

Selling Scandinavia at the Ends of the Earth

Nordic Silent Film in Australasia

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In the 1998 film *Saving Private Ryan*, a small detachment of U.S. soldiers in France in June 1944 encounter a German soldier defending a radio tower. The Americans require the German soldier to dig graves for the American soldiers he had killed during the assault on his position. As he is completing this task, it becomes clear that they will likely shoot him and bury him in that same grave. To make the case for mercy, the German soldier offers his familiarity with—and affection for—American culture, pleading, “Please, I like America! Fancy schmancy! What a cinch! Go fly a kite! Cat got your tongue! Hill of beans! Betty Boop, what a dish. Betty Grable, nice gams.” He sings the first line of the American national anthem and invokes Steamboat Willie, the debut appearance of Walt Disney’s Mickey Mouse in a 1928 short, with a “Toot! Toot!” The captain does ultimately show mercy and set him free, but it is unclear whether his protestations of his affinity for American film stars contribute to that decision.

What this brief scene makes very clear is how film sells culture. It illustrates how the global spread of American film in the wake of World War I made it possible for a German soldier, who spoke almost no English, to know and adore iconic American film figures. Betty Boop first appeared in the 1930s cartoon short *Dizzy Dishes*, while Betty Grable rose to such prominence in the American film industry in the early 1940s that she was the number-one box-office draw in the world in 1943. Film’s function as a medium of cultural communication manifests itself not only in the circulation of films themselves, but also, perhaps especially, in the circulation of ideas, conveyed through the films. Audiences react to the faces they see on screen, to the stories they witness, to the values those stories convey, and learn to associate certain traits and priorities with the countries that produce the films they watch.

The early cinema industry capitalized deliberately on this culture-marketing potential, as Will H. Hays, president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), announced to an audience in London on October 5, 1923, “We are going to sell America to the world with American motion pictures.”¹ In *The Media are*

¹ John Trumbour, *Selling Hollywood to the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 17.

American, Jeremy Tunstall confirms the success of this strategy, noting that Hollywood films “have carried U.S. values (individualism, the success ethic, social and geographical mobility supposedly unaffected by class) and U.S. market orientations (directed to the migrant in urbanizing societies, to the modern urban woman with contradictory roles, to the newly affluent urban youth) into economically dependent cultures.”²

By the same principle, the global circulation of Scandinavian films must have helped to disseminate a popular image of Scandinavia and Scandinavian culture, even as far afield as Australia. In the early years of the twentieth century, long before television or the Internet made information (and misinformation) easily accessible with a few keystrokes, familiarity with Scandinavian culture spread to the far corners of the earth through the movement of people—primarily sailors and settlers—and culture, in particular film. The circulation of Scandinavian silent film in Australia and New Zealand between 1910 and 1928 sheds light on the question of what image of Scandinavia films conveyed to the largely white settler colonial population of Britain’s remotest colonies. The kinds of Scandinavian films that were shown in Australasia in the silent era, their origin, their distribution and exhibition, their audiences, and the changes in the way Scandinavian silent film circulated in Australia before and after World War I can illuminate changing perceptions of Scandinavia at the ends of the earth in the early twentieth century.

Silent Film and Cultural Marketing

The longstanding global dominance of American film, which lends American stars and American cultural norms the pervasive influence that the scene from *Saving Private Ryan* illustrates, tends to obscure public awareness of the fact that the international film market was very different in the 1910s, during the golden age of silent film. By its very nature, silent film avoids the linguistic barriers that often limit the movement of literary texts (this problem persists today—books in translation from foreign languages made up a paltry 2% of the vast American publishing market in 2008³), and its intertitles could be easily adjusted to accommodate the local vernacular. Moreover, many of the earliest pioneers of cinema were European, from the Lumière brothers, Charles Pathé, and Alice Guy in France to Ole Olsen, Benjamin Christensen, and Asta Nielsen in Denmark.

The global film industry was much more nationally diverse in the pre-WWI era than it became in the 1920s, with films from at least a dozen countries occupying a market niche that would eventually be filled almost entirely by American films. Audiences from Moscow

² Jeremy Tunstall, *The Media are American* (London: Arnold, 1977), 81.

³ Motoko Rich, “Translation is foreign to U.S. publishers,” *The New York Times*, 17 October 2008, C1.

to Minneapolis and Brighton to Brisbane had their pick of Italian, French, German, Danish, Swedish, Russian, Japanese, British, and American films. The majority of film-producing nations at the time were European and American, but since market share, particularly in Europe, was finite, film companies had to look farther afield for film markets, particularly along the path of European and American colonial and imperial expansion. As James Burns has documented in *Cinema and Society in the British Empire, 1895-1940*, cinemas flourished in European colonies from Bridgetown, Barbados to Dar es salaam, Tanzania, and Mumbai, India to Capetown, South Africa, so export-oriented production companies in Europe and the United States competed fiercely for a share of the most lucrative overseas markets.

Prior to World War I, European film companies controlled a significant share of global film markets. In fact, the second largest exporter of films in the world in 1913 was the Copenhagen-based Nordisk Films Kompagni (hereafter Nordisk),⁴ second only to Paris-based Pathé Frères. Given the small domestic film market in Denmark, the bulk of Nordisk's production was aimed at an international market, a strategy that helped the company vault into a leading position in the global film industry at a time when the Swedish and Norwegian film industries were still getting off the ground. In the early 1910s Nordisk sent 98% of its films abroad.⁵ When Ole Olsen, founder and director of Nordisk, was asked in a 1913 interview whether other Danish film companies had a chance of matching Nordisk's global success, he replied, "If they have good managers and if they can find some empty gaps in the world market. But to find room for their films, I believe they will have to populate the South Pole."⁶ Australia was somewhat more populous than the South Pole, but it lies at the farthest geographical extreme from Europe, roughly 17,000 kilometers from London, Stockholm, and Copenhagen, so it might be helpful to explain why Australia was an attractive target market for Scandinavian film exports.

