that it played a major role in creating the societal ills of modernity and what he called the 'nervosity of our time' (Biokrates 1923: 117).

Up until the release of 'The saga of the last eagles', Berg had given permission to screen his films in classrooms and lecture halls around Scandinavia. After having returned from an international lecture tour with his next expedition film *Abu Markúb och de hundrade elefanter* ('Abu Markúb and the hundred elephants') (Berg, 1925), he offered the camera negative of 'The saga of the last eagles' to the Swedish state for what he considered a symbolic sum. But when the Board of Education declined his offer, Berg was incensed. He withdrew the film from the SF Studios catalogue of educational cinema and expressed an increasing disenchantment with the direction of Swedish cinema (Åhlander 1982: 186). Berg also voiced anger about the large number of American films in Swedish cinema repertoires, which he deemed a 'poison' for Swedish youth (Björk 1995: 252). While 'The saga of the last eagles' was received with great critical acclaim, it was a commercial failure. Thenceforth, Berg

moved away from the Swedish film industry both in terms of production and exhibition. While Berg and films about Swedish nature received considerable attention internationally, the relation to his native country became increasingly strained in the decade that followed (Marcigny 1922: 14; Anon. 1923a: 1; Anon. 1924: 58; Anon. 1929; Magnus 1932: 34).

Nazi ties

In her study of the African expedition films of Oscar Olsson, Swedish ethnographic filmmaker and one of Berg's contemporaries, Åsa Jernudd identified ties to a 'Linnaean heritage of observing and representing the natural world […] and an acute awareness of landscape inspired by the national romantic movement around the turn of the century' (1999: 50–51). A review of Berg's *oeuvre* similarly reveals that he moved in contemporary currents of national romanticism. Berg dedicated several of his works to another famous depicter of the Swedish landscape and its fauna, Bruno Liljefors. In 'The saga of the last eagles', he repeatedly called upon Liljefors' imagery of the eastern Swedish coastline and even attempted to recreate cinematically one of his most famous images. 'He has brought to life what Bruno Liljefors so grandiosely captured on canvas with his brush', wrote *Arbetaren* about Berg (Anon. 1923b). But his fervent patriotism extended further than the preservation of Swedish wildlife.

In 1915, Berg published a collection of essays titled *Där kriget rasar* ('Where the war rages') that expressed strong anti-semitic and pro-German sentiments. In one chapter titled 'Jews', he declared: 'I have always loved Jews. They are the funniest people I know; interesting to talk to sometimes, always amusing to look at, but less so to touch' (Berg 1915: 72). When Berg described the 'typically' Jewish appearance, he activated widespread contemporary negative stereotypes: '[T]hey pulled their hands up into the wide sleeves of their kaftans, and their black eyes glanced fearfully from anxiously bowed heads, as if perpetually trembling from the memory of the whip of the pogroms' (1915: 74). The following year he published *En german – en berättelse från den nya tiden* ('A Germanic man – a story from the new era'), a declaration of his view of racial politics thinly veiled as a coming-of-age story. The novel's main character, Göran Åkeson, a Swedish medical student who, as Berg had done, studies at the University of Bonn, discovers his 'Germanic soul' through the teachings of a German friend, the confident Kleeber. Göran's pan-Germanic patriotism is further reinforced when he returns to Sweden. There he realizes the crucial importance of preserving the Swedish stock, part of the strong Germanic race: 'There was no other people, except his own, for whom he felt so passionately as the German' (Berg 1916b: 128).

Both the essay collection and the novel became popular in Sweden and helped shape Swedish opinion. 'A Germanic man' received favourable reviews in a wide range of newspapers (V. L—t 1916: 10; Berg 1916c: 6; W. 1916: 5). The scientific interest in racial separation was at its peak in Sweden in the early 1920s. Notions of racial hygiene had seeped into the centre of public discourse and were discussed across party lines. In 1922, the Swedish government commissioned Herman Lundborg, leader of the Swedish Society for Eugenics, to found the first State Institute of Racial Biology in Uppsala. At the core of these discussions was the idea of preserving the stock of the 'Germanic race', which was believed to be particularly strong in Sweden

(Broberg 1995; Hagerman 2011). In 1918, Berg published another critical inspection of the Swedish social body, titled *De rikas hunger* ('The hunger of the rich'). In March 1919, he announced an agreement with Svenska Biografteatern to adapt the story into film. 'I wrote this book with the film adaptation in mind', proclaimed Berg and revealed that none other than Victor Sjöström had agreed to direct the film (Anon. 1919: 6; T.M. 1919: 18). The film project never reached the movie screen, but the interest of the country's most notable film company and director during the 'golden years' of Swedish silent cinema serves as an indicator of the contemporary currency of Berg's ideas.

