

“I’m not one of your sailors!”: Nils Asther’s Queer Film Persona, From *The Wings* (1916) to *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1932)

Tommy Gustafsson



Texten ingår i:
Andrés Brink Pinto,
Mikael Mery Karlsson
och Irina Schmitt (red.)

Kritiska blickar från marginalen.
Reflektioner i spåren av Jens Rydström

Sid. 89–110

<https://doi.org/10.37852/oblu.155.c211>

Copyright The editors and the authors, 2022.

All texts from this volume are licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

All images are all rights reserved, and you must request permission from the copyright owner to use this material.

ISBN 978-91-8039-293-8 (print)
ISBN 978-91-8039-294-5 (electronic)

Boken ges ut med stöd av:
Genusvetenskapliga institutionen, Lunds universitet
Stiftelsen Torsten Amundsons fond, Kungliga Vetenskapsakademien

Tommy Gustafsson

“I’m not one of your sailors!”: Nils Asther’s Queer Film Persona, From *The Wings* (1916) to *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1932)

Nils Asther (1897–1981) was born in Denmark and adopted at an early age by a wealthy Swedish family in Malmö, where he grew up. After a troubled childhood he moved to Stockholm in 1915, where he met and befriended film director Mauritz Stiller, who gave him his first role in what was to become a silent film queer classic, *Vingarne* (*The Wings*, 1916). He then continued in the film business until 1963, appearing in no less than 81 film and television productions in Sweden, Denmark, Germany, UK, and in Hollywood, where he “made it” and became a film star during the late silent era and the early sound era circa 1927 to 1933.

Asther was what we today would define as bisexual or queer, although sexual attraction, behavior, and identity may not always be congruent, and in the case of Asther, he never explicitly defined himself as either hetero-, homo- or bisexual. Nonetheless, he wrote at length of numerous sexual encounters with both men and women in his autobiography.¹ He also

consorted with a part of the gay community in Sweden that in turn was part of the literary establishment, and in this environment, the question of “queerness” was largely a none-issue during the 1910s and 1920s.² Likewise, in Hollywood, Asther could be fairly open with his sexuality. However, while a certain amount of queerness was reluctantly tolerated in Hollywood at the time, it was not encouraged, not least in public where it would have clashed with the film studios’ attempt to market him as a romantic lead of “the type that the girls will run after”.³

This sexual openness belonged to the pre-code era when Hollywood films depicted or implied sexual innuendo, romantic interracial relationships, illicit drug use, promiscuity, infidelity, violence, and even homosexuality – simultaneously as Hollywood actors, directors, and producers frequently were reported to be involved in the same clandestine activities.⁴ This short-lived openness came to a full stop when The Motion Picture Production Code – known as *Hays Code* – was implemented in 1934.⁵ Hays Code was a set of industry guidelines for the self-censorship of content that was applied to all films released by major film studios in the US from 1934 to 1968. Besides making the content “family friendly”, one particular consequence of this conservative turn was that many openly gay actors were ostracized by the industry.⁶

Consequently, the interwar years presented a precarious two-way situation for the film business, in part mirrored by the pre-code era of Hollywood, where insinuating content of the films were linked to, foremost, the actors and where hidden realities and open fictionalizations interacted to create modern and somewhat sensational histories of society. In this context, Asther constitutes an interesting object of study, both as a person but above all as a *film persona* based on themes such as sexual orientation, masculinity, and contemporary popularity. Film persona is here based on Carl Jung’s term where persona is the social face the individual presented to the world, as “a kind of mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and on the other to conceal the true nature of the individual”.⁷ Furthermore, the strength of the biographical outlook lies “in the fact that it enables an in-depth understanding of the past and acts as a corrective to too far-reaching generalizations”.⁸

The aim of this article is to study the actor and the film persona of Asther, using this two-way correlation as an analytical prism in order to examine themes such as sexual orientation, masculinity, contemporary popularity, and how these in turn were connected to race during the interwar years. I will use films, reviews, and marketing material for the official image while at the same time reading this against the more personal with the use of contemporary interviews and Asther's autobiography.

The Formation of a Film Persona

In a historical account of lesbian and homosexual films, the Swedish silent film *The Wings* is often hailed as the first film in the world to include a homosexual theme.⁹ However, *The Wings* does not show homosexuality openly. Instead, the film presents a subtle picture: secret codes, dual motifs and allusions. It relates how the sculptor Claude Zoret got the idea for his sculpture "The Wings" in connection with meeting the young and beautiful painter Mikael. Zoret adopts Mikael. A few years later, the beautiful Princess Lucia de Zamikow enters their lives. A triangle love drama is enacted in which Mikael begins an affair with the princess, despite Zoret's objections, and Zoret falls seriously ill and dies.

Homosexuality researcher Fredrik Silverstolpe has identified many of *The Wing's* codes, which today can be regarded as part of cultural history. He points out the presence of bronze statuettes in Zoret's home as a typical sign of wealthy homosexuals of the period. In addition, he claims that Zoret was thoroughly homosexual, as he was unable to render the tempting erotic glow in Lucia's eyes when painting her. Mikael, on the other hand, was able capture this glow.¹⁰ Mikael could thus be interpreted as bisexual. On the other hand, film scholar Richard Dyer attaches importance to the fact that many of the people involved in the film production were themselves homosexual. Dyer also claims that the benefactor-recipient relationship between Zoret and Mikael was a highly idealized form of homosexuality at the time. Using innuendoes, the homosexual director Stiller was thus able to throw up a smoke screen,

relating one story to the general audience, while the initiated interpreted the film quite differently.¹¹ This interpretation is supported by the fact that *The Wings* is surrounded by a frame story, in which the actors and the director play themselves, first while the film is being planned, and later showing their reactions in the cinema after the premiere.