Cultural Competition in Australia

Once the first British explorers happened upon Australia, at around the same time as the American colonies rebelled against the British Empire and declared their independence, the immense distance between Europe and Australia did little to discourage European settlement. Australia's colonial history began with the establishment of a British penal colony in 1788 and continued with waves of not only British convicts and soldiers, which made up the majority of settlers until 1830, but also gold prospectors, farmers, laborers, and other settler colonists from Ireland, Germany, China, and Scandinavia, among

⁴ Laura Horak, "The Global Distribution of Swedish Silent Film," *A Companion to Nordic Cinema*, ed. by Mette Hjort and Ursula Lindqvist (Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 457.

⁵ Isak Thorsen, "The Rise and Fall of the Polar Bear," *100 Years of Nordisk Film* (Copenhagen: Danish Film Institute, 2006), 59.

⁶ "Anker," "Men hvad siger Ole Olsen," *Politiken*, 10 April 1913, qtd. in Thorsen 59.

other places, who began arriving in large numbers after the discovery of gold in New South Wales and Victoria in 1851. While the earliest Scandinavian settlers in Australia had consisted of a handful of sailors, Scandinavians soon became the second largest non-English immigrant group in Australia, after Germans. Swedish settler Corfitz Cronqvist “estimated the number of Scandinavians in Australia in the 1850s to be approximately 1500 Swedes, 1000 Danes and 300 Norwegians.”⁷ The tendency to categorize Danes, Swedes, and Norwegians together as “Scandinavians” was both a pragmatic one, since their individual numbers were not statistically significant, and an expression of solidarity, in the face of the much larger majority British Australian population.

Although British settlers were most in demand, settlers from Denmark, Sweden, and Norway were also recruited by the Australian government to populate the continent, in part because of a belief in the hardiness of Scandinavians. From approximately 1870 to 1901, with periodic gaps, the Australian colonies offered “assisted passage schemes” to British and Northern European immigrants as a means of recruiting farmers and artisans to thinly-settled territories, in particular Queensland and Tasmania. The attractiveness of this offer is reflected in the 400% increase in the number of Danish settlers in Queensland over a ten-year period, from 554 in 1871 to 2223 in 1881, along with an increase from 118 to 442 Norwegians and 253 to 583 Swedes.⁸ Small Scandinavian settlements were also established in Victoria, New South Wales, and South Australia, made up primarily of young, working-class Danes. Danish police emigration records indicate that of approximately 5741 Danes who left for Australia between 1868 and 1899, 63% were working-class. Within this group, 75% were young people under 30, and two-thirds of them were male, though 43% of the emigrants were part of a family group.⁹ Between 1900 and 1918, another 4092 Danes immigrated to Australia, nearly seventy percent of whom were under 30 and eighty percent of whom were male.¹⁰ Yet while the movement of people from Scandinavia to Australia has been relatively well documented in numeric terms, it doesn’t tell us much about how Australians regarded their Scandinavian neighbors or the region of the world from which they came. By contrast, the circulation of Scandinavian film in Australia can offer much more detailed insights into how Scandinavia was perceived on the far side of the globe in the early 20th century.

In the early 1910s, cinema-going was a national pastime among British, German, and Scandinavian settlers in Australia—in major cities, mining towns, and even out in small towns in the bush. Average wages in Australia were relatively high, so a significant percentage of the population could afford to attend the cinema regularly.

⁷ Peter Birkelund, “Danish Emigration to Australia,” *Danish Emigration to Australia*, ed. by Kristian Hvidt and Helle Otte. 34-53. Special issue of *Emigranten. Årsskrift for dansk udvanderhistorisk selskab*. Nr. 4. 1988. 38.

⁸ Birkelund, 39.

⁹ Birkelund, 40.

¹⁰ Birkelund, 43.

As a result, cinema attendance in Australia in the early 20th century was among the highest per capita in the world. By 1913, there were about 650 permanent and several hundred more temporary cinema theatres across Australia, which had at that time a population of approximately 4.8 million people.¹¹ Australians were, as the Melbourne newspaper *Argus* declared in 1913, “as regular in attending picture shows as in having breakfast,” with approximately 1/8th of the population of the entire country spending every Saturday night “at the pictures.”¹² Such robust demand meant that even small towns could support several different theaters and films could circulate on different circuits for years.

A combination of high demand and low domestic supply made Australia an attractive market for Scandinavian film companies. Pathé Frères was the first overseas company to establish a distribution agency in Australia,¹³ which it did in Melbourne in 1909. According to Richard Abel, Pathé was the world’s first global film empire and it “distributed more films to more places in the world than any other company.”¹⁴ After opening a branch office in Stockholm and establishing cooperative endeavors with local talent, Pathé agreed to distribute selected Svenska Bio films abroad. According to Laura Horak, “Pathé distributed at least 13 Svenska Bio films, including six under the name Phoenix,” between 1912 and the end of 1915.¹⁵ The Swedish films that were sent Australia in this period through Pathé included *På livets ödesvägar* (*On the Fateful Roads of Life*, Mauritz Stiller, 1913) and *Stormfågeln* (*The Stormy Petrel*, Mauritz Stiller, 1914). This decision to carry Nordic films seems to have been part of Pathé’s strategy to revitalize its Melbourne office, which was not consistently profitable in 1910-11, with the value of the merchandise shipped far exceeding receipts. However, based on the complete absence of newspaper ads for them, none of the Svenska Bio films appear to have been screened in Australia, or at least not very widely. After a period of considering closing its branch office, Pathé decided instead to accept a buyout by T.J. West’s in 1913, that gave its films direct access to West’s extensive network of cinema houses.

