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<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/19753>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Björkin, Mats: Ports as nodes in film logistics: Swedish film agent Oscar Rosenberg in the years after the First World War. In: *NECSUS_European Journal of Media Studies*. #Ports, Jg. 12 (2023), Nr. 1, S. 58–80. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/19753>.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

<https://necsus-ejms.org/ports-as-nodes-in-film-logistics-swedish-film-agent-oscar-rosenberg-in-the-years-after-the-first-world-war/>

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Ports as nodes in film logistics: Swedish film agent Oscar Rosenberg in the years after the First World War

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NECSUS 12 (1), Spring 2023: 58–80

URL: <https://necsus-ejms.org/ports-as-nodes-in-film-logistics-swedish-film-agent-oscar-rosenberg-in-the-years-after-the-first-world-war/>

Abstract

Ports make visible neglected details in the history of film distribution. The international shipment of film connected for more than half a century the main nodes in the network of film distribution. This article maps questions on port-related logistical challenges, based on the personal and corporate collections of Swedish film distributor Oscar Rosenberg (1874-1943) and his film agency from around 1916 to 1930, also the changing conditions for four Swedish ports in the years around 1920.

Keywords

film distribution, critical logistics studies, shipping

Introduction

The Gothenburg and Stockholm ports were major sites of international freight to and from Sweden. Malmö linked Swedish cargo and post services to Denmark, while the Trelleborg port was the main railway port attaching Sweden to Germany and thus to the continental railway and postal systems. The cases used in this study emanate from correspondence and documents in the archive collection of Swedish film agent Oscar Rosenberg, who for many years represented Goldwyn Pictures Corporation in Scandinavia. The Rosenberg collection at the Swedish Film Institute Library in Stockholm consists of 17 boxes of letters, contracts, notices, bank checks, and notes, from around 1917 to the late 1920s. There is limited material from Rosenberg's later career, probably because the film industry changed in favour of major distribution companies, leaving little space to independent film agents.[1]

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Fig. 1: Map of Swedish ports.

The research takes as its point of departure the four Swedish ports involved in the logistics of moving images – Gothenburg, Stockholm, Malmö, and Trelleborg – during the early 1920s. This period is selected for three reasons: first, the rapid and huge expansion of distribution of Hollywood films; second, the often creative and inventive endeavours to rebuild trade in films (and other goods) within Europe after the war; third, the challenges for every actor involved in films dealing with the volatile German currency, which was particularly important since Germany was Sweden’s main business partner at the time.

Logistics of media and other material goods, ‘the organization and coordination of resources to manufacture and distribute global commodities’, [2] has recently been theorised in research on digital media, but is even more relevant, I would argue, to studies of film history. Studying ports in relation to early 20th century film distribution may contribute to a historicisation of critical logistics studies, by looking at a culturally highly significant product. [3] Including the historically varied conditions for the supply chains of film, a critical logistics studies perspective helps in emphasising the different objects of film distribution

such as raw film stock (positive or negative, perforated or non-perforated), films for inspection and films for distribution, text lists, posters and photographs, contracts, proofs of financial transactions, shipping agreements, insurance agreements, etc.

Since the beginning of the film trade, the major European ports were physically instrumental in upholding film distribution in perilous times of revolution, economic and social crises, and through radically different political, economic, and legal systems. For film distributors, European ports and shipping were necessary obstacles to negotiate to ensure trade with the US but also between continental Europe, the UK, and the rest of the world. Ports combined shipping with land transport, insurances, customs, and indirectly, currency regulations, trade conventions and cultural policies, and, in times of war, diplomacy and security.

Ports are neglected actors within the entire value chain of film. This article aims at opening up new topics in the study of historical film logistics at a challenging period in international (film) trade: the years after the end of the First World War, when Europe had to rediscover and transform its place in the world. I will argue that the relatively narrow focus on ports offers new perspectives on the surprisingly under-developed research field of the history of moving image logistics. My argument rests on Michael B. Miller's useful distinction in his *European Maritime World*, that ports are part of three sets of networks: hinterland networks, foreland or overseas networks, and city or harbour networks.

Hinterland networks were the collectors, the gatherers of travelers and production for world distribution and the conduits through which people and goods found their way to interior centers. Foreland or overseas networks established world linkages of shipping and trade and turned ports into global hubs of information exchange. City or harbour networks made ports coherent and efficient operation centers and so powered ports interests that the local and global welded together.[4]

The international trade with moving images coincides with general changes in the roles and functions of ports, from enclosed worlds of their own to integrated parts of larger transport chains – a change often explained by the containerisation of sea transport during the later decades of the 20th century.[5] For a minor and small-scale, but still delicate and valuable type of goods, such as film products, these cases show that when the film trade was rebooted in the early 1920s, the transport chain of films was already integrated with shipping, railways, and the postal package delivery systems.

The article argues that even if films did not change the business of shipping, film distribution was dependent upon the European and North American network of ports. Looking at the ports as complements to the major production and distribution hubs of Europe, such as Paris, Berlin, London or Milan, it may be possible to discern constraining and enabling forces that were involved in which films were screened at which market. The article will mainly focus on the foreland, overseas networks of Swedish ports.

I suggest that a combination of the three networks of ports (hinterland, foreland, and city), with modes of transport (general cargo on freighters, general cargo on passenger ships, and postal packages), and the financial flows related to ports (customs, transport, and insurance costs), as well as considering the different objects involved (raw film, inspection prints, distribution negatives and positives, advertising and information material) is needed to create a framework for analysing ports within the value-chain of moving images.

Ports and film distribution

Research in film distribution has mostly revolved around the major actors: how the distribution agencies connect films with their audiences, by connecting production companies with cinema owners.[6] Kristin Thompson's *Exporting Entertainment* is still a groundbreaking study, even if the logistics of film trade was not her main focus.[7] Recently two studies by Richard Abel and Martin L. Johnson look into the logistics of film distribution and the film exchanges within the US during the 1910s and early 1920s.[8] These studies are exemplary as a basis for hinterland networks of film logistics. Even if US railway and local truck transport systems differed from those in other countries, they are recognisable from a Scandinavian point of view. What both Abel and Johnson show is how regulation, business, and organisations culturally impact the logistics of film.