The trick worked and not a single reviewer touched upon the homoerotic theme, although many complained about the frame story as “unnecessary” and “tasteless”¹² since it broke the illusion.¹³ In hindsight, the frame story is more reviling than the main story. This is particularly evident in the prologue when 19 years old Asther, in his film debut, is looking for work and reads the following advertisement signed by Stiller: “**Young, intelligent man** with attractive appearance wanted for shooting of a film”. The persons involved and the advertisement’s connotation to a contemporary homosexual personal ad is more revealing than the film itself.¹⁴ This especially when read against the autobiography, where Asther reveals that it was Stiller who taught him “the art of loving and enjoying my own gender”, in the process introducing him both to the budding film industry as well as into the Swedish literary community.¹⁵

Only appearing in the frame story, Asther was not mentioned in the reviews, and he primarily worked in the theatre during the next couple of years but had minor roles in three Danish films before landing a role in the successful Swedish comedy *Gyurkovicsarna* (*The Gyurkovics Family*, John W Brunius, 1920) with Gösta Ekman (Sr) in the lead role. Ekman was one of Sweden’s most popular film stars during the interwar years and did, like Asther, present an ambiguous film persona that often interacted with his personal sexual preferences as a closet bisexual, which sometimes confused critics. Ekman had a publicly created picture of himself as a handsome, unmanly, fashionmonger at the same time as he was extremely popular among female audiences.¹⁶

This “double nature” can be linked to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s discussion of a glass closet. By pointing to the dualism that characterizes Oscar Wilde’s novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that the novel is “a perfect rhetorical distillation of the open secret, the glass closet, shaped by the conjunction of an extravagance of deniability and an extravagance of flamboyant display”.¹⁷ Hence, the

flamboyance that characterized Ekman's as well as Asther's film personas worked as an open secret with plausible deniability due to the double nature of their respective sexualities.

In *The Gyurkovics Family*, Asther played the role of Bandi Gyurkovics, the twin brother of Géza, played by Ekman. As twins, they look alike; young and handsome, that is, they are not portrayed as manly in the traditional sense. Nevertheless, these twin personas are set against each other as Ekman is portrayed with a boyish masculinity – impulsive, fresh and natural, but without any interest in women – while Asther is portrayed as the responsible one, taking over the family estate and eventually getting married, thus fulfilling the role of traditional masculinity. The double nature is here obscured by the fact that they are given, at the time, acceptable roles of masculinity.¹⁸ However, neither of them belonged to the ideal hegemonic masculinity.¹⁹

Asther is mostly mentioned only by name in the reviews, but those who elaborate admit that he “neatly fills his supporting role”²⁰ and that he “has an excellent film face and plays unusually moderate and intelligent”.²¹ The attention to appearance and the “film face” is significant as it undermines the seemingly fulfilled role of traditional masculinity, pushing him towards a more marginal position where beautiful looks and popularity determine his masculinity, rather than actions and a muscular body.

Asther made another three films in Sweden before continuing his film career, first in Germany, and then in Hollywood. In two of them, he starred once more against Ekman. In *Vem dömer* (*Mortal Clay*, Victor Sjöström, 1922), a medieval tringle love drama with religious overtones written by Hjalmar Bergman, Asther had a minor part as an apprentice while Ekman played Bertram, the love interest of a young woman who is married to a much older man.

The narrative trope with a triangle love drama pertaining to a young woman, an elderly man and a younger man should be highlighted here since it was part of a recurrent theme during the interwar years where money, wealth and social status are put against the question of love, which was a manifestation of the class divisions at the time. However, strikingly often this theme relied on either one of two circumstances: that the relationship between two men of the love tringle could be read as

something more than just antagonism, for example as in *The Wings* with a platonic but equally homoerotic relationship. However, a far more repeated circumstance was the fact that the young, handsome and masculine week man was portrayed by an actor with an ambiguous film persona, such as that of Ekman and Asther. This was also a common practice, for example in Hollywood, where actors such as Rudolf Valentino and Ramon Novarro played the third wheel in the heterosexual love triangle.²²

In *Mortal Clay*, Ekman's film persona was made suspicious by the reviewers: "How this stereotypical good-looking dandy have become the worshiped hero of the Swedish women's world is a sexo-psychological mystery bigger than the mystery of the woman herself!"²³ In contrast, the reviewers described Asther in juxtaposition with Ekman, as having "greater physical conditions for the role" of the lover.²⁴

The other film where Asther and Ekman starred together was in the historical adventure film *Carl XII:s kurir* ("Karl XII:s courier", Rudolf Anthoni, 1924), where Ekman played the hero and Asther played the villain, the Pole Stanislaus Potocki. Ekman was ridiculed in the reviews as a "sugary mother's boy dressed up like a warrior"²⁵, while Asther yet again is considered as the more masculine one, based solely on a comparison between the two.