This buyout was part of the consolidation of the Australian distribution and exhibition system in early 1913 that should have made the circulation of Nordic silent film in Australia more streamlined and more profitable. Since it cost far more and was financially riskier to produce films than to import them, so at around the same time as Australian film production was really taking off, several of Australia’s most successful film entrepreneurs—the Scotsman T.J. West, the Englishman Cozens Spencer, Australian brothers John Henry and James Nevin Tait, and eventually the American J.D. Williams—decided to shift their focus from production to distribution. Aus-

¹¹ *Argus* (Melbourne), 17 March 1913

¹² Diane Collins, *Hollywood Down Under. Australians at the Movies: 1896 to the Present Day* (North Ryde, NSW, Australia: Angus & Robertson Publishers, 1987), 5.

¹³ Graham Shirley and Brian Adams, *Australian Cinema. The First Eighty Years* ([Sydney]: Angus & Robertson Publishers, 1983), 22.

¹⁴ Qtd. in Horak, 458. (FIND ORIGINAL SOURCE!)

¹⁵ Horak, 459.

tralian film historian Ina Bertrand explains,

In November 1912, the interests of West's, Spencer's and Amalgamated Pictures were merged, and in January 1913 J.D. Williams also joined. The new company (which became known—without any affection at all—as 'the combine') had an exhibition wing (Union Theatres, controlling twenty-nine cinemas throughout the country) and a distribution wing (Australasian Films).¹⁶

This decision, while financially advantageous for the firm's proprietors, had the effect of depriving Australian filmmakers of the necessary capital to sustain such a high level of production and leading to the gradual decline of Australian film production.

Since there was not enough domestic production to enable an Australian equivalent to the American Motion Picture Patents Company's protectionist policies, this new system supported a nationally diversified cinema market. Foreign film companies like Pathé and Nordisk, which were able to work with the combine, had an advantage. In 1913, less than half of the films imported to Australia were American, 26.3% of films were British,¹⁷ and the remainder were European, including French films from Pathé Frères, German films from Deutsche Bioscop and Messter Films, Danish films from Nordisk, Italian films from Cines and Itala, and Swedish films from Svensk Bio. Particularly in the prewar years, Australia absorbed a steady, even if not numerically spectacular, stream of Scandinavian films—at least 13 films from Nordisk alone in 1911.

Scandinavian films held their own on the Australian market in the early 1910s, but the outbreak of World War I had a devastating impact on European film exports, including those from Scandinavia. As products of neutral countries, Danish and Swedish films continued to circulate internationally during the first few years of the war, although (sometimes justified) British suspicions that German films might be hidden among the Scandinavian films distributed by Nordisk to Britain and its colonies resulted in delays and temporary bans, but the disruption of global shipping and material shortages meant that far fewer films were sent abroad from European producers.

After World War I, Scandinavian silent film gained renewed currency in Asia and Australasia, but was handicapped by the increasing dominance of U.S. film exports, the rise of UFA, and Nordisk's financial collapse. Instead of large numbers of Nordisk films being screened across the country, a much smaller number of Scandinavian films were in circulation in Australia. Aside from a few Nordisk films, they were primarily Svenska Bio films imported by the Clement Mason Company, including Mauritz Stiller's *Erotikon* (1920), which was marketed as *Bonds that Chafe* in 1923; Victor Sjöström's

¹⁶ Ina Bertrand, *Cinema in Australia: A Documentary History* (Kensington: New South Wales University Press, 1989), 41.

¹⁷ Mayer and Beattie, 2.

Mästerman (1921), translated as *A Lover in Pawn*; and Sjöström's *Körkarlen* (1921), which is most commonly known in English as *The Phantom Carriage* but which ran in Australia under the title *Thy Soul Shall Bear Witness*.

Screening Histories

So how do we know what Scandinavian films were being shown, where, and to whom? There are a number of challenges to tracing the circulation of silent films. As Richard Maltby explains, individual films' exhibition histories are highly transitory, in part because the film industry was built on a model in which "motion pictures were understood to be consumables, viewed once, disposed of and replaced by a substitute providing a comparable experience."¹⁸ To complicate matters, very little tangible evidence remains from the early Australian film industry—few company records, cinema log-books, even publicity materials.

However, there is a wealth of information available from contemporaneous newspapers, most of which have been digitized and made available online by the Australian government. Australian newspapers from the early 1910s reveal that Nordic silent films were regularly screened not only in major Australian cities, but also in small towns throughout rural Australia. Data from these newspapers illustrates just how far Nordic film was able to circulate beyond its domestic markets and for how much longer. Despite the fact that most cinemas changed their program once or twice a week, which allowed each film a run of only a few days in a given city, the sheer size of the Australian market gave rise to several different cinema circuits—first in metropolitan areas, then in smaller cities, and finally in tiny rural towns—which meant that Scandinavian films had a potentially much longer life at the end of the earth than they did at home.

To illustrate this pattern, let me focus for a few minutes on a single film, the three-reel Danish film *Ved Fængslets Port* (*Temptations of a Great City*, August Blom 1911), which *Moving Picture World* credited in 1911 with being the first feature film anywhere.¹⁹ Directed by August Blom and starring Valdemar Psilander, Clara Wieth, and Augusta Blad, *Temptations of a Great City* premiered in Copenhagen on March 6, 1911 and was exported to Australia very shortly thereafter, either through a British distributor or directly from Nordisk. As a high-quality feature film from an established production company, generally known as a "star picture," *Temptations of a Great City* was a welcome addition to the Australian cinema market for both businessmen and audiences, for the former as a reliable source of revenue, for the latter as an entertaining picture.

¹⁸ Richard Maltby, "New Cinema Histories," *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies*, ed. by Richard Maltby, Daniel Biltereyst, and Philippe Meers (London: Blackwell, 2011), 7.



Figure 1: Valdemar Psilander in *Temptations of a Great City*. Image courtesy of the Danish Film Institute.