However, introductions to film economy tend to neglect logistics.[9] In his *Entertainment Industrialised* Gerben Bakker briefly discusses the 'distribution delivery system' but without including logistics:

The key is the capacity of the distribution system that delivers the entertainment to the consumers. Such a system may be the theatre, the cinema, the radio, the television, and its capacity can be measured by, for example, the maximum number of spectator-hours that it can distribute within a day. The scarcity of the distribution capacity, together with the size of the market, is the economic characteristic that drives dynamic product differentiation.[10]

By contrast, I aim to show that logistics is a crucial component of the distribution delivery system which not only responds and adapts to demand and supply, but also constrains and enables both. This becomes evident, as Thompson showed, when looking beyond Hollywood's domestic market, when further aspects such as different state regulations and trade issues are put into play. One of Thompson's main contributions is to explain how the practices of Hollywood, the film industries of Europe, and the rest of the world were intricately connected and dependent upon political, economic, and cultural changes. Ports

help us to further understand the logistics of the physical performance of film goods, as well as the financial transactions involved, and thus the information networks of film logistics.

During the second half of the 19th century, Britain, France, the US and some other countries made very favourable deals, more or less enforced, with the relatively closed markets of Japan, China, and Korea through the establishment of so-called treaty ports. Former trade actors such as the Dutch and the Spanish could not compete in the geopolitical situation.[11] The Chinese ports, either treaty ports or ports actually owned by foreign countries, are thoroughly researched, where the intricate relationships between western modernity, domestic modernity, and domestic tradition come to fore. Given that the introduction of moving images, by American, French, and British companies, coincided in time with the major trade and political changes in the region, cinema became a useful stepping stone for studies of larger cultural, social, and political issues.[12] Similarly, while the ports of Antwerp, London, and Stockholm were important for so many reasons, their cultural significance in relation to film is still to be more thoroughly researched.

It is interesting to compare the relative invisibility of ports and seaways with the attention given to trains and railways.[13] Again, it is in studies of non-Western, colonial contexts that we find brief comments on the connections between ports and railways as links between the outer world and the inner world of the colony:

The train in the 1920s was an integral mechanism in Britain's empire because innovation on the railway was central to the nation's global representation. British companies established rail networks across Asia (through India and Burma) and Africa (through Egypt, Uganda, and South Africa) in the nineteenth century and also financed railways in both North and South America. Trains extended trade routes from ports to production sites, facilitating the efficient transportation of great quantities of goods. In countries exploited by imperial rule, the train symbolized Britain's superiority. However, the railway also was configured as an inclusive space that helped people to rise above their social station.[14]

Apart from the fact that some of the earliest films depicted trains arriving at railway stations, and the contemporary comparisons to train rides and film spectatorship, trains and railways were of course also everyday experiences. The railway had an even more prominent position as an expression and symbol of industrialism, modernity, and mobility. The seaways had existed for thousands of years and were thus less 'new'. The technologies of travelling the seas did evolve – as the steam engine made railways possible, steamships radically changed shipping and passenger transport. We should therefore not underestimate the novelty and culturally radical function of the steamship. In Shaolin Ma's study of modernity and literature in late 19th and early 20th century China, the steamship becomes a value-laden vessel (figuratively and literally) for not only globalisation and modernity but for personal and artistic change. In addition to people travelling on steamships from port to port, so did cultural meaning, new aesthetics, and new values:

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Do new transportation networks and innovations such as the telegraph and photography actually constitute the *substance* of a new poetic culture, or do they, like the steamship, serve merely as technological *form*, vehicle, and occasion for poetic creativity?[15]

It may be the former too, but I will rather focus on 'technological form, vehicle and occasion'. In Rosenberg's correspondence, the business of film trade and logistics can perhaps also be read as a cultural expression (though perhaps not poetic) of the society emanating from the new world order after the First World War.[16] The topic of transatlantic passenger traffic in 1910s and 1920s Hollywood (and European) films indicate a similar, but in some cases radically different phenomenon from what Ma describes, such as in comedies with the first class deck as a site of flirtation, as in the introduction of *Up in Mabel's Room* (E. Mason Hopper, 1926). What was similar was the class hierarchies of the journey onboard, and the cultural transitions by way of geographical mobility. A main difference was the political and economic relations of power. Even if the US was rapidly expanding economically and politically, the general 'equality' between US and Europe was of another dimension than that between China or Japan and the West. Still, looking at different networks of transporting goods and people will enhance our knowledge of the importance of ports for cultural exchange, and that the conditions for ports, and their foreland and hinterland networks, may have conditioned film distribution.

Swedish ports and their foreland networks

Historically, many ports along the 2,400-kilometre-long coast of Sweden were used for domestic and international transport of the country's main export products – iron, ore, and wood – as well as for import. Naturally the three major cities, which are all located along the coasts, had significant passenger and cargo traffic. Stockholm, the capital, situated on the east coast, was until the beginning of the 20th century the largest site for import, while Gothenburg, the second largest city located on the west coast, and with the largest harbour, dominated the export business. Their geographical positions also affected the direction of trade and passenger traffic. Stockholm connected with the other ports in the Baltic Sea, in Finland, Russia, the Baltic states, Poland, and Germany, but also with other European ports. Gothenburg connected with the British Isles, Denmark, Norway, the major European Atlantic ports (for example Hamburg, Rotterdam, Antwerp, and Le Havre), but also trade with the United States and the rest of the world. The port of Malmö was primarily directed towards Copenhagen, with passenger traffic, postal services, and light freights. Denmark was an important trade partner in general, given the strong market position of Nordisk Film, especially for moving images. The lesser-known port of Trelleborg had one major purpose: binding together the Swedish and German railway lines with the Sassnitz-Trelleborg train

ferry, and in that capacity it became the main site for lighter and postal goods, including films, between Sweden and continental Europe.

