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Wallengren, Ann-Kristin

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

Ann-Kristin Wallengren

John Ericsson: Victor of Hampton Roads. Images of Sweden in American History

JOHN ERICSSON WAS an engineer and inventor born in simple circumstances in 1803 in the province of Värmland, Sweden. He displayed an early interest in technique and machines, and as a young officer, he worked with measuring and mapping the northern part of Sweden. In 1826, he moved to England where he worked with steam boiler construction and with what he became famous for: propellers. All these efforts were not financially profitable though, and in 1839, Ericsson left for America, partly because of the better opportunities to develop his work there, and partly to escape his creditors and avoid being taken to court. He stayed in the US for the rest of his life and among his many inventions, he is most well known for constructing the ironclad warship *Monitor*, used by the Union Navy in the battle of Hampton Roads during the American Civil War. He died in his home in New York in 1889, and today numerous memorials and monuments in both Sweden and USA honour Ericsson (Goldkuhl, 1961).

In 1937, the Swedish Film Industry (Svensk Filmindustri), the most influential production company in Sweden, produced the film *John Ericsson – segraren vid Hampton Roads* (*John Ericsson: Victor of Hampton Roads*, Gustaf Edgren). Some argue that the film is one of the decade's most glorious tributes to Swedish genius (Qvist, 1995). Principally, it stages the course of events surrounding the ironclad warship and the battle, and connects Ericsson's personal life to this event. The USS *Monitor* was

vital in the combat against the ships and ironclad warships of the Confederate Navy, notably the USS Virginia, more widely known under its earlier name, Merrimac, in the battle of Hampton Roads in March 1862. In that way, the USS Monitor contributed to the final victory over slavery. The battle of Hampton Roads was important for the Civil War: if the Confederate warship Merrimac had succeeded in sailing up the Potomac River, it would have threatened Union supremacy (Åberg, 1994). According to some of Ericsson's biographers, he actually became something of a US national hero, at least for a brief moment, and he was celebrated in American papers. People with an inclination for commercial earnings took the opportunity to make some money by producing and selling Monitor cigars and Monitor hats; even a special dance was composed named the Ericsson galop (Goldkuhl, 1961). The battle between the Monitor and the Merrimac can probably be considered undecided, but in the historical discourse, the Monitor has been put forward as the winner. In the film, however, Ericsson is depicted as the winner of the entire American Civil War.

The primary reason for producing the film was to celebrate the tercentenary of the arrival of the first Swedish immigrants to Delaware (Qvist, 1995). Another was to meet the devastating critique against the Swedish film culture, which the year before had been debated at the notorious Concert Hall meeting in Stockholm (Qvist, 1995). However, of equal importance was to produce a film that in terms of its morals, politics, ideologies, and even its pedagogy adhered to the ideals of the Swedish welfare state, which began developing during the 1930s. A fourth contributory reason was to produce a film that could unite the nation during a period when weapons started to rattle around Europe, even if that may not have been totally conscious or deliberate.

In all these motives for producing this specific film, Swedishness is at stake, Swedishness is the centre around which all the different reasons revolve. Furthermore, the theme of Swedishness operates on different levels: from the personal, to the regional and to the national. On the one hand, it is about specific Swedish personal characteristics, but on the other, it is also about what kind of Swedes and what kind of society the new Swedish welfare state encouraged and aspired towards. The character John Ericsson embodies all the reasons for the film's production as well as all these different aspects of Swedishness. One point of interest here is how the film creates the ideal Swedishness as located, or born, in the specific Swedish region where Ericsson grew up, Värmland, as well as connects this region to Sweden as a whole. That is to say, in the film, the

abstract features of Swedishness are apprehended as promoted by the materiality of place, but also fostered by Ericsson's adolescence in poor conditions. The film is a veritable marketplace for analyses of national identity, but I will concentrate here on Swedishness in the growing welfare state coupled with the notions of class, nation and modernity, and whiteness. The film is thus not only a film about John Ericsson; above all, he became a tool for asserting and narrating about these other things that were important to the Swedish agenda in the 1930s.

In the discussion about the film, I use the concept "region" in relation to different aspects that build upon one another. Basically, we have the county of Värmland, the province where Ericsson grew up, as a provincial region and part of Sweden. Sweden in its turn is a part of Europe; Sweden is accordingly a European region. Finally, Europe can be considered a region in the world, here particularly compared to the North American region (Hjort and Petrie, 2007). The subchapters in the article adhere to these different aspects of region, starting with the provincial region. First, some words about the motives for making the film.

