



Book Review

Annika Wickman

Filmen i försvarets tjänst:

*Undervisningsfilm i svensk militär
utbildning 1920–1939*

[Film in the Defence Forces' service:
Educational film within Swedish
military training, 1920–1939]

Stockholm University (PhD diss.)
2018, 248 pp.

In the 1910s and 1920s, film was a new, cutting-edge media technology. It was not only immensely popular with the crowds that filled the palace-like cinemas of the period. Film also attracted the attention of all kinds of dreamers and visionaries—including teachers and educationalists. In Sweden, not least some military officers were enthused by the potential of using film as part of military training.

In a ground-breaking study, media historian Annika Wickman demonstrates how these officers saw film as a modern, rational and efficient teaching media that could save both time and material resources, as for example large-scale military manoeuvres could be caught on film and thus re-used for demonstration in military classrooms all over the country. Moreover, enthusiastic officers believed that the power of educational films went far beyond such practical demonstrations. Film could be used to narrow the educational gap between the rural and urban youth, educate young men about their common fatherland, and improve national integration and patriotic motivation among the conscripts.

Already in the 1910s, makeshift cin-

emas were in operation in Swedish military garrisons. They screened both fiction and non-fiction films, primarily in order to entertain the soldiers and fight boredom during off-duty hours. In Germany, however, film was purposefully used as part of military training as early as 1912. The First World War forcefully brought film into military settings all over the Western world, mainly as a way of entertaining the troops and maintaining morale during the nerve-racking trench warfare. Yet the production of military training films also picked up speed during the war in forerunner military powers such as Great Britain, France and the USA.

The first proposals to use film as a regular part of Swedish military training were made during the First World War. Developments picked up speed in 1920, as a group of Swedish officers interested in film founded an association for the production and distribution of military training films. This new association, *Armé- och Marinfilm* (Army and Navy Film, AMF), would over the years see most Swedish military units joining its ranks and using the association's extensive film rental services.

The activities of AMF and the films it produced are the object of Annika Wickman's 2018 dissertation in film studies, *Film in the Defence Forces' service: Educational film within Swedish military training 1920–1939*. Through a broad empirical survey of visual as well as printed and archival sources, Wickman traces the discussions and activities among film-interested Swedish officers, as well as the uses of educational films within Swedish military training

through the period between the First and Second World War.

Over time, AMF acquired a vast library of more than 7,500 films. The association was deeply involved both in the production and international exchange of military training films. The AMF made new films tailored to the needs of Swedish military units, but also imported films from, for example, Germany and France, and exported Swedish military film to other countries. The AMF productions of military training films were commissioned and financed by the national military authorities, but otherwise the association was organised as a private-sector production company.

Wickman positions her study as part of the media history of the armed forces, as well as the vibrant research on “useful cinema” or “films that work” within the discipline of film studies. This includes research on how film has been used by organisations for various internal purposes such as staff training or civic education. Wickman does not, however, position her work as part of the history of education, although this could have been another fruitful contextualisation. Neither does she therefore discuss the military educational films as part of a wider context of how film was used for educational purposes in Sweden in the period. Only in the concluding chapter is it mentioned that the educational films produced by *Svensk Filmindustri* (Swedish Film Industry, the major Swedish corporation for production and distribution of film since the 1920s) were yearly seen by four million viewers around 1930. This phenomenon, it seems, is still waiting for closer exploration by historians of education.

Wickman’s analytical interest is rather in the organisational and technical conditions of military film production. The four main chapters of the disserta-

tion focus on the actors around AMF and their stated objectives, the production process of its military educational films, the practices of showing and viewing film in the military classroom, as well as the visual semantics of a large selection of AMF films.