In Rosenberg's correspondence package post by rail are frequent, but since it did not matter for neither the sender nor the recipient which routes the post employed it is rarely an issue. The exception concerns correspondence with customs authorities wanting to receive information on how much of the films consisted of raw film and film prints, since there were different customs charges.[17] Unfortunately, there is little information regarding the relative volumes and the correlations between these three main gateways, though other parts of the puzzle are better known. Distribution negatives, positives, and raw film from the US and the UK must have entered the ports of Gothenburg and Stockholm at least since the early 1910s. With the exception of Gothenburg-based photography firm Hasselblad, Eastman Kodak's main agent in Sweden until the 1920s, the film industry was located in Stockholm, primarily because of Stockholm being the financial centre of Sweden, and the more practical reason of the introduction of film censorship in 1911[18] (the first US films probably came from Germany, France, or Denmark by train.) It is not likely that films as a quantitatively minor category of goods changed the shipping lines or the postal services. But the film trade was big enough in scale, scope, and need for speed and efficiency to be heavily dependent upon the changes in shipping between the wars. To map these changes will most likely give new perspectives on film distribution.

From a Swedish perspective, Finland is an interesting example. Swedish films were frequently screened at Finnish cinemas, and Sweden was a relatively important export market for Finnish films during the silent era. American studios and distributors tended to treat Scandinavia plus Finland as one market, and depending on whether the main distributor was Danish or they had their own agencies in Stockholm (gradually from around 1920) US films to Finland were either shipped from New York to England, for further transportation via Copenhagen or Stockholm, or directly to Helsinki. With the Hollywood agencies in Stockholm, US films followed the same route as films to Sweden either direct to Helsinki or Turku or, if stored in Stockholm, from the distribution agency storage in Stockholm to the port of Stockholm for shipment to Helsinki or Turku. Swedish films exported to Finland went along the same route. The trade between Sweden and Finland was extensive, which means that the number of ships from the port of Stockholm to Helsinki and Turku made it easy to exchange films.

Films to Norway do not seem to have passed through Sweden, other than when the same prints were used. If so, they were sent by train from the agencies in Stockholm to Kristiania/Oslo. Otherwise, the main route before and during the war was through London or Copenhagen. One more route should be mentioned, regarding imported European films that did not pass by Germany, UK, or Denmark after the end of the war. Here, it seems that they followed the main routes for general cargo from Europe, that is from any of the major

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Western or Southern European ports (Genoa, Le Havre, Antwerp, Rotterdam, or Hamburg) to Stockholm, by way of any of the major transporters of films, a market dominated by Transoceanic Forwarding, but also to and from Sweden with Swedish shipping agency Rederia AB Svea.[19] Finally, we should not underestimate the use of railway cargo from southern and western Europe through Germany, by way of the Sassnitz-Trelleborg railway steamships.

Besides inspection copies, text lists, and other written information before distribution decisions were made, advertising material, posters, and photographs were sent to the distributors before a film was screened. Another category of material in the Rosenberg collection concerns posters and photographs, almost always sent as parcel post, thus following the regular postal service routes by train through Trelleborg and Copenhagen, or by boat through Gothenburg or Stockholm. Similarly, when Rosenberg organised the sending of material between different Nordic countries, the most direct way was by post (boat) between Copenhagen and Oslo or Copenhagen and Helsinki.[20]

Cargo on passenger steamers

The main shift in the transatlantic logistics of film was the wartime import difficulties to Britain which resulted in Britain (particularly London) losing its position as the main distribution hub for American companies in Europe, which forced US companies to start their own agencies around Europe.[21] For Sweden two other developments made the loss of London as a distribution hub less problematic: the development of local film laboratories for production of theatrical prints with Swedish intertitles, and the establishment of the Swedish America Line direct steamship route between New York and Gothenburg. Businesswise it strengthened the position of the port of Gothenburg, since Hollywood films dominated Swedish cinemas.[22] It was consequently a large part of all films screened in Sweden that entered the country via this line. Passenger steamships had been used for film cargo before, but this now became the main route into Sweden from the US.



Fig. 2: Drottningholm, Swedish America Line. Sjöhistoriska Museet.

Passenger ships were also faster and even more regular than general cargo ships. Film exhibition in Sweden may have become more up to date with actualities and newsreels, and it most likely speeded up the release dates of popular titles. It is difficult to tell, but further research into forwarding and transport documents may provide data on average shipping time. So the entry of American films still took place at the port of Gothenburg but was now synchronised with the transportation of passengers, including film personalities and stars. Though unknown to the public, the port in Gothenburg became the number one hub for American film culture after the First World War. Symbolically the use of Sweden America Line as cargo vehicle for films between the US and Sweden continued or rather reinforced the port of Gothenburg's importance from the decades of emigration from Sweden to North America – this time, with the main flows in the opposite direction, from North America to Sweden. The cinematic flows from sea to land at the port, the beginning of the harbour network, went along three parallel tracks: from the ship to the Central station (people), from the ship to Gothenburg's main post office, next to the station (mail), and from the ship to the train cargo facilities within the port area. Passenger, general cargo, and postal train transport then followed the same railway tracks to Stockholm. Export of films to North America followed the same route. To use Ma's distinction between transportation networks as substance or form, the port of Gothenburg was the visible substance of the narratives of US-Swedish relations but invisible form as a relay hub of the distribution networks.

Shipping or postal service: Combining hinterland and foreland

Swedish film production and distribution were with some exceptions located in Stockholm, including the theatre chains' headquarters. There were many cinema theatres around the country, so already in the early 1910s distributors had developed a system for transportation, by railway, for domestic distribution. International distribution, both export and import, thus followed four main routes within Sweden: by ship direct to the port of Stockholm, redirected by ship from Gothenburg to Stockholm, by train to and from Gothenburg, and by train to and from Malmö/Trelleborg. The tracks were the same, but railway transport could be either freight cars or postal cars.