¹⁹ Isak Thorsen, *Nordisk Films Kompagni 1906-1924. The Rise and Fall of the Polar Bear* (John Libbey, 2017), 113.

Newspaper ads and reviews reveal that the film was screened in Sydney, Hobart, Perth, Melbourne, Adelaide, and Brisbane during the summer of 1911, under the auspices of a variety of Australian cinema exhibitors. In-country distribution seems to have been handled initially by the Greater J.D. Williams Amusements Co.

In the Sydney trade journal *Referee* on July 12, 1911, Williams lauds the film's potential as "an absolute money-getter." Williams supplied the film for screening at the Lyric Theatre in Sydney, one of two cinemas he controlled there, but the ad suggests that Williams was also offering the film's exhibition rights (presumably outside of Sydney) for sale or rent. The ad promises that, as a "dramatic production . . . produced on a scale of magnificence never before attempted," this film would "be the talk of Australia."²⁰

No mention is made of any of the actor or actresses' names in Williams' ads for the film, in keeping with both Nordisk's policy at the time and the general industry practice, but Nordisk itself is not mentioned in any of these early ads either until nearly a month later, in an ad for West's that ran on August 7 in the Adelaide *Daily Herald*. Subsequent ads tend to mention Nordisk's name at least—an August 12 advertisement in the Melbourne paper *The Age* also reminds audiences that Nordisk "presented the Famous Social Problem *In the Hands of Imposters*," which is the English title of Nordisk's second major white slave-trade erotic melodrama *Den hvide Slavehandels sidste Offer*—but the greatest preeminence in the ads is generally given to the name of the exhibitor. Neither the film's associations with a particular star, like Psilander or Wieth, nor its Danish or European origins, were apparently majors factor in the film's anticipated financial success. Instead, while most advertisements praise the film's cinematography, its realistic acting, its sensationalism, and the relevance of its subject matter, they seem to rely most heavily on audience loyalty to a particular exhibitor in attracting attendees.

The circulation history of this single film illuminates both the highly competitive nature of the Australian market and its complexity. By August 7th, while Williams was still showing *Temptations of a Great City* in Sydney and English Amusements Company was showing it in Hobart, West's began to screen it in Adelaide, marketing it as an "exclusive attraction" at West's Pictures. Just a few days later, on August 10, *The Age* in Melbourne began advertising for the film's exclusive August 12 premiere in Melbourne, at Tait's Pictures, offering the assurance that "this Great Interpretation of a Desperate Social Canker cannot possibly prove harmful to beholders. It is a true, honest representation of the terrible undertow which encompasses our young manhood in its relentless tentacles, and draws them down! down! down! into the fascinating vortex of oblivion."²¹



Figure 2: Ad for *Temptations of a Great City* in *Referee* (Sydney), 12 July 1911.

²⁰ *Referee* (Sydney, NSW), July 26, 1911, 16.

²¹ "Advertising," *The Age* (Melbourne), 10 August 1911, 12.

