Promoting the Image of Gender Equality in Swedish Film as the 2020 Deadline Expires
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In current debates about gender and representation in the film industry, Sweden is held up as a model country. A narrative about Sweden as "the best country in the world when it comes to gender equality in film" is broadly reproduced.1 The documentary *This Changes Everything* (dir. Tom Donahue, US, 2018), produced by Geena Davis, a vocal proponent in the debate, features no fewer than three Swedes among the celebrity cast: Anna Serner, Ellen Telje, and Baker Karim. Since the Swedish Film Institute launched a program for gender equality in 2013, redesigned in 2016 as the action plan "50/50 by 2020," the institute's CEO Serner has held widely publicized seminars in Cannes and elsewhere. The Swedish model has inspired policy-making within the BFI and Eurimages, and major festivals – including Berlin and Venice – continue to sign on to the plan.2 Telje made headlines when she launched the "A-rating" in Swedish independent cinemas in 2013, a marketing strategy specifically highlighting films that pass the Bechdel test.3 Like Serner, Telje has been invited by women's organizations and film festivals all over the world and was listed among the one hundred most influential women by the BBC in 2018.4 Karim is a filmmaker who in his former role as public film commissioner initiated "Fusion," a diversity project promoting women filmmakers of color. A fourth internationally known Swedish player is Helene Granqvist, current president of Women in Film and Television International (WIFTI) and recognized in *Variety*'s International Women's Impact Report 2019.5

The buzz around these individuals shows that in the transnational imagination about a more equal film industry, Sweden holds particular promise. In this article, I show that the image of Sweden as an egalitarian haven obscures remaining injustices, norms, and, not least, the equality program's lack of intersectional analysis. I also analyze the program's failure to reach its goal of dividing production support evenly between men and women by 2020. Unraveling the myth of gender equality in the Swedish film industry, this essay shows how this myth operates in the context of Swedish foreign policy and self-promotion in the neoliberal present.

The Swedish success story builds largely on the all-time high of 65 percent female directors granted feature-length fiction funding from the commissioners in 2016.6 However, as the Film Institute's own announcements disclose, statistics continue to vary greatly. Women received only 23 percent of grants in 2017, the lowest rate in over ten years, and 33 percent in 2018.7 Moreover, in 2016 no women-directed films received funding allocated for films with strong box office potential, referred to as "market funding," and only one female director received funding in the five highest tiers of support. As a report from the institute concludes, the resources distributed between men and women remain strikingly uneven.8

Serner's efforts to address this disparity have provoked an outcry in the Swedish film industry. Given the largest imbalances concern market funding – funding that covers up to 30 percent of the production costs for features with budgets exceeding 20 million SEK (approximately 2 million EUR) – Serner, at a press conference in Cannes in 2018, provocatively threatened to set aside that entire portion of the budget for women in 2020.9 Serner's controversial status in the national context is rarely reported internationally. Rather than generally accepted, the gender equality program has resulted in drastic warnings against

"totalitarian methods" and ideological control of cultural production and artistic freedom.10 Certainly, as others have argued, the Film Institute's production support was never a neutral procedure.11 It was no less biased when mostly men received it, even if they presumably got it under the banner of quality rather than equality. To a large degree, the alarmist tone invokes white male rage against those perceived to be given permission to cut in line at their expense.

Yet the public spotlight on CEO Serner as the main agent responsible for the perceived politically correct hegemony is itself part of the problem. The individualizing focus – recurring in international coverage of Serner as "the woman who changed a film industry" – overlooks the fact that Serner is not personally responsible for the equality agenda.12 These goals were set up by the Swedish government in 2000 and were included in Swedish film policy in 2006.13 Furthermore, far ahead of these official goals, self-organized women filmmakers in Sweden have advocated for better opportunities since the 1970s.14 The history of the feminist film movement in Sweden is largely neglected in both national and transnational accounts. Nevertheless, the present popularity of the notion of gender equality in Swedish film relies on the legacy of second-wave feminism. Sweden's long-running reputation as one of the world's most progressive countries was consolidated with the country's so-called women-friendly social democratic welfare politics of the 1970s, including shared parental leave and abortion rights.15

Today, what was once the Swedish welfare system has transformed into the neoliberal politics of privatization and market logics. Increasing socioeconomic inequality characterizes the current situation. Yet the notion of gender equality has remained a fundamental piece of the imagined Swedish community. "To be a Swede is to be gender equal," as the authors of the recent book *Challenging the Myth of Gender Equality in Sweden* write.16 The notion of gender equality, they argue, has turned into a mantra that reproduces nationalism, racism, and heterosexual and cisgender norms.