Individual films, often films for inspection before a distribution contract, to and from distributors seem to have been more frequently transported by the postal services. From the UK by shipping, but from continental Europe by train, which means that the railway from Stockholm through Lund to Trelleborg became the core of the Swedish hinterland. From the other end of the train-carrying steamship line (Sassnitz in Germany) the transport then went to either Hamburg or Berlin. Hence the impact of what went on in Germany when almost all mail (and light train-based cargo) either ended in or passed by Germany. Financially the transport of mail was relatively stable, but duty was paid in local currencies, which affected the transport costs. The daily train-carrying steamships between the ports of Trelleborg and Sassnitz started in 1897, thus coinciding with the first years of cinema exhibition and production in Sweden. With this link, it became possible to go (or send a package) by train from Stockholm to Berlin in 24 hours (28 hours during winter).[23] In comparison to shipping, that was incredibly fast.



Fig. 3: Trelleborg train ferry in 1909. Järnvägmuseet.

The same train route Stockholm-Lund but with Malmö as destination carried films (and film material) to and from Copenhagen. Films from Sweden to the rather large export market of Denmark thus entered by train to the port of Malmö, were reloaded into small steam-ferrys to the port of Copenhagen, reloaded again and through customs for further transport either to the railway station, or by truck (in the early years by horse carriages) to the storages of Danish film companies. Theoretically, Swedish goods could have been taken from Copenhagen by train to the port of Gjedser in southeastern Denmark, on the train-carrying steamships to Warnemünde in Germany for further transport to Hamburg or Berlin. This was however a longer and slower route, only used when the Trelleborg-Sassnitz route was temporarily closed (e.g. due to rough weather). In the 1920s the postal system had been standardised (particularly in the form of prepaid stamps) for a long time. Costs of postal packages were dependent upon destination, size, weight, and security (fire) regulations, and subject to custom fees (and inspections) – but still a reasonably quick and secure form of delivery, and sometimes less expensive than cargo. Consequently, postal routes in Northern Europe seem to have privileged Berlin and Paris, since it was possible to send packages long distance without manual handling, that is, without the forwarding agencies. Still, Rosenberg and his business partners often preferred the combination of train and shipping, though they then became dependent upon the forwarding agents.

Handlers of the ports: Forwarding agents

What seems to have been an issue of different choices were the use of forwarding agents. A letter to Rosenberg from European & General Express Co., Ltd from March 1919 describes that they 'have forwarded to you on behalf of the London Film Co, 3 copies of the "Manxman" and 1 copy of "Mr Lyndon at Liberty" which arrived from New York'.^[24] They add that they 'have consigned the 29 parcels direct to you instead of through our Agent in Stockholm, knowing that you like to clear the films yourself through Customs at Stockholm'.^[25] The forwarding agents were obviously instrumental when films were forwarded from one port to another, as for the print from New York via London to Stockholm. Rosenberg seems to have been critical towards using forwarding agents, and preferred dealing with customs himself. Some of Rosenberg's business partners in Denmark and Norway employed the forwarding agency Thaning, sometimes to his dismay. In a conversation with Danish film distributor Fotorama from November 1923, he argues that they should just use parcel post when they return film prints to Stockholm, rather than employing Thaning.^[26] The expansion of forwarding agents seems to have been rather rapid after the war. During the war even Fotorama returned films to Rosenberg by (Express) Post.^[27]

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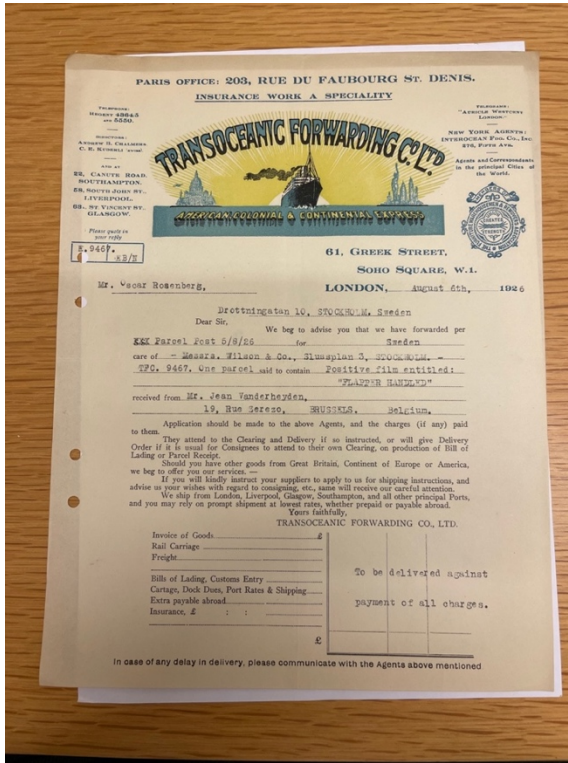


Fig. 4: Transport document, Transoceanic Forwarding, Collection Rosenbergs Filmbyrå, Swedish Film Institute Library.

A frequent topic in Rosenberg's correspondence concerns forwarding agents. Transoceanic Forwarding, which seems to be the major forwarding agent for film, is initially met with some scepticism by Rosenberg, but he seems later to have been using them more frequently.[28] Between Stockholm and Turku or Helsinki is Victor Ek the main agent, often involved in conversations with Rosenberg, and there are many transport documents regarding films and raw film by Victor EK.[29] To avoid the forwarding agents for transport of one or two prints of a film to and from Avery in London, Rosenberg had to choose between regular steamer transport or parcel post. Rosenberg's preferences seem to have changed and varied depending on the need for speed and relation to cost. During the immediate postwar years Rosenberg seems to have preferred 'insured parcel post as told you so many times before'.[30]

Rosenberg also emphasises the importance of carefully planning shipments of raw film stock, particularly the films Avery sent from London to Stockholm (directly or forwarded via Gothenburg). In a letter to Avery in August 1920, Rosenberg complained of additional costs due to the 'carriers' that Avery used:

You should have packed the films in a tin lined case and taken a taxi to the agents of the regular steamers between London and Stockholm and handed the cases over with necessary Bills of Lading and the whole expense to get them over to Stockholm would not have amounted to two pounds and I should have received them within a fortnight after the despatch.[31]

Raw film stock trade, a separate network?