Asther is tight-lipped about his efforts in these Swedish films in his autobiography, simply writing that he "did not dare to watch them". Nonetheless, in connection to *Carl XII:s kurir* he wrongly stated that Hjalmar Bergman wrote the screenplay, but above all he described how he and Ekman "always played clowns to everyone's enjoyment. He and I brooked and teased us to amuse the extras, who laughed at our nonsense, all except Ivar Lo-Johansson. He smiled ambiguously and thoughtfully noted our feminine artificiality".²⁶ The guarded looks that the future proletarian author gave Asther and Ekman should be put in relation to the ideal working-class masculinity during the interwar years as well-behaved, that is sober, principled, and in self-control – the opposite to what Asther's and Ekman's personas radiated.²⁷

The connection to Hjalmar Bergman is noteworthy. Bergman was one of Sweden's most popular authors during the interwar years, and one of a

few who took interest in the film business at the time.²⁸ Bergman was a dear friend of Ekman, and Asther in turn writes vividly about how Bergman instantaneously became infatuated by him.²⁹ Bergman took care of Asther, providing him with an apartment in Stockholm, and promoted him for roles in the theatre and in the film industry. Their relationship seems to have been platonic on an idealized homoerotic level as between Zoret and Mikael in *The Wings*. Asther mentions that Bergman slept over numerous times, but that he never made any sexual approaches, instead he contented himself with admiring Asther: “As I undressed and put on my pajamas, he followed my movements with admiring glances and sometimes almost as if in religious ecstasy. When we got to bed, he took my hand, and then caressed my arm and my shoulders. There the approach stopped”.³⁰

Asther’s ambiguous film persona was not considered as effeminate as Ekman’s, allowing him to play the part of the lover without being ridiculed as Ekman routinely was. However, Asther’s person and film persona were separated or publicly compartmentalized. Film scholar Gaylyn Studlar has described this as a “mad masquerade”; that male Hollywood film stars displayed a transformative masculinity during the interwar years where the gender construction was elusive and thus could appear in many different guises, and not as the single hegemonic one. This included what Studlar calls a “woman-made masculinity for female film spectators” – a lover that is not muscular or self-made but instead able to reconcile with feminine values, something that was vociferously rejected by American men.³¹ Asther’s film persona constituted just that sort of transformative masculinity, especially as he got bigger roles and reached for the stars.

In Hollywood: The Foreigner with Something to Hide

Between 1925 and 1927, Asther acted in ten German films, quickly getting bigger roles, usually as the malicious lover with something to hide, for example in *Der Goldene Schmetterling* (*The Golden Butterfly*, Michael Curtiz, 1926), and *Gauner im Frack* (Manfred Noa, 1927). But he also

acted in so-called uniform films that depicted the Great War, for instance in the huge success *Die versunkene Flottje* (*Wrath at the Seas*, Graham Hewett and Manfred Noa, 1926). During Asther's time at Ufa (Universum Film AG), Ekman came to Berlin to make *Faust: Eine deutsche Volkssage* (*Faust*, F.W. Murnau, 1926) and the two of them got on well together. During his stay in Berlin, Ekman became addicted to cocaine.³² However, the autobiography is tellingly laconic: "There are a lot of pleasant and ridiculous memories associated with that time. Unforgettable memories!"³³

When Asther arrived to Hollywood in 1927, he wished that the change of work environment would end his career of playing "thieves in evening dress".³⁴ However, the typecasting of the malicious lover would follow him over the Atlantic, where it would eventually merge with contemporary ideas about race and ethnicity in intricate ways.

His first American film was *Topsy and Eva* (Del Lord, 1927), which was an unofficial sequel to the big budget film *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Harry A. Pollard, 1927), and thus worked as a vehicle for the promotion of the highly popular Duncan sisters' act. Rosetta and Vivian Duncan had become famous with the musical comedy act "Topsy and Eva" in 1923, where they portrayed the two characters from Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, Rosetta in blackface. Asther played the lover George Shelby in a film that historian Gerald R. Butters Jr. have described as "a racist joke from beginning to end".³⁵ In Sweden, nonetheless, *Topsy and Eva* was marketed as especially suitable for children and, of course, as something to be proud about due to its Swedish association via Asther's participation.³⁶

Between 1927 and 1929, Asther acted in another eleven Hollywood films, rapidly rising in the cast and thus being noticed through marketing. He played the son of Anna Q. Nilsson' character in the huge success *Sorrel and Son* (Herbert Brenon, 1927), and then returned to the "uniform genre" in *The Blue Danube* (Paul Sloane, 1928). In the majority of these late silent films, Asther played the role of the foreigner with something to hide. Among these films was the period piece *Loves of an Actress* (Rowland V Lee, 1928) where Asther played the mysterious Raoul against one of the big Hollywood stars, Pola Negri. The advertising department at Paramount Pictures was not late in using this cast to create romantic

gossip. During the filming, a jealousy drama was arranged between Asther, Pola and her fiancé, a prince who appeared on the set with a gun to “shoot” Asther in jealousy, something that then became widespread news in the American press.³⁷