Why Make A Film about John Ericsson?

As I see it, the film about John Ericsson was primarily a vehicle meant to meet the ideological and political needs of the 1930s. However, the explicit reasons for making the film did not have much to do with discussions about the dawning Swedish welfare state, but these reasons were nonetheless just as ideologically significant. As mentioned above, the choice to make this film was a part of the celebration of the first Swedish immigrants' arrival in Delaware 300 years before. This is important as a context for the advocating of Swedishness in the film. The Delaware immigration movement was a colonial enterprise, and people were more or less forced to go there. New Sweden, as the region in Delaware was called, was actually used also as a convict settlement (Åberg, 1988), and Queen Kristina, the reigning Swedish monarch, considered sending all Swedish "vagrants" to Delaware (Nu, 1937).

The number of immigrants to Delaware is negligible compared to the number of Swedish immigrants to America in the nineteenth century, but it is clear that the Delaware immigration, officially sanctioned by the state, is the only Swedish immigration to America that has been celebrated. This fact can perhaps be a question of class and power considering the cinematic representation of the common immigrants. The later mass exodus was a movement totally embraced by common people and even

counteracted by the political and intellectual elite. The Delaware immigration, on the other hand, was an invention of the authorities and continues up to this day to be acknowledged as the start of the emigration, regardless of its authoritative and colonial overtones (Henricsson and Lindblad, 1995). In Swedish narrative films contemporary with the film about John Ericsson, the common emigrant, most often emanating from the working class, is usually portrayed negatively and even as ridiculous, and the films highlight the idea that the emigrant should have stayed in Sweden. On the other hand, and in accordance with the power and class ideology of the Delaware celebration, national pride accompanies the genius and educated man who is successful in America.

Equally important as a production context and as a background for the construction of Swedishness is the Concert Hall meeting, which was a debate about the standard of the Swedish film in the 1930s. In this debate, many critics maintained that the Swedish film culture was at its lowest point ever. For example, one of the angriest critics argued that the Swedish cinema crushed political efforts towards general education, and suggested that films must turn to Swedish values and Swedish reality (Björkman, 1937). The head of the production company Swedish Film Industry answered that the company at that very moment was looking into the possibilities of making a film about the engineer and inventor John Ericsson. He asserted, like a premature epigone of film theorist Siegfried Kracauer, that Sweden was one of the countries that could make films that “were an expression of the Swedish spirit” (*Frågan blev med nej besvarad*, 1937). Following that debate, it is reasonable to talk about a wave of Swedishness in the Swedish cinematic culture, a “neonationalism” as one scholar put it, a wave that was arguably introduced by *John Ericsson: Victor of Hampton Roads* (Qvist, 1995). For a Swedish film at that time, the film about John Ericsson was also a very expensive and lavish production.

Class and Region

The film is about and presupposes Ericsson’s origins in the lower classes, and arguably, an important reason for this emphasis was the political and ideological spirit at the time of the production. In the film, the issue of class is connected to John Ericsson’s personal characteristics, and it is his rather simple origins – in what is viewed as one of the most Swedish regions in Sweden, the province of Värmland – that explain his personality. The film repeatedly accentuates that he is a man of the people, and that

he has always worked hard and purposefully. A short lecture about Ericsson begins the film, pictures from his native region are shown, and the rural nature and simple buildings become a kind of metaphor for Ericsson the person. Class, geography and character become presuppositions of each other. Likewise, it is stressed that regardless of the long time he spent abroad, he remained spiritually connected to the region of his childhood.

In his book about Swedish conceptions of the landscapes of Sweden, historian of ideas Jakob Christensson writes that since the beginning of the nineteenth century, two landscapes have been regarded as particularly Swedish, and one of them is Värmland (Christensson, 2002). This notion is maintained by several cultural manifestations, such as the novel and the screen adaptation *Gösta Berlings saga* (*The Legend of Gösta Berling*, 1891 respectively 1924) by Selma Lagerlöf, and the extremely widespread song *Värmlandsvisan* (*The Song of Värmland*) written to a popular drama in the 1820s and sung by the famous Swedish tenor Jussi Björling at the end of the film.¹ Christensson actually writes about *John Ericsson: Victor of Hampton Roads*, saying that Ericsson's origin in this particular region was probably essential in the decision to make the film, and he emphasizes that a Danish newspaper regarded the film as primarily tourist propaganda (Christensson, 2002). Curiously, Victor Sjöström, formerly an international film director, who plays the leading role and the director Gustaf Edgren both came from Värmland.