A frequent topic in Rosenberg's correspondence concerns how to compare quality and price of different film stock, but always also adding the cost of transport. The quantity of raw film stock traded seems to have been rather significant, so there are few references to postal packages. Rather, as in a letter from Rosenberg to Avery in May 1920, when Rosenberg asked him to send Kodak negative film stock 'by steamer from London to Gothenburg for transshipment to my address in Stockholm or better still by Steamer direct to Stockholm if there is any regular service between these two ports'.[32]

The raw film issue was distinctively complex during the early 1920s. The manufacturers of raw film in Europe were many, but there were three main suppliers most distributors seem to have preferred: German Agfa, Belgian Gevaerts, and American Eastman Kodak. Logistically, larger quantities of Agfa raw film stock were shipped from Cologne, Gevaerts from Antwerp, and Eastman Kodak from New York, either by way of forwarding agencies or direct agreement with shipping companies. In Rosenberg's correspondence with partners in the Nordic countries, the UK, and Belgium purchasing and shipping raw film are rather frequent. It may have been a special situation after the war, but as in the conversations with Svensk Filmindustri, the major film firm in Sweden, Rosenberg even provided raw film to them. This needs to be investigated further, but the raw film trade seems to have been handled not only by the distributors and film agents, but most likely also by the production companies and even the film laboratories.[33]

Another problem for Rosenberg during the immediate postwar years was the scarcity of film laboratories in Finland, in combination with unclear shipping routes and sometimes lack of relevant information. In Autumn 1919, Rosenberg bought 72,000 feet of positive raw film stock from Avery to be transported from Paris to Stockholm by Transoceanic Forwarding. For Rosenberg there were two uncertainties that potentially could harm his business. First, the cost (and timing) of Transoceanic Forwarding's services was not yet as established and predictable as they would become a few years later. Second, since Avery initially did not tell Rosenberg whether the films were perforated or not, there would be extra cost at the port of Stockholm, if he had to pay duty for the boxes before taking them to a lab in Stockholm, having them perforated, and then shipped from Stockholm to Helsinki (where more duty had to be paid). If the films were perforated, the box could just be reloaded at the port of Stockholm and shipped to Helsinki.[34]

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A common topic in the Oscar Rosenberg collection is consequently the import and (re-)export of raw film. The demand for Agfa raw film in the UK seems to have been significant enough for Rosenberg's main British trading partner, film broker John G. Avery, to ask Rosenberg for help in acquiring Agfa raw film stock, as it was not restricted like German film prints.[35] The demand for Agfa raw film stock before 1924 may also have been motivated by its relative affordability given the inflation in Germany, even if, as Rosenberg remarks, Agfa raw film stock was exported in 'foreign money' though strictly regulated.[36] Likewise, since the US dollar was the strongest currency during the first part of the 1920s, Eastman Kodak raw film stock became more expensive.[37]

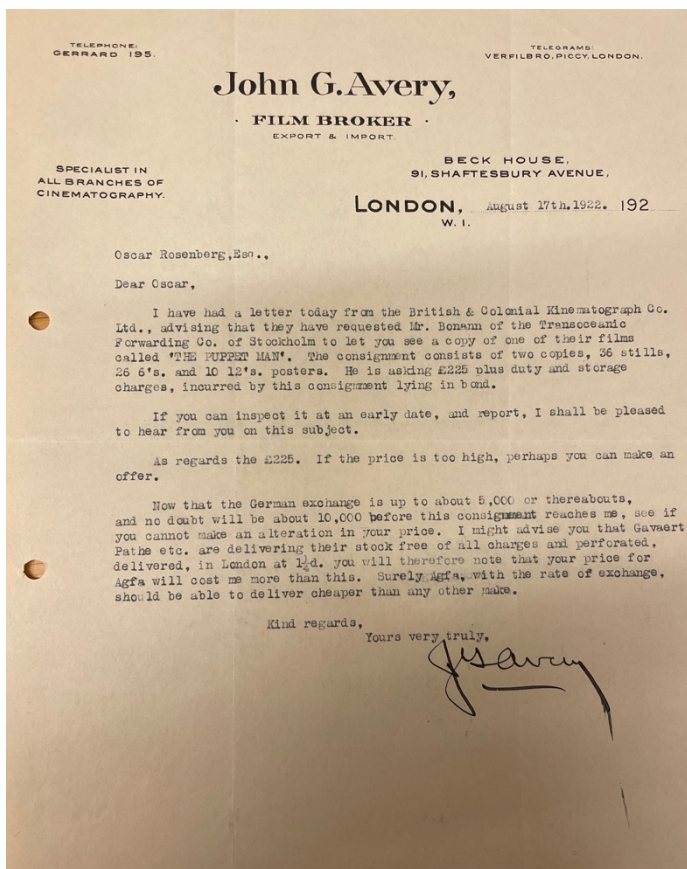


Fig. 5: On forwarding agents, raw film, and currencies. Letter from John G. Avery to Oscar Rosenberg, 17 August 1922, Collection Rosenbergs Filmbyrå, Swedish Film Institute Library.

The correspondence indicates that Avery traded in Eastman Kodak film stock to Rosenberg and Sweden. Later in the 1920s the routes of raw film stock seem to have followed general cargo routes from Antwerp to Stockholm (Gevaerts), from Hamburg or Bremen to Stockholm

(Agfa), and from New York to Gothenburg (Eastman Kodak). The somewhat chaotic film market during the interwar years thus created a market for independent dealers such as Rosenberg and Avery.