These rumors were used to create interest for Hollywood’s film stars in order to lure audiences to the cinema, but they were also used to hide scandals and rumors of another kind. This could have to do with drugs, infidelity and occasionally with illicit same-sex sexual relationships. While a certain amount of queerness was tolerated in Hollywood, it was not encouraged because it disturbed the business. The build-up for the good-looking Asther in romantic leads thus worked simultaneously to market him as a mysterious (heterosexual) lover as well as to hide his queer sexuality. Asther’s sexuality was also hidden through the fact that he countered, at least through his film persona, the dominating image of male homosexuality as weak and thus as an opposite to real masculinity. The author of the landmark study *The Celluloid Closet*, Vito Russo, states that homosexuality in the film business was understood along the lines of a gender dichotomy where the “[w]eakness in men rather than strength in women has consistently been seen as the connection between sex role behavior and deviant sexuality”.³⁸ That is, male homosexuality, if it was portrayed at all, always came in the guise of weak men or so-called sissies that had given in to their feminine side. The strict gender dichotomy did not leave room for differences among gay men (or women) and bisexuality was automatically equated with homosexuality. Yet, Asther’s film persona was not constructed as queer, but as masculine. However, the foreign ingredient in his film persona undermined this traditional masculinity. To be more precise, Asther could not obtain an American masculinity – a man of action: “strong, silent and ostentatiously unemotional” – as his European origin was considered domesticated and undeserving of the American legend.³⁹ Russo writes, “In almost all American films, from comedies to romantic dramas, working class American men are portrayed as much more valuable and certainly more virile than the rich, effete dandies of Europe, who in spite of their success with women are seen as essentially weak and helpless in the real man’s world”.⁴⁰

Casted as the somewhat dangerous foreign lover where something is off, Asther's film persona thus corresponded with the contemporary notion where a markedly un-American masculinity was considered as weak, but still within the masculine sphere, at the same time as the "sissyness" due to his sexuality was kept at bay by Hollywood's advertising departments.

Asther then starred in two films against Joan Crawford, *Our Dancing Daughters* (1928, Harry Beaumont), a dancing film that was banned by the Swedish film censorship, and *Dream of Love* (Fred Niblo, 1928), which was another huge success where Asther played a prince in uniform yet again. However, between these two films Asther was forced by the film company to grow a thin black mustache because he looked too young and innocent as he was supposed to play the lover against an older woman. The film in question was cancelled but the mustache stayed and became a trademark for Asther.⁴¹

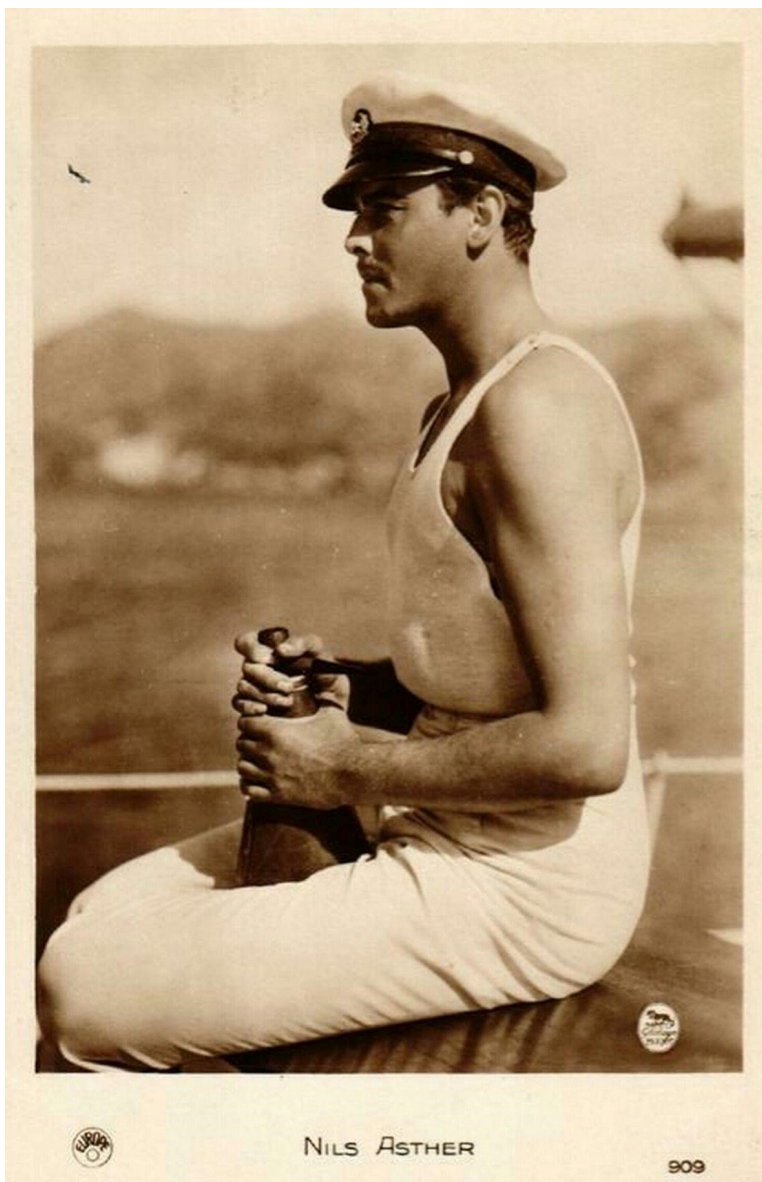
Asther is sometimes referred to as "the male Greta Garbo" – good-looking, withdrawn and queer.⁴² Asther and Garbo, being part of the Scandinavian enclave in Hollywood, quickly became friends and in 1929 they starred together in two hugely successful films at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), *Wild Orchids* (1929, Sidney Franklin) and *The Single Standard* (John S. Robertson, 1929). Both films were variants of the triangle love drama. In *Wild Orchids* Asther played a mysterious prince from Java who invites Lillie (Garbo) and her much older husband to stay on his mansion. The husband is markedly uninterested in his young wife, while the Javanese Prince show all the more interest. That something is off reveal itself already in the scene where Asther is introduced. Lillie is on her way to the boat cabin when the Prince suddenly appears in the hallway, viciously whipping his male servant. Lillie does not approve but is nevertheless attracted – or as Asther ironically writes in his autobiography, "Love at first sight, of course".⁴³