The depiction of Värmland as Ericsson's origin geographically as well as in terms of class is emphasized throughout the film's soundtrack. Sweden or Swedishness is characterized through Swedish folk songs, whereas everything specifically connected with America is expressed through more official and solemn music, such as marches and military songs. This structural division is manifested already in the title music. That is to say, the Swedish music in the film suggests the popular, the regional and the individual and the American music the national, the official and the collective. As we shall see, this stylistic and narrative device has consequences and corresponds to the reception of the film in the respective countries.

The idealized class origin and the characteristics connected to Ericsson are further highlighted and accentuated through another character in the film – Charlie Pettersson. He is from the same region as Ericsson and a childhood friend of the inventor, but still a working-class man employed as a sailor. He also embodies some supposed Swedish characteristics such as honesty, uprightness, loyalty and dutifulness. Even the

producers admitted in the cinema programme that the purpose of Charlie was to stress the popular aspects of Ericsson's life.² Charlie plays the accordion, he is a humorous counterpart to Ericsson and a member of the crew on the Monitor, where he is vital to the victory over the Merrimac, in that he, in opposition to the American officers, loads the canons with as much gunpowder as Ericsson had prescribed. Thus, two Swedes win the American Civil War, one engineer and one representative of the lower classes. This represents cooperation over class barriers, which was a recurrent theme in the films made at the dawn of the welfare state. In this way, the political dimensions of the Swedish welfare state are reinforced, a tendency further strengthened through Sigurd Wallén who plays the role of Pettersson. Wallén repeatedly played characters with social democratic sentiments, and he represented a popular and down-to-earth type of man. The fictional friendship between John Ericsson and Charlie Pettersson reinforces the notion that Ericsson remained Swedish in his heart and soul and that his personality did not change, regardless of the fact that he spent almost his entire adult life in the US.

Engineering, Culture, and the Swedish Welfare State

If working class and personal characteristics are coupled with the provincial region as discussed above, then engineering, culture and middle class are coupled to Sweden as a European region, or Europe as a region in opposition to the US. Being an engineer, and with the specific characteristics attributed to him, the Ericsson character is very much a figure that can be connected to the Swedish welfare state. Engineering as an occupation and the social engineering of the welfare state can be understood as two sides of the same coin. Ericsson's working-class background and the personal characteristics attributed to him were strongly accentuated already when his remains were delivered to Sweden in 1890 (Rodell, 2004). In Swedish newspapers of the late 1930s, terms like "an ordinary man", "purposefulness", "hard work", and "the self-made man" were used abundantly to explain his success. These terms were connected to a Swedish sentiment, but they can be regarded as a perfect definition of the concept of the American dream as well. The newspapers discussed personal characteristics in terms of self-sacrifice, rationality and a sense of the practical, and reported that he regarded his work as a mission and proudly did things his own way. These characteristics fit together with the Swedish self-image as well as with characteristics that the Swedish cinema often embraced. The aphorism "Swedish steel is hard to break" sum-



Old Swedish friendship over class borders. Charlie Pettersson and John Ericsson.

marizes the main elements mentioned above, an aphorism that Ericsson himself uses in the film.

Thus, Ericsson came from a working-class background, but he worked his way up to be a highly regarded engineer and inventor in America – a successful personal story well suited to underpinning the ideologies of the Swedish welfare state. As some scholars have argued, from the end of the nineteenth century, the general view of engineers and inventors was that they were symbolic representatives of a modern Sweden. In the 1930s, at the beginning of the Swedish welfare state period, there was no longer any need to make feature films about kings and royalty – the welfare state demanded other types of heroes (Rodell, 2004). Of course, royalties were still represented in films, but they were no longer the heroes they used to be (Qvist, 1995). The engineer became one of these new heroes, and many films in the 1930s and 1940s depict an engineer as the saviour of and the ideal man for Swedish society (Qvist, 1995; Furhammar, 1998). In a way, Ericsson is ascribed a royal position and stature through, for example, Victor Sjöström's imposing interpretation of the character and through the visuals that provide a framework for the introductory scenes from Ericsson's childhood and adolescence: pictures with flags, flowers and a well-known presenter behaving and speaking with an official ethos.