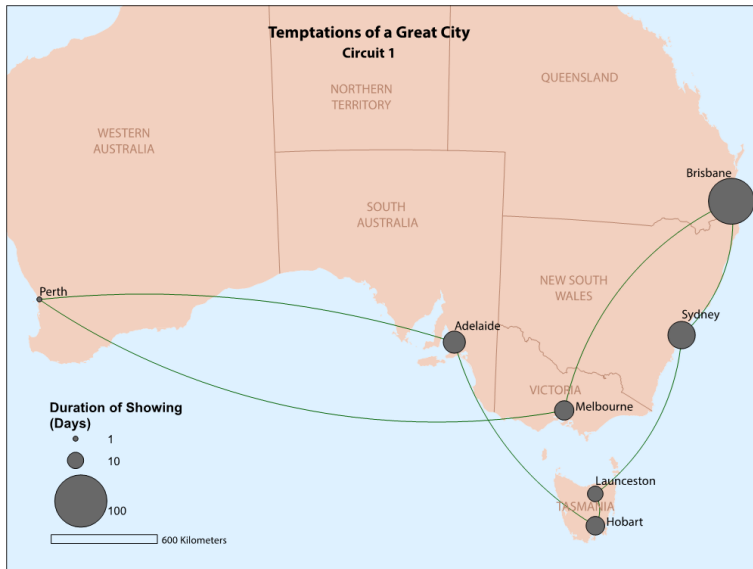


Figure 3: Temptations of a Great City, Circuit 1

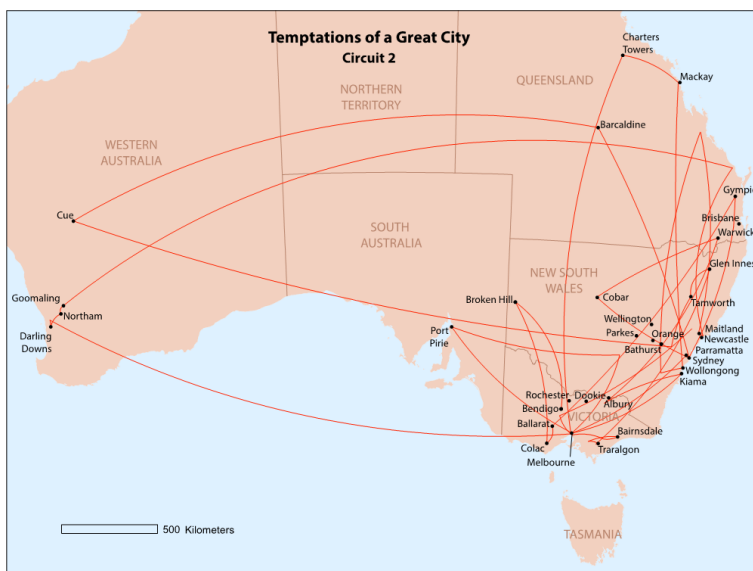


Figure 4: Temptations of a Great City, Circuit 2

While still making the rounds of the major theaters in large Australian cities, including Brisbane and Perth, *Temptations of a Great City* moved on to the provincial cinema circuit. Tait's screened *Temptations of a Great City* on August 11th in Bendigo, 150 km north of Melbourne, at the Princess Theatre, a showing which was, as *The Bendigo Independent* reported, "crowded from gallery to stalls."²² Parallel ads in the Sydney trade journal *Referee* on August 23, 1911 indicate that both J.D. Williams and another distributor, the Clement Mason Ciné Co., were offering the film for hire; Mason also featured another Nordisk production, *In the Hands of Imposters*.²³ On August 22, 1911, the film was screened for the first time in the isolated mining town of Broken Hill, in the far west of outback New South Wales. Since Broken Hill, near the border of South Australia, is twice as close to Adelaide (500km) as to Sydney (1100km), it seems likely that the print being shown at the Port Adelaide Empire Picture Palace until August 19 made its way north to Broken Hill. In Victoria, the Melbourne print was being screened in rural Colac, 150km west-southwest of Melbourne, by August 28, and, on the other side of the country, from Brisbane, where the film had had a double run at West's New Olympia, it went to the brand-new custom-built Empire Theatre in Toowoomba, Queensland, approximately 150 km west of Brisbane, on September 9.

²² *The Bendigo Independent* (Vic.), 12 August 1911, 4.

²³ "Advertising," *Referee* (Sydney), 23 August 1911, 16.

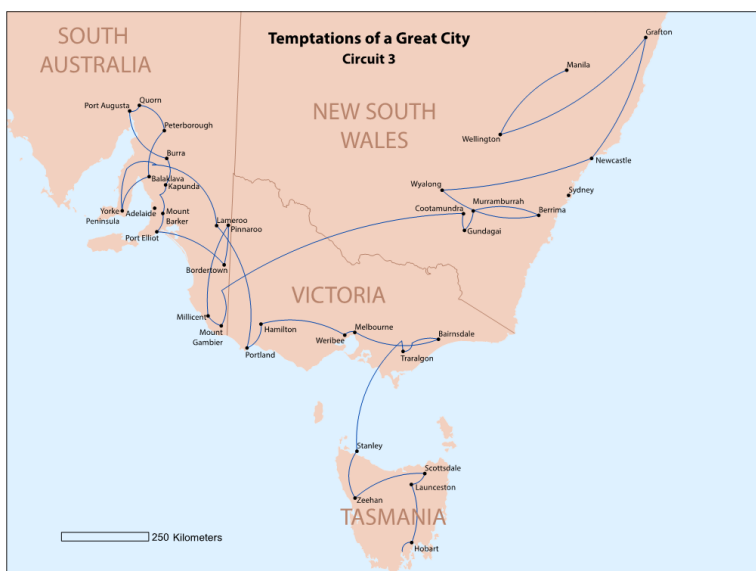


Figure 5: *Temptations of a Great City*, Circuit 3

More than three full years after the film's Danish premiere, it was still being screened in rural Australia, albeit in more primitive conditions

than the Empire Theatre, and with slightly less intensive newspaper coverage. Following its run in a variety of provincial cinemas in 1911 and 1912 under the auspices of many different exhibitors, *Temptations of a Great City* was apparently acquired by Miss Ettie Wilmott's traveling Wilmott Electric Picture Company. She screened the film one night in Manilla, New South Wales in April 1912, which must have been successful enough to justify taking it on an extensive tour in the Australian hinterlands. Between May 1913 and June 1914, she brought the film from town to town throughout rural South Australia and Victoria on a rather circuitous route, accompanied screenings with operatic songs that must have illustrated her professional nickname, "the lady with a man's voice."²⁴ Then, from February through May, Wilmott's toured the film around Tasmania, including some places, like Launceston and Hobart, where it had been screened three years earlier. Wilmott's last documented screening of the film took place in Franklin, Tasmania, on May 20, 1914. Wilmott's then seems to have handed the print off to a company called Souvenir Pictures, who screened the film for what appears to have been the last time in Australia, on June 20, 1914 as the Saturday evening picture in Coleraine, Victoria, more than 335km west of the state capital of Melbourne. It had had quite an impressive run, far longer and covering much more ground than it would have in Denmark alone.

²⁴ *Pinaroo Country News* (SA), September 12 1913, 4.

Thinking Scandinavia

Now that we have established how often and where Nordic films were being shown in Australia, the question we need to address is what effect the circulation of a Scandinavian silent film like *Temptations of a Great City* may have had on perceptions of Scandinavia in Australia. As a result of these prolonged, overlapping circuits of exhibition, one can assume that the average Australian had a significant chance of seeing Scandinavian films in the theater on a fairly regular basis and, through them, becoming familiar with specific aspects, attributes, and representatives of Scandinavian culture. However, what complicates this hypothesis right off the bat is that the majority of Scandinavian films circulating in Australia in the early 1910s were not necessarily popular *because* they came from Scandinavia or represented Nordic values in any explicit way. Many scenic films depicting ice-fishing in Kiruna or the Norwegian fjords were screened in Australia, but in terms of the feature films that have since come to define Nordisk's contributions to cinema history, from its (admittedly plagiarized) version of *Den hvide Slavehandel* (*The White Slave*, August Blom, 1910) to *Temptations of a Great City*, many were marketed, at least initially, without any mention of their place of origin, though

the company name of Nordisk is frequently used in ads. In the early 1910s, it wasn't particularly important for exhibitors or audiences that these were Scandinavian films

Instead, Australian ads for these films focus on their moral or artistic value, and the success of one Nordisk film was often used in later ads as a recommendation for an upcoming Nordisk film. A review of *In the Hands of Imposters* (August Blom, 1911), in the *Bendigo Independent* in May 1911 praises the "creator of this masterpiece" for "his great attempt to reveal to an apathetic world the dangers—which are living dangers—which await the sweetness of girlhood at each turn of the street."²⁵ Similarly, an ad for *Temptations of a Great City* published in the *Barrier Miner* (Broken Hill, NSW) on August 24, 1911, describes a variety of hypothetical reactions to the film in order to demonstrate its universal appeal:

The man in the street says, "Have you seen the great winner, THE TEMPTATIONS OF A GREAT CITY?"