The development of their relationship could be analyzed through the four kisses they share. The Javanese Prince initiates all four kisses and the first one results in him being slapped in the face by Lillie. The second causes Lillie to start crying. By the third kiss, she gives in and when the fourth kiss is being enacted, Lillie is dressed in trousers and a tie, queering this moment. Of course, the Prince then has to die, and he is violently

attacked by a tiger but miraculously survives, a “happy ending” that Swedish reviewers complained about.⁴⁴ Most reviewers also mentioned that the film’s triangle love drama had been rehashed numerous of times.⁴⁵ In the US, Asther was praised as “capital as the Prince”⁴⁶, and in the trade paper *Variety*, he was seen as “more robust than usual” – probably due to the violent masculinity and the mustache – in what the reviewer perceives as a fundamental “women’s picture. It’s a feminized plot all the way. Sex is the meat and the marrow if its drama”.⁴⁷

The Single Standard was also received as a women’s film by the reviewers, as Garbo played a woman who leaves husband and child to pursue sexual happiness with the painter, ex-sailor, and aspiring boxer Packy Cannon (Asther) as “she snags against the single standard”, that is, disrupt the moral rule of fidelity.⁴⁸ The film steams of half-nakedness á la the pre-code era. However, the reviewer in *Variety* is reluctant, stating, “Nils Asther, with his black hair and a John-like mustache, while doing a good job, does not lend the sailor-artist-boxer role the Gilbertine touch”.⁴⁹ In other words, that Asther, despite his external bodily qualities, was not masculine enough to portray a man’s man, worthy – or credible enough – to attract the interest of Garbo’s character.

This reluctance can be connected to an incident during the production of *The Single Standard* where, during a love scene, Asther kissed Garbo rather roughly, and when she pushed him away, Garbo is said to have proclaimed, “I’m not one of your sailors!” to the amusement of the film crew.⁵⁰ The term “sailor” was probably used in a derogatory way to describe her friends who were queer men, a probability that is strengthened by the fact that Garbo, according to sociologist Arne Nilsson, encountered this “sailor world” on the Swedish American Line, a Swedish passenger shipping line, where as many as half of the sailors were homosexual.⁵¹



Nils Asther in *The Single Standard* (1929). With the permission of Hansrad Collection/Alamy Stock Photo.

This slippage between the person and the film persona was revealed by another two items. In February and March 1929, two very personal articles appeared in *Photoplay* where Asther, seemingly frankly, tells the story of his life. The *raison d'être* for this was that Asther had been romantically connected to Vivian Duncan, his co-star in *Topsy and Eva*, by the Hollywood press, but as rumors began to spread about his queerness, studio fixers responded by allowing these two articles to be published. In them Asther explain that he is not “gay and amusing and social”, but instead “ingrown, introspective, analytical”, due to an unhappy childhood.⁵² The gist is that Asther have the ability to love many (women but also implicitly men through “friendship”) but the lack to commit. This in turn is used to rationalize the break-up with Vivian Duncan, who he had had a highly publicized engagement with.⁵³

However, the pressure to commit – or rather to hide his sexuality – became too great and in 1930, in Reno, Nevada, the marriage become realized and this then became a “lavender marriage”; a marriage of convenience to conceal the socially stigmatized sexual orientation of one or both partners. In the autobiography, Asther is laconic about the marriage: “In August 1930, I committed the biggest stupidity of my life. I married vaudeville singer Vivian Duncan. I was never told how old she was. Not even at the wedding did she state her year of birth. Then she went to Germany and got us a daughter”.⁵⁴ Three years later, the marriage ended in divorce. By that time, Asther’s career was in decline, partly because of his sexuality, partly because Asther had a long-standing reputation for bluntness. For years, he had publically objected to the studio system and his roles, creating an image of an actor that was impossible to work with.⁵⁵

Repressed Sexuality and Career Decline

In the late 1920s, when Asther arrived to Hollywood, the whole film industry was in turmoil due to the transition to sound. One important aspect that concerned the actors was how they sounded when they spoke.

Many actors disappeared from the screen because of this transition. Still, Hollywood craved diversity. The mysterious foreigner was still in demand and the roles that Asther had excelled in could now be accentuated through the use of an accent. MGM even demanded that Asther stop taking English lessons. "It's the accent I want to buy. That's the one I'll make money on", Asther claims that Jeremiah "Jerry" Mayer told him.⁵⁶ Therefore, after a year of being on hold, Asther started working again and made a string of films where he once more portrayed the usual seducer in a tuxedo or uniform. However, for years he only got supporting roles. That is, until he was casted in the lead role as General Yan in Frank Capra's *The Bitter Tea of General Yan* (1932) against Barbara Stanwyck, which was the first film to be shown at Radio City Music Hall in New York. Asther prepared by studying the Chinese in Los Angeles' Chinatown, and by doing his own makeup.⁵⁷ The film was yet again a triangle love drama that told the story of a Chinese warlord (Asther) and an engaged Christian missionary who fall in love. The interracial relation was the titillation of this drama, and portrayals of miscegenation were prevented when Hays Code was implemented a year later.