Ports and foreland information networks

Films and film-related material seem to not have been significant enough to be separately documented, which makes research difficult. Regular transportation invoices, however, provide some initial information on where to look. Railway cargo fees were relatively tariff-based, thus predictable. The same seems to have been the case for shipment, whether it was Transoceanic, Sweden America Line, Svea, or any other forwarding agent or shipping company. Insurance by the 1920s had also become more predictable for film-related material. A frequent request from both Avery and Rosenberg was that 'carriage and so forth are prepaid', which meant that the recipient only had to pay for duty and customs house clearances. In this manner, economic transactions became more predictable and stable, which consequently reduced the time between order, shipment, and payment.

Political restrictions of film trade represent essential aspects of moving images and ports. These are fundamentally political solutions to political problems. To some degree import regulations may have been aimed at supporting the domestic film industry, but at the very forefront was the perceived threat that US culture and US products posed to European, German, or British cultural domains. In the face of such threats, quotas of course had economic consequences.

A less investigated aspect of this topic is how the financial instability in Europe during the 1920s affected the film industry and film trade. The tremendous fluctuations of the German Papiermark until 1924 and the still not completely stable Reichsmark after the financial reconstruction are well known from the research on Weimar cinema. But the adventures of the Papiermark, and the short-lived Rentenmark (1923-1924), naturally affected everyone trading in or in any other way was dependent on the German currency. From a Swedish perspective, the relatively more stable Swedish Krona made the film trade risky since the Krona had to be converted to not only the volatile Mark, but also the gradually devalued Danish Krone, and the more reliable UK sterling and gradually more expensive US dollar. Before the opening of the Free Ports of Stockholm in 1919 and Gothenburg in 1922, currency issues came into play for everything that passed by the Swedish ports. The value of the Swedish Krona affected the business of Swedish film distributors relative to the changes of currencies. An example of the currency issues is a wartime correspondence between Danish Kinematograf Fabrik and Rosenberg from 1917, where the Danish company complained

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about the employment of a daily exchange rate rather than 'normal' exchange rate, something that differed 20%.[38]

There was a financial equivalent to ports, in authorities deciding on international financial transactions between banks, which of course were inseparable from the mobility of physical goods. Consequently, even financial mobility was a slow business. It is important to consider the combination of time for transport and time for payments in understanding film distribution. Adding to this, the risks involved in the financial transactions, and the handling of heavy physical objects means that film trade (as all international trade) was a risky business. An often-mentioned actor in relation to port transitions were insurance companies. The insurance process meant adding another inspection activity (apart from customs) in the handling of films which delayed the transport and increased the costs, and thus adding yet another financial transaction. Insurance records are a valuable source in researching logistics of film. Costs listed on invoices often consisted of the films themselves, promotional material, transport, customs, packaging, and insurance.

As interface between foreland and hinterland networks, ports thus became a financial interface between cinema-related payments (rights and prints), transport payments (shipping, railway, and sometimes included post), and public costs (duty and other customs costs) – and eventually storage costs, if the films either got stuck in customs, or just had to be temporarily stored before further transport.

Challenges in the hinterland

As Kristin Thompson has shown in detail, around 1916 London declined as the main distribution hub for US studios and distributors due to import restrictions.[39] That does not mean that London ceased to be a place for film trade. On the contrary, the UK was a significant market for films, and many films made in the UK had the potential to reach audiences in Scandinavia and Continental Europe. UK ports, such as Dover and Folkstone, were also used for reshipping, as relays without the films entering into the UK.[40] Independent distributors, like Avery, are proof of the intricacies of hinterland networks before and after actual theatrical release. In a letter to Rosenberg from December 1921, Avery makes a renewed attempt to attract Rosenberg to a film Avery calls 'The Fanatic', a US war-promoting film serial more known as *The Yellow Menace* (directed by Aubrey M. Kennedy for Serial Film Corporation) from 1916. Avery's interest in the film was initiated by its success in Paris, under the title 'Kaffra Kan', though a bit shorter than its original total length of 32 reels, and it screened in Belgium and Switzerland at the same time. The film was stored at Pathé in Paris, so if Rosenberg was interested Avery could make sure the negative could be shipped to Stockholm. Avery also offered a shorter positive print, a 'sample copy'

from Prague. The film, seemingly another print though, had also been screened in Cologne, 'in the Cinema theatres of the Army of Occupation'. Avery offered Rosenberg to send the Prague print to Cologne 'or any other town if so desired'.^[41] For Avery the inland port of Cologne was easy to use since it was one of the hubs used by his forwarding agent Northern Transport.^[42] After describing available markets (primarily Germany) Avery mentions two additional sets of challenges. The first is that given the financial situation in Germany, the film was maybe too expensive. The other concerned 'stray copies', unregulated (re)distribution, in this case to 'Greece and that neighbourhood'.^[43] Rights issues were certainly important for distributors, but also connected to logistics, since any irregular distribution of films implied a transport within or without the regular supply chain. Whether this was a common phenomenon or not remains to be investigated.

The existence of 'stray copies' may indicate that films did travel beyond legal and contract regulations and were perhaps screened outside eventual quotas. Films were however neither economically nor politically of enough importance to be controlled in detail at ports. If duties were paid, and no one noticed, they were given all clear. In the other direction, in the same letter, Avery asks Rosenberg for advice concerning which German films to get hold of when German films were to be permitted for screening in the UK. He writes that he heard that 'Dubarry', 'Dr. Caligari', and 'Anne Boleyn' already were planned for screening at Covent Garden.^[44] Avery wanted to be ahead of his (larger) competitors. He trusted that Rosenberg had excellent knowledge of contemporary German films, good contacts with German distributors, and knew how to deal with the logistics of film.