Historian Thomas Kaiserfeld has argued that it is interesting that the film *John Ericsson: Victor of Hampton Roads* puts forward the engineer as a national symbol during these troubled political times (Kaiserfeld, 1991). He writes that the engineer, as part of a collective myth, was playing the role of the hero who had brought Sweden to its current position as an industrialized nation. This is probably true, but Kaiserfeld seems to forget that Ericsson is a Swedish-American, and that he pursues his career abroad, mostly in the United States. In the Swedish as well as in the overall European conception of the United States during the first decades of the twentieth century, the US was the nation that fostered technological progress and, somewhat in contrast to Europe, regarded technology as the main feature of modernity (Alm, 2002). Despite the fact that a nation like Sweden also used technology extensively in the development of the modern state, the general opinion was that America's love of technology had meant the sacrificing of other values, such as culture and humanity.

Furthermore, the American valuation of engineering is often connected solely to economic benefits, whereas Ericsson's work as an inventor, as depicted in the film, is connected to the aim of peace and equality. In the film, John Ericsson as a Swede becomes a kind of amalgamation between the European and the American, in that he is a brilliant inven-



A presentation worthy of a king.

tor but uses his inventions in the interest of peace. America as a place becomes important in providing the opportunity to work with technology, but Sweden as a European region becomes necessary for the narrative in order to couple technology with humanity and idealism.

Perhaps in order to clarify that Sweden is a region that shares the cultural aims of Europe, Swedish self-esteem is further developed through the film's depiction of other prominent Swedes in America. The Swedish singer Jenny Lind, introduced in the United States as "The Swedish Nightingale", performed with great success in American concerts at the beginning of the 1850s. She turns up in the film at a concert where she, among other things, sings an old Swedish nursery rhyme that is supposed to remind Ericsson (even though he is absent from the concert) of his childhood in Sweden and more specifically in Långbanshyttan. For the cinema audience, this song parallels the beginning of the film when the same song accompanies images of a cradle holding the baby John Ericsson.

son. Another Swedish singer heard in the film, as mentioned earlier, is Jussi Björling, who had his international breakthrough in New York at the Metropolitan in 1938 (Åstrand, 1975). In accordance with the class ideology discussed earlier, only distinguished men and women who have had success in the United States are highlighted as representatives of Sweden in an American context. In the cradle of the Swedish welfare state, and in a film celebrating the early Swedish exodus to America, the emphasis is rather surprisingly on the traditional and elitist bourgeoisie and not on the classes that constituted the vast majority of the emigrants. It is perhaps even more surprising that these ideas were put to the forefront during the social democratic regime.

Nevertheless, apart from this, the film is also about a European region's relation to the US and the emphasis on technological and cultural success in a country that, at the time of production, was regarded by some as more or less culturally barbarian. The slight anachronism in using two singers from different centuries, one diegetically placed and contemporary with Ericsson and one contemporary with the cinema audience and thus not part of the diegesis, only further accentuates the unbroken chain of Swedish success. However, the songs that both Lind and Björling sing are associated with Ericsson's childhood in the County of Värmland in Sweden and in that way, both these very famous singers become anchored to the regional.

Swedishness and Race

In this and other films, Swedishness, in terms of both explicit policies and more vague characteristics, is constructed and understood as morally and ethically superior to other nationalities and cultures. Although this is a film about Ericsson's life during the 1860s, Swedish traits are portrayed as timeless and eternal, even if they are also in accordance with the policies of Swedish society in the 1930s. One trait that is repeatedly attributed to characters in Swedish films during this period is uprightness and a feeling for justice. In one scene in the film, Ericsson publicly defends a slave that is being beaten by his white master, and one of his closest friends is a highly ranked military officer in the Confederate Army. This is another example of the spirit of understanding and agreement that was typical of the Swedish welfare state as well as typical of the film's depiction of Ericsson – he has friends over class borders as well as over ideological borders.

Ericsson is thus depicted as being against slavery and as fighting for the Union. This was also the official Swedish position during the Civil

War. Many Swedes also lived in the northern states and volunteered in the Union Army (Åberg, 1994). The Swedish welfare state and the Social Democratic Party have constantly tried to maintain this ideology – Swedes as peace lovers and defenders of oppressed peoples. However, this ideology has suffered from constant contradictions, above all concerning race and ethnicity. This becomes obvious in the Swedish cinema culture, which is intoxicated by xenophobia, and *John Ericsson: Victor of Hampton Roads* does not differ a great deal from the ordinary Swedish film in this respect. Even if the film in some scenes presents resistance against slavery, this does not prevent it from articulating racist ideas.