Asther portrayed General Yan as a combination of imagined "western" civilization and sophistication and "eastern" ancient wisdom and cruelty. In the scene where General Yan is introduced, his car hits and kills a young rickshaw boy. When he is confronted by the film's love interest, Megan Davis, he ignores the incident but shows sophistication as he speaks Mandarin Chinese, French and English in the matter of minutes. Later he commits acts of cruelty, such as mass executions, and while Megan objects, she still falls for his chivalry and gentle "Asian" manners.

The miscegenation drama was in vogue during the entire 1920s, and it started with success of *The Sheik* (George Melford, 1921) with Rudolf Valentino as the Sheik who falls in love with a "white" woman. However, it turns out that Valentino's character is in reality European, thus solving the interracial love relation, but in *The Bitter Tea of General Yan*, Asther's character has to commit suicide due to the impossibility of an interracial love relationship. Nonetheless, the fact that he was European made it possible to even portray one. As film scholar Chris Holmlund remarks, "because a good-looking Swedish heartthrob plays the 'Asian', they become multi-

dimensional, according to masculine as well as feminine, civilized as well as barbaric, and Western as well as Eastern, traits".⁵⁸

American reviewers applauded Asther's mask and acting: "The Bitter Tea of General Yen', is a handsomely mounted affair with conspicuously good portrayals by Nils Asther [---] It is a story that is scarcely plausible but which has the saving grace of being fairly entertaining. Mr. Asther's make-up is impressive, with slanting eyes and dark skin. He talks with a foreign accent".⁵⁹ In Sweden as well, Asther got rave reviews and one reviewer wrote that this was "a success for the actor that must please every Swede"⁶⁰, while another wrote, "Nils Asther is a good actor and has put on a pretty good mask but seems too weak to be illusory as a Chinese warrior".⁶¹ Once again, we have this remark about weakness, despite the powerful display of cruelty, which can be attached to both contemporary ideas of weak Asian masculinity as well as to Asther's feminized masculinity.⁶²

Asther believed that he would get more demanding parts after the critical success of *The Bitter Tea of General Yan*, but MGM gave him a final lead role in *Storm at Daybreak* (Richard Boleslawski, 1933) where he "would put on a nice uniform and be in love again".⁶³ After that, he got supporting roles and then bit parts, as the career dwindled. One of these supporting roles was as Prince Alfred von Rommer in the comedy *By Candlelight* (1933) directed by the openly gay film director James Whale, most recognized for his horror films *Frankenstein* (1931) and *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935).

By the next year, Asther acted in his first real B-movie, *The Love Captive* (Max Marcin, 1934), and then the stories of what happened fall apart. According to one source, Asther was put on a blacklist after a breach of contract and because of the persistent rumors of homosexuality.⁶⁴ According to Asther, he made four films in England with the blessing of the Screen Actors Guild and when Universal sued Asther, he won the case. However, with his usual laconic formulations, he writes, "The gentlemen from Universal seemed to have hung on to the fact that I stayed in London too long. But I had my own idea of the real cause".⁶⁵

This "real cause" could in fact have been a blacklisting due to immoral behaviors. When the production code was strengthened in 1934, Hays

Office allegedly compiled a “doom book” that “included 117 names of those deemed ‘unsafe’” because of their personal lives.⁶⁶ The names of this list are yet to be revealed, but the fact is that many actors and film workers were ostracized because of their sexuality, including the successful director James Whale who refused to stay in the closet and as a result never worked again.⁶⁷

Aster continued doing supporting roles and bit parts until 1949, when he went over to the new television industry. In 1958, he returned to Sweden, where lived his life mostly in obscurity, only making a few small parts. In 1960, Asther was inducted into the Hollywood Walk of Fame with a motion pictures star for his contributions to the film industry. He died on October 13, 1981 and was buried in Hotagen, Jämtland.

*

Marketing and typecasting formed a film persona of Nils Asther as the good-looking, mysterious foreigner with something to hide. In hindsight, the hidden bit could easily be associated with his queer sexuality, but during the interwar years, it was foremost connected to a foreignness that titillated the fear of miscegenation. Simultaneously, in Hollywood, Asther’s film persona was feminized as the heterosexual lover in films that were considered primary for female audiences, thus creating a woman-made masculinity in opposition to an American self-made masculinity. Race, gender, and sexuality thus reinforced each other in complicated ways. Studlar have fittingly described this as a “mad masquerade”, wherein Asther’s persona could be publicly compartmentalized in order to enhance his male beauty, and at the same time hide his (queer) sexuality.⁶⁸ This display of a transformative and elusive masculinity become even more nuanced when compared with his film persona in Sweden, where Asther often acted against Gösta Ekman, who was far more flamboyant, thus resulting in a male hierarchy where Asther was considered more masculine, despite his good-looks.