Throughout his professional life, Berg maintained close relations to Germany. Most of his publications were translated into German, published and reprinted multiple times (Lohm 2008); many of his films were screened in Germany as well. Berg frequently visited German university cities on his film lecture tours, but his connections went beyond the occasional cordial visit. At the University of Bonn, Berg had made several important acquaintances who would rise to prominence as the German economy collapsed under the strains of the Treaty of Versailles. As for many Swedes at the time, Germany was Berg's second homeland during years of tumultuous change and a harshening political climate. His connections led him to work with representatives from the expanding National Socialist Party. After his falling out with the Swedish film industry, Berg moved his operations to Germany in the early 1930s. There he sought to build on his reputation as a wildlife expert and conservationist by proposing to make a Pomeranian peninsula into 'Germany's Yellowstone' (Ulbrich-Hannibal 1931: 4). After Berg had settled in Germany, he set out on several new lecture tours and expeditions (Ab 1933: 17; Anon. 1934a: 9). One of these resulted in the film *Sehnsucht nach Afrika* (*Desire for Africa*) (Zoch, 1938), made under the auspices of Tobis Filmkunst. Berg was billed as the photographer of the film, which included footage of German youngsters visiting his Halltorp estate in southern Sweden. It premiered in Berlin in early 1939 and was praised by the Nazi regime (Anon. 1938: 16; Swam 1939: 11).

As Berg's star rose in Germany, his sentiments towards his native country deteriorated. In 1934, he was featured in the Berlin press with condemnations of Swedish politics (Anon. 1934b: 3). He pronounced his admiration for Hermann Göring and was given an honorary doctorate and declared 'proven friend of Germany' at the University of Bonn (Anon. 1935a: 9). Italy's fascist leader Benito Mussolini in turn proclaimed his gratitude to Berg for 'opening the eyes of the Italians towards the animal kingdom' (Aber 1936: 4, 7). In response, Sweden's left-leaning press characterized Berg as a Nazi and 'friend of Hitler' (Anon. 1935b: 5; Adolf 1936: 5). Soon it was also revealed that Berg had been given an audience with the Reichskanzler himself (Anon. 1935c: 9; Berco 1935: 5). In 1937, Göring and the Nazi party put on an *International Hunting Exhibition* in Berlin to celebrate hunting culture as an issue of 'national prestige' (Giaccaria and Minca 2016). Berg was one of the invitees, and his wildlife photography was exhibited alongside paintings by Bruno Liljefors in the Arts pavilion (Anon. 1937: 3; Edo 1937: 1). Berg's success did not go unnoticed back home. Gradually, newspapers oriented closer to the centre of the Swedish political spectrum began speaking publicly against Berg's advancement in the cultural elite of the Nazi

party (Berco 1938: 5; Anon. 1944: 10; Phoras 1945: 5; Joy 1945: 18).

Berg returned to Sweden towards the end of the war. He settled on the farm Eriksberg in Blekinge province, which he gradually turned into one of Sweden's most notable nature preserves. Recent non-academic biographic works have tended to trivialize Berg's history as a Nazi collaborator, focusing primarily on his work as a wildlife photographer and conservationist (Lohm 2008; Brorsson 2016). While Berg's nature studies do not always explicitly reveal his political leanings, they recurringly exude a Nietzschean categorization of humans as weak or strong, not unlike his approach to the Swedish fauna. The notion of invasive migratory birds preying on Swedish national wildlife parallels contemporary discussions of eugenics and the preservation of the Nordic race (Berg 1922a, 1923b, 1925). The ethnographic descriptions in Berg's films often employ a racist discourse comparable to that commonly found in the contemporary travelogue genre (Rony 1996; Jernudd 1999: 47–50, 64–71). Other Swedish wildlife filmmakers and ethnographers such as Sven Hedin and Stig Wesslén showed similar tendencies (Mårald and Nordlund 2010: 222–25, 243). It should also be noted that Hedin and a large segment of the Swedish film industry had strong ties to Nazi Germany during Second World War (Olsson 1979: 57–61; Martin 2016: 253–75). Berg's xenophobia seems to have had deeper roots, however, and his professional stature arguably benefited from his dealings with the Nazi regime during its most intensive period of expansion. A post-war article on Berg's Nazi involvement stressed that 'should historians investigate how sympathies for the Third Reich were spread among the better classes in this country, [Berg's] path of contamination is one to look into' (Anon. 1945).

Paths ahead

A tentative history of Swedish documentary filmmaking should include a consideration of the accomplishments and impact of Bengt Berg. While Berg, unlike his hero Liljefors, never entered the pantheon of the Swedish public imagination, the international reach of his films and books made him a leading figure of Scandinavian educational cinema in the 1920s. As such, his work in film and wildlife photography warrants its own monograph. However, such a history should also consider his prolonged formulation of xenophobic views in the context of the contemporary Swedish eugenics movement as well as Berg's own leanings towards the Nazi party's formulation of a *Volksgemeinschaft* ('racial community'), culminating in his involvement with upper rank Nazis during World War II. A meticulous investigation of Berg's collaboration with the Nazis promises to produce an important case study of the political, social and cultural connections between Sweden and Nazi Germany.

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