The most fascinating chapter, from the point of view of educational history, is perhaps Wickman’s masterly reconstruction and analysis of the screening practices used in the military classroom. Mainly on the basis of texts printed in AMF’s own magazine, she is able to reconstruct how military classrooms were adapted for screening, the challenges and restrictions posed by projector technology, and the interaction between the teaching officer and the moving pictures. The normal practice in the 1920s was evidently that the teacher would pause the film at short intervals, in order to explain the frozen image on the screen. Films were thus rather educational aids to lecturing than an independent teaching media. In the 1930s, however, a shift took place towards screening whole films without interruptions and the teacher commenting only after the film. As Wickman concludes, the agency of the military teacher was increasingly restricted as he had to adapt his teaching to the film, rather than the other way around. At the same time, increasing efforts to standardise military teaching through centralised planning worked in the same direction.

Wickman’s treatment of the contents of the military films is, however, somewhat bewildering to this reader. She has viewed and analysed 80 films out of the 634 films from the interwar period in the AMF archive, focusing on those most relevant for a study of military training films. Yet she pays little attention to the subject matters and educational purposes of the films. She

does not seem interested in what topics were typically taught by means of film or what skills, knowledges or attitudes the films were intended to teach to the viewers. Instead, her chapter on the contents of the military educational films focuses on the visual elements in the films, such as the graphic design of the text plates, the use of diagrams and graphics, the visual representation and cropping of bodies and faces, or how the pictured soldiers related to the camera.

An interesting detail mentioned in the book is that the chief of the General Staff, Bo Boustedt, disapproved of plans to make propaganda films intended to boost patriotic motivation among the conscripts. In a letter to the AMF, written in 1931, Boustedt claimed that due to their individualistic national character, Swedish conscripts were suspicious of any manipulative efforts from the authorities. Only films that had no obvious intention of guiding the viewers' thinking in a certain direction could have a genuine influence on Swedish audiences, he argued. If this was a wide-spread attitude among the Swedish military leadership, it might explain why the films produced by AMF seem to have been either documentary films about festive military events and major manoeuvre exercises, or very technical training films instructing the viewers in the execution of different military activities.

Another bewildering element in this dissertation is its handling of theory. As the author frankly declares, the initial empirical survey of the sources was made without any particular theoretical framework. Neither does the structure of the book or the bulk of the analysis seem to have been guided by any explicated theoretical model. Which works just fine: Wickman has done an impressively broad and thorough empirical

groundwork in order to tell the important and hitherto untold story of AMF and the educational use of film in the armed forces.

Yet as an apparent afterthought, or a bow to the formal requirements of doctoral dissertations, a theoretical discussion has been suffixed to each main chapter. These theoretical sections make use of Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's concept of assemblage (Fr. *agencement*), meant to guide our understanding of "situations as fields of tension with different active forces." The concept supposedly draws attention to how the activities surrounding military training films connected with, or avoided, assemblages such as military bureaucracy, military training practices, state government or the commercial film business. Wickman further deploys a classification of assemblages, developed by Thomas Nail, as either *nomadic* (non-hierarchical, innovative, autonomous and expansive activities), *territorial* (creating order through sorting, separation and distribution), *state-related* (centralising, hierarchical, standardising) or *capitalist*.

The analytical potential and fruitfulness of this framework in this particular context remains unclear. As applied in this study, it seems to add little to a common-sense historical understanding of society as consisting of interacting and overlapping institutional sectors. In places, an overly rigid application of the theoretical concepts even seems to distort Wickman's valuable empirical findings. For example, one theoretical section claims that it was in the nature of the state assemblage to restrict and regulate activities around the military film. Yet actually, as Wickman interestingly shows and discusses in her highly commendable empirical analysis, the Swedish state not only *enabled* these ac-

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tivities by funding them but also actively chose to place them outside the state apparatus by delegating production and distribution to a civic-private association.

In the final analysis, Wickman concludes that it is difficult to assess to what extent film was actually used in military education in the period. Moreover, there are probably no existing sources that would allow an analysis of how the films were received by the conscripts or what educational impact they might have had. In practice, the production and use of film for purposes of military education in many contexts proved to be rather expensive and laborious. As so often has happened as new technology has been introduced in educational contexts, the most enthusiastic visionaries were disappointed. The practical implementation of their high-flying ideas proved impracticable and traditional teaching methods surprisingly tenacious.

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