Still, the film persona of Asther chafed against his person, not least against his queer sexuality, something that systematically shines through

in his autobiography. He lived a double life where production companies and the society as a whole repressed his sexuality, thus placing him in a glass closet shaped in the conjunction of deniability and flamboyant display, according to Kosofsky Sedgwick.⁶⁹

When Asther's autobiography was published in 1988, the reviewers only saw the bitterness.⁷⁰ Mattias Berg degradingly called him a "poor asshole" but Berg was the only one that commented on his sexuality: "Asther is somehow the very essence of the ancient notion of the actor who takes the bed to the stars. In his case, it was facilitated by a more or less bisexual orientation".⁷¹ By linking Asther's queer sexuality to the infamous bed-way-to-the-top, usually associated with female actors in a derogatory way, Berg greatly undermines Asther's actual success in Hollywood as well as makes his sexuality suspicious, which is interpreted as a weapon used against the "victims of mixed sorts" whom got in Asther's way.⁷² In other words, as late as in 1988 there was still no understanding of how a double life, blacklisting, and loneliness became the result of what, at the time, was seen as a deviant sexuality, something that contributed to making Asther's life a living hell.

Endnotes

- ¹ Nils Asther, *Narrens väg: Ingen gudasaga: Memoarer* (Stockholm: Carlssons, 1988).
- ² Tommy Gustafsson, *Masculinity in the Golden Age of Swedish Cinema: A Cultural Analysis of the 1920s Films* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2014), 116–148.
- ³ Asther, *Narrens väg*, 67. All translations from Swedish are mine unless otherwise noted.
- ⁴ Thomas Patrick Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema 1930–1934* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).
- ⁵ Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood*, 320–321.
The Hays Code was named after Will H Hays, the president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), and it was implemented in 1934, foremost under the pressure from the Catholic Legion of Decency
- ⁶ Anthony Slide, *Silent Topics: Essays on Undocumented Areas of Silent Film* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 56.
- ⁷ Carl G Jung, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology* (London: Lightning Source, 2014), 190.
- ⁸ Ingmar Lundkvist, ”Med tematik som berör. Om att avgränsa biografiskrivandet”, in *Med livet som insats: Biografen som humanistisk genre*, eds. Henrik Rosengren and Johan Östling (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2007), 93–101.
- ⁹ Richard Dyer, *Now You See It: Studies in Lesbian and Gay Film* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 8.
- ¹⁰ Fredrik Silverstople, ”Mauritz Stiller och den första homosexuella spelfilmen”, in *Sympatiens hemlighetsfulla makt: Stockholms homosexuella 1860–1960*, ed. Göran Söderström (Stockholm: Stockholmia, 1999), 322–326.
- ¹¹ Dyer, *Now You See It*, 8–15.
- ¹² Jens Flik [Carl Björnberg], Review of *The Wings*, *Nya Dagligt Allehanda*, September 6, 1916.
- ¹³ See, e.g., Chinoise [Siri Thorngren-Olin], Review of *The Wings*, *Stockholms Dagblad*, September 5, 1916.

-
- ¹⁴ Arne Nilsson, *Såna & riktiga karlar: Om manlig homosexualitet i Göteborg decennierna kring andra världskriget* (Göteborg: Anamma, 1998), 38.
- ¹⁵ Asther, *Narrens väg*, 31.
- ¹⁶ Gustafsson, *Masculinity in the Golden Age of Swedish Cinema*, 141–148.
- ¹⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 49, 161–166.
- ¹⁸ Gustafsson, *Masculinity in the Golden Age of Swedish Cinema*, 62–63.
- ¹⁹ R W [Raewyn] Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), 67–81.
- ²⁰ Unsigned, Review of *The Gyurkovics Family*, *Stockholms Dagblad*, September 21, 1920.
- ²¹ –une [Märta Lindqvist], "Gyurkovicsarna – en glad sommarfilm", Review of *The Gyurkovics Family*, *Svenska Dagbladet*, September 21, 1920.
- ²² See, for example, Gaylyn Studlar, *This Mad Masquerade: Stardom and Masculinity in the Jazz Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 186–187.
- ²³ Cramij Diavel, "Vem dömer? Ny svensk film på Metropol", Review of *Mortal Clay*, *Arbetet*, January 2, 1922.
- ²⁴ Unsigned, "Vem dömer?", Review of *Mortal Clay*, *Folkets Dagblad Politiken*, January 2, 1922.
- ²⁵ Unsigned, Review of *Carl XII:s kurir*, *Folkets Dagblad Politiken*, April 8, 1924.
- ²⁶ Asther, *Narrens väg*, 36–40.
- The famous Swedish proletarian author, Ivar Lo-Johansson, played an extra in *Carl XII:s kurir*.
- ²⁷ Ronny Ambjörnsson, *Den skötsamme arbetaren: Idéer och ideal i ett norrländskt sågverksambälle 1880–1930* (Stockholm: Carlssons, 1998).
- ²⁸ See, for example, Gustafsson, *Masculinity in the Golden Age of Swedish Cinema*, 21–40.
- ²⁹ Asther, *Narrens väg*, 25.
- ³⁰ Asther, *Narrens väg*, 32.
- ³¹ Studlar, *This Mad Masquerade*, 7–10, 148.
- ³² Per Lindberg, *Gösta Ekman: Skådespelaren och människan* (Stockholm: Natur och kultur, 1942), 132, 188–189.
- ³³ Asther, *Narrens väg*, 63.