Again, given the instability of the German currency, any trade route or economic transaction involving Germany became a risky business at least until 1924. Duty and other state regulated costs were of course intricately related to other political decisions such as import restrictions and import or export quotas. A marginal aspect of import restrictions, rarely discussed in research, is where these restrictions were controlled. Still, regulations need to be controlled if someone tries to bypass them. Complete bans of films from certain countries, like German films that were banned in the UK immediately after the war, were perhaps difficult to bypass. Import restrictions and quotas are on the other hand quantitative estimates. I have not seen any evidence of actual breaches of import restrictions but given Rosenberg's and Avery's letters it seems that UK ports did control flows of film-related goods. It was probably for duty reasons, but at least they seem to have distinguished between negative and positive prints, and raw film, and (maybe) reacted if any 'wrong' goods were imported from Germany. From a Swedish perspective the Customs Authority did ask Rosenberg if prints to and from Norway were aimed for screening, that is import or export, or as samples.^[45] It was for statistical reasons, but the fact that they asked with some delay, it seems that a 'forbidden' print may not have been noticed until it was screened.

Consequently, at the ports, at the end of the foreland networks, films were inspected based on financial regulations, and probably to prohibit illegal import and export. Distributors' legal rights to different markets were a 'hinterland' problem.

Scale matters

When Hollywood studios (or rather their distribution subsidiaries) established offices or local representatives (depending on national regulations) in Europe by the end and after the First World War, they knew quite well what to sell to different markets. Decisions to place certain films on certain markets were based on the experience and previous sales figures from the local markets, combined with different modes of block booking arrangements. For sales within Europe, particularly by independent distributors, but also by the major European companies, films were selected on a more individual basis. Another aspect concerns the difference between transporting positive prints and negatives, from which positive theatrical prints with locally produced intertitle segments could be made. The transport of positive prints has often been connected to markets using English language intertitles. There was also an extensive circuit of original language prints that were sent around different markets for distributors to examine and make decisions from.[46] The economic terms differed, however, as customs fees were often lower for positive prints than for negative prints.[47]

As for any export product, the question of scale combined with slow payment systems and complex duty tariffs demanded different actions in dealing with different types of goods but were still easily handled by local transport companies. In a letter from Avery to Rosenberg in May 1923, he details how he wanted Rosenberg to send some 'Scenic subjects':

[T]he best way to handle this matter would be to submit positive prints with short tell tale titles unless you can put in English titles and these prints can then be submitted to prospective buyers. [- -] I did not want the negatives on the first shipment as duty would be 5d. [penny] per feet plus cost of prints, whereas if prints are imported there is only the duty to be paid of 1d per ft. Ship them by parcels post and let me have the original invoice by letter and enclose correct length of each film with each subject as I must have these papers for clearance purposes. Post will be cheaper than by freight but if you will address them to the Northern Transport Co. with the above mentioned particulars instead of to me they will be able to clear them quicker and all I have to do is to pay duty plus their charges which are small. I hope these instructions are quite clear.[48]

The choice between sending negatives and then printing positive copies locally or sending positives where only the titles must be printed locally thus depended upon a combination of transport costs, duty fees, storage costs, raw film costs, and laboratory costs. Consequently, it was not always cheaper to ship negatives. Adding to the list of costs connected to negatives were also the cost of returning the negatives, adding even more storage and transport costs

and duty fees. Kristin Thompson gives some examples of break-even points both for the initial 1915 import tariffs and the subsequent reduction of tariffs for negatives and raw film stock, arguing that with re-export to colonies and to open countries (like Sweden), shipping negatives via Britain was an economically feasible option[49] – at least for feature films aiming at larger audiences, from the US, I would add. The Avery-Rosenberg conversations seem to complicate the matter. The example above concerned short nonfiction films, with a less commercial potential for each title, shipped between Britain, Scandinavia, and Continental Europe. Seemingly, the combination of increased laboratory capacities in Europe and the consequences of British import tariffs on different kinds of film material bring the ports into focus in my research.

By 1919, long feature films had become the standard main attractions of most cinema programs, but that does not entail that features were the only film product transported at the time. Transportation of additional films programmed before and after the feature film were almost as frequent, measured in length and weight, but not as US-dominated as the feature films. The flows of negative and positive film prints across the Atlantic and between Britain and Continental Europe are even more complex and differentiated than the US-Europe feature film distribution, and even less investigated. Scale mattered in shipping of raw film stock, but also in shipment of film prints from the US. In a letter to New York-based film agent J. Frank Brockliss, Inc, Rosenberg complains of the extra costs due to a shipment having been sent by different ships. He remarks that ‘the shipping expenses being very much the same for 40 reels as for 5 or 10’.[50]

Conclusion: Understanding ports in film history

This article indicates the multitude of aspects connected to the logistics of film distribution through ports. More often than we think, the traces of films and film-related material may have been preserved, but hidden in the masses of paper trails of customs authorities and shipping agencies. Nevertheless, it may be worth searching for them, for at least two reasons. First, the complex web of relations involved in the international shipping of film both constrained and enabled film distribution on many levels. Second, it emphasises that film business entailed so much more than just the individual feature films. A third aspect, not discussed here, is how transport technologies as well as geopolitical and economic circumstances constrained and enabled film personnel’s international travel, and thus affected both the business and art of moving images (Rosenberg was frequently travelling around Europe).

There are many methodological challenges of film logistics research; it is a combination of gaps and excess. Film trade documentation was not significant enough to archive, which was

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the case for many other parts of the 'afterlife' of the film business, as Jan Olsson labels it.[51] The sources may have been lost, due to neglect, accidents, and just bad luck. The traces that most often have survived, in the customs documents, in the port authority notations on ships coming and leaving, and in the financial exchange documents, are hidden in the mass of data. Finding the film trade, without having the collections digitised, is a time-consuming task.

One reason to research films via import documents related to general cargo, rather than through the postal service at the port of Stockholm, is most likely a question of costs of shipping, the uses of forwarding agencies, and a not yet strong demand from distributors and cinema owners for more immediate release dates of films. On the other hand, when theatrical prints were more often made in Swedish (that is Stockholm-based) laboratories, individual multi-reel negatives were lightweight enough and could be sent by train (post), when safety regulations permitted that. But, even if many European films entered Sweden through the port of Trelleborg, the port of Stockholm was still a major hub for films – and most importantly, there are no traces of them in Trelleborg. Remaining documents can only be found in the postal service archives. Even the regional film trade around the Baltic Sea is a methodological challenge. General cargo by ships had been the key mode of transportation from Stockholm to Finland, Russia/Soviet Union, the Baltic States, and Poland. The limited trade with these markets (except for Finland) is potentially an argument for looking for postal packages. On the other hand, with evidence from the Rosenberg collection, these markets (again, except for Finland) were not very profitable for Swedish film companies, so most films seem to have been sent via the general cargo shipping companies working on the Baltic Sea. Here, individual cargo shippers could be an inexpensive and efficient alternative to both postal services and the forwarding agencies.