The lady in her boudoir says, "My novels are tame in plot compared to THE TEMPTATIONS OF A GREAT CITY."

The gay old spark says, "Well, I've had a good time in my youth, but I am beat by the doings in THE TEMPTATIONS OF A GREAT CITY."

The lovers say, "Oh, we are shocked! We never spoon like those in THE TEMPTATIONS OF A GREAT CITY."

Old Cent Per Cent says, "Mein gootness, the extravagance is awful in THE TEMPTATIONS OF A GREAT CITY."

All the dear girls say, "Oh, I wish George would spoon like the nice, foolish boy in THE TEMPTATIONS OF A GREAT CITY."

And the Wowser says, "It's dreadful but it points a great moral, and I am going again and ALL SHOULD SEE THE TEMPTATIONS OF A GREAT CITY."

The ad makes it clear that the film is both racy and exciting, but by attributing these attributes to the film's attempt to convey a moral lesson, this scandalousness is at once justified and legitimized.

Yet although the specifically Scandinavian origins of the films generally go unremarked, Nordic films are often lauded for their connection to the British/European homeland of most Australian settler colonists, as suggested by the obvious German accent attributed to "Old Cent Per Cent," itself a somewhat derogatory term for a greedy or stingy person, in the abovementioned ad. In many ways, Scandinavian films were marketed as an exclusive, luxury product with Continental flair. Ads frequently mention how expensive it was to secure the exhibition rights for a particular Nordic film and reassure viewers (sometimes inaccurately) that the theater/distributor has exclusive rights to the picture. Two of the major film distributors in

²⁵ *Bendigo Independent* (Bendigo, Victoria), 12 May 1911, 4.

Australia in the early 1910s, J.D. Williams and T.J. West, were British and used their connections to import European films, often through British companies. An ad for *Temptations of a Great City*, published in *The Daily News* (Perth) on September 7, 1911, boasted of “a complete change of bill, the films having only arrived from the Old World by the last mailboat.”²⁶ Similarly, an ad in *The Sun* (Sydney) on October 31, 1911 explained that “the following new attractions,” including the Nordisk film *Ungdom og Letsind* (1911), which was marketed under the title *The Girl Behind the Counter*, perhaps in an attempt to capitalize on the popularity of a successful live theater piece of a year or two earlier by the same name, had been “especially arranged for in England by J.D. Williams.”²⁷ Two years later, an article about T.J. West in *Theatre Magazine* reported on his trip to Europe, where, “In the interests of his firm Mr. West will see the Cines people at Rome, the Ambrosio people at Turin, and the Milano people at Milan. From Italy he goes direct to the firm’s office in Paris, and from Paris to his headquarters—and home—in London.”²⁸ Although the article makes no mention of Copenhagen or Stockholm, West’s was one of the most frequent exhibitors of Scandinavian films in the prewar period, generally in luxurious cinema palaces appropriate to the European cosmopolitanism of the films he imported.

Moreover, the leading actors and actresses in Scandinavian films, on the occasions that they were mentioned by name, were frequently associated, however erroneously, with Continental theaters. For example, in September 1911, when West’s Pictures in Sydney screened *Den sorte drøm* under the title *The Circus Girl*, starring Asta Nielsen and Valdemar Psilander, West’s ad made a point of establishing Asta Nielsen’s (in this case imaginary) Continental stage credentials:

Mdlle. Asta Nielsen, of the Folies Bergères [sic], Paris, who plays the name-part in *The Circus Girl*, is one of the most fascinating ladies on the Continental stage. A woman of remarkable stage presence and exceeding beauty, she has long since become the idol of Parisian and Berlin audiences.²⁹

Australia might have been located at the end of the earth, as seen from Europe, but, as these kinds of ads underscore, silent film provided access to the best of European art and culture.

Yet while a few Nordic stars, like Nielsen, were individually famous by name, most were not. Psilander, the star of *Temptations of a Great City*, was the highest paid actor in Denmark for many years in the early 1910s—he was voted most the most popular cinema actor in Germany, according to a 1914 survey of German filmgoers by the magazine *Kino-Woche*,³⁰ and in Brazil, according to a survey conducted by the Rio de Janeiro newspaper *Correio da Manhã* on October 19, 1915—³¹but his name is rarely mentioned in Australian media, in

²⁶ *The Daily News* (Perth, Western Australia), 7 September 1911, 7.

²⁷ *The Sun* (Sydney), 31 October 1911, 3.

²⁸ *Theatre Magazine*, October 1, 1913, 9.

²⁹ “West’s Pictures,” *Sydney Morning Herald* (NSW), 9 Sept. 1911, 13.

³⁰ Corinna Müller, “Der Weg zum Star. Versuch einer Rekonstruktion,” *Henny Porten. Der erste deutsche Filmstar, 1890-1960*, ed. Helga Belach (Berlin: Haude & Spener, 1986), 32.