This is the political context in which the notion of gender equality in Swedish film must be understood. As Maria Jansson points out, striving toward gender equality at the same time that commercial considerations increasingly inform film policy is paradoxical.17 Market funding is one example of this. By current logics, both cultural production and gender equality should be profitable. One common argument is that since the equality program was launched, Swedish film has become more internationally successful with more films competing at A-list festivals.18 In this argument, gender equality is, contrary to what the critics fear, not damaging but improving the quality of Swedish film. This is crucial given the fundamental role of the notion of "quality film" as a guiding principle for support since the 1960s.19 The present film policy declares that "gender equality and diversity in all aspects of the production contribute to strengthening the quality of Swedish film."20

Implementing "Swedish values" such as democracy, freedom of speech, and equality is described as crucial to the promotion of Swedish film internationally.21 In a post on her official blog, Serner writes: "No doubt, our work towards equality contributes to a strong trademark. At festivals . . . audiences all have one image of Sweden . . . Positive!"22 Advertising the notion of gender equality in Sweden has a long history but has gained renewed currency since 2014, when Sweden became "the first country in the world" to launch a feminist foreign policy, cementing gender equality as a crucial tool for advancing Swedish economic interests: "Swedish trade and promotion policy aims to promote Swedish economic interests and Sweden's image abroad, which in turn facilitates exports and imports and enables a mutual exchange of trade with other countries. . . . One aspect of foreign policy

involves promoting Swedish values and spreading the image of Sweden around the world. Gender equality is an important part of this image."23 The praise that both Margot Wallström, the minister who launched this policy, and Serner receive, I suggest, indicates that the success of this image of Sweden might actually depend more on these public figures than on any film or policy document in itself.24 The affirmative and exceptionalist narratives spun around their mediatized personas cast these Swedish feminists as heroines at the forefront of global democratic progress. Such individualizing, hence decontextualizing, media logic, I argue, makes little room for addressing remaining, as well as inherent, problems in gender equality politics.

As Lena Martinsson and colleagues point out, "The most common way to define gender equality in Sweden is to do it quantitatively."25 Accordingly, statistics are the Film Institute's primary tool for addressing gender equality, examining how funds are distributed between women and men with the aim of achieving equality in numbers. Jansson warns that aiming solely for equal representation reduces the presence of women filmmakers to "proof of gender equality," whereby they become "tokens of equality rather than agents for liberation."26 The Film Institute's recent attempts to increase the number of women filmmakers granted market funding evokes this problem and has prompted acclaimed auteur Lisa Langseth, director of *Euphoria* (UK/Sweden/Germany, 2017), to denounce the expectation that women adjust to commercial industry standards instead of exploring their own artistic visions.27

Moreover, as many have argued, the presumption that gender equality is quantifiable based on a binary understanding of two essential sexes balancing each other is hetero-and cisgender normative. In a bizarre gesture acknowledging the model's shortcomings, the Film Institute adds the following caveat to some of their supports: "Over time, support should be divided 50/50 between the genders. Recipients not identifying with a gender should not be included in this calculation."28 A seemingly more productive approach is seen in the WIFTI campaign "10% for 50/50," which was launched in collaboration with a Swedish postproduction company in early 2019.29 Companies joining the campaign commit to offering a 10 percent discount on their services to productions that fulfill gender equality according to specific criteria. Despite the heteronormative connotations of the campaign's heart motif, shaped by two individuals' curved hands joined together as two halves completing each other, this logic is challenged by the visible rainbow and trans flag bracelets worn by one of these hands, and the criteria consider not only gender but also whether members of the production identify as people of color and LGBTQIA+.

Data about filmmakers' race and sexual identity, however, cannot be legally collected by the Swedish Film Institute and hence eludes the statistical analysis on which the equality program relies so heavily. Although, as quoted above, diversity is pronounced as a film policy goal in conjunction with gender equality, there is a striking lack of measures to achieve it. The concept is often vaguely defined as implying any kind of plurality of stories and expressions, or, as Mara Lee points out, just "a perspective" that funding should be based on.30 A perspective does not entail obligations but functions as mere "institutional polishing," Lee argues, using the words of Sara Ahmed.31

Lee, a writer and novelist, was one of the participants in Fusion, launched in 2014 by then public film commissioner Baker Karim. Aiming to stimulate racial diversity both in front of and behind the camera, the program exclusively invited women with experiences of racialization in Sweden. Eight creatives were offered financial, technological, and networking resources in order to develop a film project over the course of one year. Accounting for her

uneven experiences with the program, Lee problematizes the institutional expectations for the participants to perform the intended diversity work and at the same time take emotional care of the exclusively white consultants who came to educate them.

In another rare attempt to address diversity, a report examines the representation of the eight groups protected against discrimination by Swedish law in films supported by the Film Institute in 2014.32 Only 7 percent of the characters in Swedish films had an immigrant background and 1 percent were "bi-or homosexual" – numbers that come as no surprise to those familiar with Swedish film culture. Since 2018, the Film Institute has been commissioned by the government to increase access to films in the five official minority languages in Sweden.33 These are the only significant diversity measures taken since the notion was included in the film policy in 2013.

This article aims to contextualize the Swedish case, as influential curators, jury chairs, and festival directors around the globe have signed on to the 50/50 by 2020 campaign with no evidence of the goal being within reach. As much as the current mobilization for change is worth applauding, it is crucial to critically examine actual measures and push for redistributive results beyond symbolic commitment, individual recognition, and positive publicity.

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