



Fernanda Nissen

Lived:

August 15, 1862 - April 3, 1920

Worked as:

film censor, journalist, theatre critic, writer

Worked In:

Norway

by Anne Marit Myrstad

The socialist politician and theatre critic Fernanda Nissen was called on to serve as one of two film censors when the Norwegian Censorship Board was established in 1913. Nissen held this position until 1920, when she died on a trip to Germany that she undertook to see film and theatre. In her years as a film censor, she was an active participant in the public sphere. She represented the Labour party in the municipality of Oslo and fought for working-class welfare, while also continuing her work as a respected critic of theatre and literature for the socialist paper *Social-Demokraten*. Her reputation at the time of her appointment as a film censor may still have been coloured by the scandal she caused in the 1890s, when, as a mother of two small children, she asked for a divorce. Her husband at the time was the editor of the leading liberal paper *Dagbladet*. However, while fighting on the side of the striking match workers, the first strike among women workers in Norway, she had fallen in love with the socialist doctor Oscar Nissen, who later became editor of the main socialist newspaper, *Social-Demokraten*.

Fernanda Nissen's public arguments against film censorship at the State level during the debate leading up to The Norwegian Cinematograph Act of 1913, opposed the Act. She argued that the establishment of a central censorship board was too late, particularly because the medium of film was making transitions from the immature early years and was now finding its true identity as an art form according to the *Social-Demokraten* that year. As one of her examples of this maturity, Nissen identified the German drama *Das Mädchen Ohne Vaterland/The Girl Without a Nation* (Urban Gad, 1911), with the Danish star Asta Nielsen playing a gypsy spy. The available film stills, showing an erotic, challenging, and smoking Asta Nielsen, suggest that the star in this film did not portray a woman who conformed to current conservative feminine ideals. Mrs. Nissen is quoted in the *Social-Demokraten* as praising the film for showing the actress' "slender, supple body" and arguing that the film promoted good values (1913, n.p.). Nissen's sympathy for Asta Nielsen's film role is understandable in light of the fact that Fernanda had herself fought for the emancipation of

women. Together with female friends, in the 1880s she established an urban lifestyle, cut her hair, smoked in public, and took part in the cultural and political debates of the day according to her biographer Kari Skjønberg (1978, 13-15).

If she was so accepting how did she function as a censor? The picture is not clear and needs to be investigated more thoroughly. Seeing the bulk of foreign films seeking an audience in Norway evidently challenged Fernanda Nissen's positive outlook on film. In a 1915 article in *Social-Demokraten*, she explained her dislike of the obligation to describe in writing the content of each film she censored. These were "abominable small depictions," according to Fernanda Nissen (5). These "depictions," as documented on the censorship cards, illustrate not only plots that an experienced theatre critic would find disgusting, but also films she found quite interesting. In her justifications for prohibitions she also expressed doubt about her decisions. We can read this hesitation in passages like: "unacceptable content—in spite of the many excellent scenes," "rejected, unfortunately, for the sake of children, due to the coarse content" or, "brilliant, but too frightening." Even among the films she had to cut, there were clearly some great moments. Her doubt is also present when decisions made by the board were criticized and she would have to comment on complaints to the Department of Justice. She does not seem afraid to admit that censorship implied difficult judgments. Rather than defending every cut or the release of films without cuts, she stressed the censors' changing moods, and thus changing ability to judge along with a willingness to discuss whether she might have chosen incorrectly.

In a 1917 interview given to the newspaper *Den 17de May/May 17th* after four years in office, she seems neither particularly liberal nor ambiguous. Contrary to her earlier statement, she rejects the idea that film has anything to do with art. Again it seems as though the censorship work itself challenged her positive outlook on film. She would not even allow that film could generate interest in the arts: "Movies make people unmotivated and lazy. Not just one single movie, but movies," she is quoted as saying (n.p.). But even here she holds that in spite of so many bad films, the general quality of films had improved over the years. And although basically questioning the worth of film in *May 17th*, in an interview in 1918 with the film periodical *Helt og Skurk/Hero and Villain*, Fernanda Nissen had to defend her liberal attitude towards nudity in films. She argued that clothing was unnecessary when "the human body is a hymn to nature's beauty" (55-56). At the same time she seems aware that the very cinematic portrayals of nudity could be essential, and she exemplified her point with an "absolutely superb swimming movie." In this film, as she describes it, "a young beautiful woman flitted back and forth on the beach and up and down in the water." This was no problem. Fernanda found the scene quite beautiful. But then "suddenly two gentlemen with monocles appeared. They watched the woman with great interest and grinned and laughed." The censor found this "disgusting" and thus cut the two gentlemen and their looking. And then "the young, beautiful woman was now allowed to swim in peace and quiet." Moviegoers watching the bathing beauty without the intervention of male voyeurism was acceptable to Fernanda.

As censorship was controversial, so became the censor. Before taking her post as censor, Nissen's public image was, as suggested, morally quite liberal. When censorship caused public offense and

controversy, however, it was the liberated Fernanda Nissen, not her far more conservative male colleague, who was caricatured as the angry, old, and asexual censor with scissors according to Sigurd Evensmo in his history of Norwegian films. Evensmo describes Fernanda Nissen's wise discretion and refreshing temperament and also calls attention to her criticism of the absence of political commitment in film and suggests that, in her day, the image of a radical censor could not find a foothold (1967, 81).

In his history of the Labour movement's amateur theatre, Jostein Gripsrud describes the socialist Fernanda Nissen's criticism of popular theatre and assigns her a fairly conservative position as cultural pedagogue (1981, 67ff). When he later describes Norwegian film censors of the silent era, he nuances this image by stressing her liberal attitude to the realm of the erotic (Dahl et al. 1996, 69-70). Tanya Pedersen Nymo, who has written on the early history of the State Censorship Board, primarily follows Gripsrud's understanding of Nissen as a culturally conservative pedagogue. According to Nymo, Fernanda Nissen—though a socialist—is conservative in the sense that she is a middle class woman who wants to lift the working classes and involve them in middle class culture and the arts (2003, 55). This is basically correct, but Nissen's position is also more complicated. For example, in the censorship debate, the Norwegian Women's National Council (NKN) represented the culturally conservative position, but Working Women, with Fernanda Nissen as one of the leading figures, never joined NKN and their cultural conservatism. Progressive aspects of Nissen's film censorship such as an open and liberal take on sexuality, are left out when she is positioned as the conservative pedagogue in cultural matters.

Clearly, conflicting interests and values met in Fernanda Nissen as censor, and her practice appears simultaneously ambiguous, contradictory, and explorative. The positions she took toward film are particularly interesting in that, as far as we know, she was the only woman of her time to participate in the public debate over film. And this is at a period when there were hard fought battles over how film should be defined, regulated, and understood, internationally as well as in Norway (Kuhn 1988; Myrstad 1996). Her work as a film censor, however, has turned out to be parenthetical in the current version of her life and work. This underscores the need for further research to illuminate Fernanda Nissen's contribution to the public film discourse in the period of silent film.

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