³¹ “Um novo concurso: Qual dos artistas dramáticos do ‘film’ é o preferido da leitora?” *Correio da Manhã*, 19 October 1915, 4.

contrast to more than two thousand mentions of Nielsen. In ads for *The Circus Girl*, in which he played opposite Nielsen, her name appears but he goes unnamed. On the few occasions when Psilander's name does appear in Australian film ads, it is often reproduced incorrectly. For example, in an article in *Table Talk* (Melbourne) on 12 December 1912, he is called "Henrik" instead of "Valdemar,"³² while in another, in *The Examiner* (Launceston, Tasmania) on 30 June 1915, he is described as the "Danish star actress Valdemer [sic] Psilander."³³ Yet despite this lack of name recognition, many of Psilander's films played to enthusiastic Australian audiences for years at a time, including *Temptations of a Great City* (1911), discussed above; *The Great Circus Catastrophe* (1912), which was advertised in the *Sydney Morning Herald* as "the greatest circus drama ever filmed"³⁴ and was still being screened in Pinjarra, Western Australia as late as June 1916; and *The Candle and the Moth* (1915).

While British Australians may not have cared where many of the films being screened at the time came from or who starred in them, so long as the films were reliably entertaining and morally uplifting, it seems to have mattered to many of the Scandinavian immigrants in Australia, who found in the films an emotional connection to their homelands. As anecdotal evidence of this, an article in *The Register*, published in Adelaide on December 16, 1911, describes a recent Danish immigrant's reaction to seeing a poster for Asta Nielsen's Deutsche Bioscop film *In dem großen Augenblick* (*The Great Moment; Gad*, 1911):

Mr. J.K. Lund, a native of Denmark, has arrived in Sydney, and intends to take up dairy farming on the north coast. . . . While Australians are always ready to applaud the pluck of the Britisher, something might be said of the newcomer, who has, at the age of 45 years, determined on making a start in a new land, for he cannot speak a word of English, a severe handicap in itself. When he arrived he told, through an interpreter, how he walked along the streets looking at the signboards until he came to a boarding on which was inscribed, "Ein ergreifendes Lebensdrama in 3 Akten von Urban Gad. Asta Nielsen als Hauptdarstellerin." Then his face lighted, and somehow he seemed to think he was among friends—his native tongue gave him a sign of encouragement.³⁵

The article's conflation of Danish and German as Mr. Lund's native tongue may suggest either that he was a German-speaking Dane from Schleswig-Holstein or that the author of the article couldn't be bothered to tell the languages of obscure European immigrants apart.

Such indifference to the national origins of the films being screened in Australian cinemas gradually changed as World War I approached. As early as 1913, ads began to foreground Asta Nielsen's Danish identity instead of the German provenance of her films. Almost none

³² "Lyric Theatre," *Table Talk* (Melbourne, Victoria), 12 December 1912, 16.

³³ "Princes Theatre," *Examiner* (Launceston, Tasmania), 30 June 1915, 6.

³⁴ "Crystal Palace," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 November 1912, 8.

³⁵ "Plucky Danish Girl," *The Register* (Adelaide), December 16, 1911, 14.

of the advertisements for her films in Australia and New Zealand that appeared between 1911 and 1915 list the German producers of her films, even though Pathé and Nordisk are often identified as the creators of certain films. Some of these ads also claim that Nielsen worked for Nordisk, Hubsch, or other non-German film companies, long after her brief stint at Nordisk was over. Explicit references to Nielsen's Danishness begin to appear as early as February 3, 1913, when she is described in the *Adelaide Daily Herald* as "the popular Danish artist."³⁶ A few months later, on August 19, 1913, she is described in the *North Otago Times* as "the popular Danish Bernhardt."³⁷ The following year, on June 6, 1914, the *Adelaide Daily Herald* describes her as "the clever Danish actress,"³⁸ while another Adelaide paper, *The Mail*, dubs her "the incomparable Danish actress" on September 5, 1914. Perhaps most strikingly, on August 8, 1914, an advertisement appeared in the *Taranaki Daily News* in New Zealand, announcing a "rare exclusive" showing of a film titled *Suffragette*, starring "the world's favorite picture artist" Asta Nielsen. After lavishing praise on "Miss Nielsen's" film, the newspaper admonishes its readers: "YOU MUST REMEMBER, YOU MUST REMEMBER that Miss Asta Nielsen is the famous Danish actress who pleases all who witness her splendid work in the Nordisk and Hubsch photoplays."³⁹ This ploy seems to have worked, as several of Nielsen's films were shown in Australian cinemas as late as 1916 and some Nordisk films until 1917. Danish Australian fans were even notified of Valdemar Psilander's untimely death in March 1917, in the newspaper *Norden*, which served the significant Scandinavian population of Victoria and South Australia.

Yet although Nordisk in particular was able to circumvent the export challenges imposed by the outbreak of hostilities for the first few years of the war, the conflict's demands in terms of manpower, attention, and materiel wreaked havoc on the Scandinavian share of the Australian film market and opened the door for a greater proportion of American films. The Australian parliament passed a heavy duty on imported European films in late 1914, but American film companies were given preferential treatment, which inhibited a possible resurgence of the Australian film industry. In a May 1915 article in *Theatre Magazine*, Henry Fletcher argued for using European models to produce more high-quality, innovative Australian films:

I say with confidence that within a short time we could produce better dramatic films here than those sent us from U.S.A. In construction these are usually wretched and depend for success on a star actor or actress and good photography. The Yank cannot write drama—only melodrama—for stage, book, or film, He is not built that way. If we are not up to the French standard, we are better in Australia—and

³⁶ Feb. 5, 1913, Wondergraph Picture Pavilion, *Daily Herald*, Adelaide

³⁷ *North Otago Times*, August 19, 1913.

³⁸ *Daily Herald*, Adelaide, June 6, 1914.

³⁹ *Taranaki Daily News*, August 8, 1914.

probably more emotional and naturally artistic—than other British people.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ *Theatre Magazine*, 1 May 1915, 7.

Unfortunately for both the Australian and Scandinavian film industries, Fletcher's arguments were disregarded. By the time the war was over and normal trade resumed, American film companies had saturated the Australian market, established local offices, and made exclusive agreements with the major Australian distributors and exhibitors. In this new economic climate, Scandinavian film was no longer an integral part of the larger distribution system and had to be specially imported.