What we can see in the Rosenberg collection is probably the beginning of a consolidation of forwarding agencies. The more complex the film trade became, it became too inefficient for distributors and film agents to do the work of handling the film packages and all the paperwork at the ports themselves. The staff of Transoceanic, Alltrans, Northern transport, Thaning and the other forwarding agencies would soon take care of the films through the network of ports, and within a few decades, the airports. But without agents such as Oscar Rosenberg, it would be more difficult to unveil the processes of film logistics.

I will argue that ports contributed to global film distribution by their own dynamics. Film trade had to adapt to broader changes in ports, shipping, and global trade. If film trade contributed to the dynamics of ports, it was as form, not substance. There is still much research needed to understand the importance of film logistics in general, and the ports in particular. Perhaps we should also start contemplating a poetics of film logistics?

Author

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Notes

- [1] In the following I will use the abbreviation SFI for the Swedish Film Institute (and its library) and RF (Rosenbergs Filmbyrå) for the Rosenberg collection. Letters from Rosenberg are copies that may be misspelled and therefore may differ from the original sent letter. Letters to Rosenberg are the original letters. Rosenberg had been working in London before the First World War, as a sales agent for Swedish wood and forest industries and later for the Swedish Biograph Company Svenska Bio. He seems to have preferred English in conversation even with German, French, Dutch, or Italian-speaking business partners, which at the time was rather unusual since German was the most common second language in Sweden at the time.
- [2] Hockenberry et.al. 2021, p. 1.
- [3] Ibid., p. 2.
- [4] Miller 2012, p. 25.
- [5] Palmer 1999.
- [6] Vasey 1997; Higson & Maltby 1999; Trumpbour 2002; Canjels 2011; Frykholm 2015.
- [7] Thompson 1985.
- [8] Abel 2021; Johnson 2021.
- [9] Sedgwick & Pokorny 2005.
- [10] Bakker 2008, p. 25.
- [11] Brasó Broggi & Martínez-Robles 2019.
- [12] Johnson 2009.
- [13] For example Kirby 1997.
- [14] Harrison 2014, pp. 35-36.
- [15] Ma 2021, p. 117.
- [16] This reading will be the topic of future studies.
- [17] Letter from Swedish Customs Authority's statistical unit [Kung. Generaltullstyrelsens Statistiska Avdelning] to Rosenberg, 8 January 1923, RF Vol. 10, SFI.
- [18] Olsson 2022, p. 37.
- [19] The correspondence also mentions less known German ports like Cologne and Lübeck.
- [20] Letter from Fotorama's office in Copenhagen to Rosenberg, 21 August 1918. RF Vol. 10, SFI.

- [21] Thompson 1985.
- [22] Frykholm 2022.
- [23] Kungliga Järnvägsstyrelsen 1909.
- [24] Letter from European & General Express Co., Ltd to Rosenberg, 17 March 1919. RF Vol. 10, SFI.
- [25] Ibid.
- [26] Letter from Rosenberg to A/S Fotorama, 1 November 1923. RF Vol. 9, SFI.
- [27] Letter from A/S Fotorama, Copenhagen, 28 December 1917. RF Vol. 10, SFI.
- [28] Letter from Transoceanic Forwarding to Rosenberg, 2 November 1923. RF Vol. 12, SFI.
- [29] Letter from Victor Ek to Rosenberg, 8 March 1923. RF Vol. 10, SFI.
- [30] Letter from Rosenberg to Avery, 30 March 1920. RF Vol. 12, SFI.
- [31] Letter from Rosenberg to Avery 31 August 1920. RF Vol. 12, SFI.
- [32] Letter from Rosenberg to Avery, 10 May 1920. RF Vol. 12, SFI.
- [33] Letter from AB Svensk Filmindustri to Rosenberg, 22 January 1923. RF Vol. 1, SFI.
- [34] Letter from Rosenberg to Avery 13 October 1919. RF Vol. 12, SFI.
- [35] Letter from Avery to Rosenberg, 15 August 1922. RF Vol. 1, SFI.
- [36] Letter from Rosenberg to Avery, 23 August 1922. RF Vol. 1, SFI.
- [37] Letter from Avery to Rosenberg, 19 December 1921. RF Vol. 1, SFI.
- [38] Letter from Dansk Kinematograf Fabrik to Rosenberg, 25 August 1917. RF Vol. 10, SFI.
- [39] Thompson 1985.
- [40] Letter from Avery to Rosenberg, 13 October 1922. RF Vol 1, SFI.
- [41] Letter from Avery to Rosenberg, 15 December 1921. RF Vol. 1, SFI.
- [42] Letter from Avery to Rosenberg, 13 October 1922. RF Vol 1, SFI.
- [43] Letter from Avery to Rosenberg, 15 December 1921. RF Vol. 1, SFI.
- [44] Ibid.
- [45] Letter from Swedish Customs Authority' s statistical unit [Kung. Generalullstyrelsens Statistiska Avdelning] to Rosenberg, 12 January 1923. RF Vol. 10, SFI.
- [46] A similar function as modern-day film festival market activities, where distribution decisions are made.
- [47] Letter from Avery to Rosenberg, 4 May 1923. RF Vol. 1, SFI.
- [48] Ibid.
- [49] Thompson 1985, p. 66.
- [50] Letter from Rosenberg to J. Frank Brockliss, Inc., 6 April 1920. RF Vol. 12, SFI.
- [51] Olsson 2022.