-
- ³⁴ Asther, *Narrens väg*, 68.
- ³⁵ Gerald R. Butters Jr., *Black Manhood on the Silent Screen* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002), 174.
- ³⁶ ”Onkel Toms skyddslingar”, Advertisement, *Biografägaren*, no. 4, 1929.
- ³⁷ Asther, *Narrens väg*, 83.
- ³⁸ Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 5.
- ³⁹ Russo, *Celluloid Closet*, 5–6.
- ⁴⁰ Russo, *Celluloid Closet*, 16.
- ⁴¹ Asther, *Narrens väg*, 88.
- ⁴² Hans J Wollstein, *Strangers in Hollywood: The History of Scandinavian Actors in American Films from 1910 to World War II* (New York: Scarecrow Press, 1994), 22–37.
- ⁴³ Asther, *Narrens väg*, 98.
- ⁴⁴ Unsigned, ”Greta Garbo-premiär”, Review of *Wild Orchids*, *Aftonbladet*, September 13, 1929, 3.
- ⁴⁵ See, for example, J-e [Göran Traung], ”Vilda orkidéer – Greta Garbos nya film”, Review of *Wild Orchids*, *Dagens Nyheter*, September 13, 1929, 13.
- ⁴⁶ Mordaunt Hall, ”THE SCREEN; Tea and the Tiger. The Baggage Smasher. In Holland. Tong War”. Review of *Wild Orchids*, *The New York Times*, April 1, 1929.
- ⁴⁷ Land, ”Film Reviews”, Review of *Wild Orchids*, *Variety*, April 3, 1929, 20.
- ⁴⁸ See, for example, Unsigned, ”THE SCREEN; The Theory of Morals”, Review of *The Single Standard*, *The New York Times*, July 29, 1929.
- ⁴⁹ Waly, ”Film Reviews”, Review of *The Single Standard*, *Variety*, July 31, 1929, 17.
- ⁵⁰ Slide, *Silent Topics*, 42.
- ⁵¹ Arne Nilsson, *”Såna” på Amerikabåtarna: de svenska Amerikabåtarna som manliga homomiljöer* (Stockholm: Normal Akademi, 2006), 15.
- ⁵² Katherine Albert, ”Something about Myself: ‘A Life Story, to be Vital, Must Deal with Emotions’”, *Photoplay*, February 1929, 32–33, 140–141.
- ⁵³ Katherine Albert, ”Something about Myself: As Told to Katherine Albert by Nils Asther”, *Photoplay*, March 1929, 99–100.
- ⁵⁴ Asther, *Narrens väg*, 130.

-
- ⁵⁵ Slide, *Silent Topics*, 42–43.
- ⁵⁶ Asther, *Narrens väg*, 132.
- ⁵⁷ Asther, *Narrens väg*, 134–135.
- ⁵⁸ Chris Holmlund, *Impossible Bodies: Femininity and Masculinity at the Movies* (London: Routledge, 2002), 95.
- ⁵⁹ Mordaunt Hall, “Radio City Music Hall Shows a Melodrama of China as Its First Pictorial Attraction”, Review of *The Bitter Tea of General Yan*, *The New York Times*, January 12, 1933.
- ⁶⁰ Lill, ”Biografpremiär”, Review of *The Bitter Tea of General Yan*, *Svenska Dagbladet*, May 3, 1933, 14.
- ⁶¹ Argo, ”Kinesflickans hämnd”, Review of *The Bitter Tea of General Yan*, *Folkets Dagblad Politiken*, May 3, 1933, 7.
- ⁶² Tommy Gustafsson, ”I skarven mellan fakta och fiktion: konstruktionen av manlighet och etnicitet i svensk filmkultur under 1920-talet”, in *Historieforskning på nya vägar*, eds. Klas-Göran Karlsson, Eva Helen Ulvros and Ulf Zander (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2006), 110–117.
- ⁶³ Asther, *Narrens väg*, 143.
- ⁶⁴ Wollstein, *Strangers in Hollywood*, 22–25.
- ⁶⁵ Asther, *Narrens väg*, 150–151.
- ⁶⁶ Aubrey Malone, *Censoring Hollywood: Sex and Violence in Film and on the Cutting Room Floor* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2011), 16; Russo, *Celluloid Closet*, 45.
- ⁶⁷ Russo, *Celluloid Closet*, 50.
- ⁶⁸ Studlar, *This Mad Masquerade*, 7–10.
- ⁶⁹ Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 49.
- ⁷⁰ Tore Nyström, ”Världsberömd – och olycklig”, *Göteborgsposten*, October 31, 1988, 4.
- ⁷¹ Mattias Berg, ”Stumfilmsstjärnan Nils Asthers memoarer: En skitstövel det var synd om”, *Göteborgs-Tidningen*, October 30, 1988, 4.
- ⁷² Berg, ”Stumfilmsstjärnans Nils Asthers memoarer”, 4.

Tommy Gustafsson is Professor of Film Studies at Linnaeus University. His work is mainly concentrated on film history, both international and Nordic. He has been published in *Cinema Journal and Porn Studies*, and his books include *Såra tukt och sedlighet: hundra år av pornografi i Sverige* (2021, with Mariah Larsson, Klara Arnberg and Elisabet Björklund), *The Politics of Nordspolitation: History, Industry, Audiences* (2021, with Pietari Kääpä), *Masculinity in the Golden Age of Swedish Film: A Cultural Analysis of the 1920s Film* (2014), and the anthology *Nordic Genre Cinema: Small Nation Film Cultures in the Global Marketplace* (2015, co-edited with Pietari Kääpä).