Given their obligations to their American suppliers, few Australian distributors were interested in importing Scandinavian films, but one striking exception to this rule was Mrs. Clement Mason. Her husband had been a film importer in the 1910s, one of J.D. Williams' competitors for distributing *Temptations of a Great City*. After divorcing her husband for abandonment near the end of the war, Mrs. Mason tried to carve out a niche for herself as the national supplier of exclusive, highbrow European films. The regional origin of the films now came to function as a marker of their quality. Among the first films she introduced after the war was the production *The Flame of Life*, which was initially described (inaccurately) in a December 1919 ad as a "Nordisk masterpiece" and then in March 1920 as a Swedish film, accompanied by the description: "A fine film this, with a good story, beautiful old world scenery and some clever acting by Lars Larsen, who among other things rides the rapids on a single log." In July 1920, Mason Films asserted the resurgence and artistic quality of Scandinavian films, noting:

The Swedish and Norwegian group of manufacturers are making a bold bid for Continental supremacy in the output of films. Not long back the Swedish Biograph Co. increased its capital to 2 million pounds, with the result that it has in course of erection an entire film city at Rasund (Sweden). The productions of this company that have already been seen are remarkable for the sincerity of the acting and the artistic presentation of the stories.⁴¹

⁴¹ *Theatre Magazine*, 1 July 1920, 26.

The company then announced the imminent release of two additional Swedish films: *The Dawn of Love* and *The Snows of Destiny*. Each of these films, featuring high-profile directors and actors Mauritz Stiller and Victor Sjöström (both of whom later worked in Hollywood for some time), was shown in several Australian cities, with *A Lover in Pawn* and *Thy Soul Shall Bear Witness* staying in circulation the longest. Mason Films' disappearance from the Australian market by 1923 suggests that importing European films, even when they were marketed as exclusive luxury goods, was not profitable enough to compete with the American conglomerates.

The lack of dedicated representatives in Australia meant that both Svensk Filmindustri and Nordisk had to negotiate sales of individual films on their own in the 1920s, which necessarily limited the number and kind of films they could sell. Nordisk contract records indicate sales to a few other Australian distributors in this period, including Howe's Film Agency and Selznick Pictures, both in Sydney, with an emphasis on fitting their product to Australian market tastes. The contract specifies that Nordisk would provide a sample copy of each "most likely suitable film," which, if found "usable" on arrival in Sydney would be purchased outright by the distributor, subject to a 50-50 profit-sharing agreement with Nordisk. The films that Nordisk sent to Howe's in 1923 included *Great Expectations*, *On the Stroke of Midnight*, *The Hill Park Mystery*, and *Mirrors of the Soul*, while those sent in 1924 featured *David Copperfield*, *Bonds of Hate*, *Sealed Lips*, and *My Friend the Detective*. As the titles indicate, many of these films were adaptations of British novels, including two by Charles Dickens, and others were detective thrillers somewhat reminiscent of the crime fiction that has inspired the twenty-first century Nordic Noir wave. Neither category of film is particularly concerned with depicting Scandinavian culture, but the pragmatism of pairing the highbrow literary prestige of Dickens with lowbrow crime thrillers evidences the versatility and virtuosity of Scandinavian film production in this period.

Throughout the 1920s, in the final years of the silent era, Scandinavian film continued to struggle for market share against American companies, often in solidarity with attempts by the Australian film industry to find its own feet. In 1926, a new distributor specializing in European imports emerged, calling itself Cinema Art Films. This name presupposes the same highbrow reputation of European films that Mason Films played up. Directed by L. J. Keast, who had started his career working for Pathé in Melbourne and then J.D. Williams in Adelaide before becoming director of the Feature Film Department of Australasian Films (the distribution arm of the combine) in Victoria in early 1920. As the ultimate industry insider, in partnership with the exhibitors L.P. and E.J. Hoskins, Keast was in a position to negotiate favorable contracts with UFA in Germany, as well as importing "selected" Scandinavian films. Testifying before a Royal Commission established in Sydney in 1927 to determine measures to protect the Australian film industry against American domination, Keast expressed his conviction that there was a niche market in Australia for high quality European productions, although strict Australian censorship, particularly of European films, made it difficult to convey their full appeal.⁴² The fact that Cinema Art Films declared bankruptcy and dissolved in 1930 confirms that the task of reaching that mar-

⁴² *Royal Commission on the Motion Picture Industry in Australia. Minutes of Evidence*, 1927: 399.

ket was still a financially risky one, even before the advent of sound films.

The difficulties involved in getting Scandinavian films into Australian cinemas in the 1920s meant that the glory days of a three-year run for films like *Temptations of a Great City* or *The Circus Girl* and their case for Scandinavia's artistic and technical sophistication belonged to the distant past. Nordisk's own bankruptcy in the 1920s limited the number of films available for export, while the advent of sound film changed the fundamental parameters of global film circulation, further limiting the access of Scandinavian films to English-speaking markets like Australia. Audiences and film critics alike retained only a vague memory of how popular Scandinavian film had been in prewar Australia, let alone which pictures or actresses came from which particular country. We can see anecdotal evidence of this forgetfulness in the "Moving Pictures" column in *The Australasian* (Melbourne) on July 21, 1928, where the author expresses amazement that the film *Dirnentragödie* (*A Tragedy of the Streets*, Bruno Rahn, 1927) had run for months at a Paris theater. He notes off-handedly at the end of the article that "the principal part was taken by Asta Nielsen, a Swedish [*sic*] actress, who was one of the first of moving picture stars."⁴³ It would be another seven decades before Nordic film, through the rise of Dogme 95 and Nordic noir, would approach the same popularity and degree of cultural influence in Australia that it enjoyed during the silent period.

⁴³ "Moving Pictures," *The Australasian* (Melbourne), July 21, 1928.