During recent years, some scholars have argued that the ideology of the Swedish welfare state can be connected with racism in some instances (Emilsson, 2009: 191). The concept of whiteness is useful here. In the racial conceptions in the film, the African-American characters are treated in a slightly patronizing way in that, even if they have the same position as their Swedish or American counterpart, they are treated as someone inferior, as servants, and some generalizing jokes are made on their behalf. Despite the fact that people of African origin have lived on the North American continent far longer than Swedes have (with the exception of the rather few Delaware-Swedes), the Swedes are depicted as more American than the African-Americans. For example, the African-Americans speak with an accent and the Swedes do not. This could perhaps be overlooked were it not for an Italian-American character, significantly enough a theatre compere, who also speaks with an accent. Thus, African-Americans and Italians have not been integrated into American society as well as have the Swedes in the film's ideological world. According to historian David Roediger, Italians, not to mention Africans, were not viewed by Americans as really being part of white America (Roediger, 2005). Swedes, Germans, and other northern Europeans, on the other hand, were considered white. Italians and other southern Europeans became white, that is, came to be regarded as worthy Americans, primarily thanks to the labour movement, New Deal reforms, and a rise in home buying. By portraying African-Americans and Italian-Americans in this way, the film, which so demonstratively is a creation of and for the Swedish welfare state, adheres to this American conception of whiteness. Swedishness also embraces whiteness; a white helps another white to defeat slavery. Through this emphasis on white supremacy, the film re-inscribes itself into the Anglo-Saxon cultural region that was considered racially superior, by the Americans as well as by the Swedes.



The white as superior. Ericsson's secretary and the messenger with hat in hand.

Back to the Native Soil

Ericsson spent a considerable part of his life outside Sweden, mostly in the US, but he kept frequent contact with Sweden. For example, he often participated in debates in Swedish newspapers (Goldkuhl, 1961). Curiously, he often expressed his disapproval of the emigration to America; he thought that one should not abandon Sweden. In many letters to his relatives, he wrote about his love for his native country. Notably he wrote a sentence that in the historical writings about Ericsson has become widely spread and that is used in the film: “I prefer that my remains rest under a heap of gravel in Swedish soil than under a marble monument in this country (i.e. America)”.

Nevertheless, despite his view that one should not leave one's native country, Ericsson himself did leave and America became the refuge where he could develop his technical inventions. Although in a way he was too sophisticated a mind for Sweden, the film repeatedly expresses that he suffered from homesickness and depicts him listening to the aforemen-

tioned Swedish folk songs. He does not want to return to Sweden because, as he says, he does not want to lose his native country as he remembers it in his dreams. The discrepancy and collision between conceptions of the old home country and modern Sweden in reality is also a rather common theme in Swedish films about returning Swedish-Americans.

However, Ericsson's Swedish traits remain, and throughout the film his character is depicted as impregnated with Swedishness. He explicitly states that his actions are influenced by Swedishness, and his sentiments for Sweden become even more prominent towards the end of the film as well as towards the end of his life. In the final sequence of the film, the American branch of the Society of Värmland celebrates Ericsson with singing and flags. It is in this sequence that Jussi Björling sings *The Song of Värmland*, although we do not see Björling in the picture. The scene gathers the most important qualities in the film: the regional, the Swedishness, the popular, and in a way Swedish superiority through a couple of famous Swedes who represent technology and culture. To a person like the cinematic John Ericsson, permeated with the Swedish ideals that flourished in the 1930s and for decades to come, the national and regional location of one's final resting place is essential. The imagined pictures that flow through Ericsson's mind seemingly inspired by the song connect with the beginning of the film and the location of the origin of his Swedish characteristics. Different pictures of nature in Värmland, a church, simple houses and still lakes represent reminiscences in Ericsson's mind into which we gain insight. In the film, Värmland is a region associated with life and emotions, whereas America is solely a place for work and warfare. Especially the music in the film communicates these ideas, as discussed above.

The cinematic narrative is surrounded by birth and death, and these are in turn connected to the region of Värmland. In the song as well as in the mind screen, the native soil is glorified, and the native soil is the equivalent of life in Ericsson's mind. The soil and the country become antropomorphized – "The national soil is made human" (Medved, 2000: 83). The return of the corporal remains becomes a metaphor for a spiritual reunion, a motif quite common in films about the return of expatriates of various nationalities (Rains, 2007).

Reception in Sweden and America

In the interpretation furnished above, I have explored how the cinematic narrative constructs Swedishness and Swedish traits as connected to



Celebrating Ericsson with flags and Swedish songs.

and directly born out of the geographical place, here mostly the Swedish region of Värmland. In addition, I have shown how the film deploys several motifs connected to ideology and policies in the dawning welfare society, and how the film places Sweden as a region in Europe and at the same time depicts Swedes as well-reputed members of modern American society, while still trying to uphold the specifically Swedish as an ideal standard. All this is communicated through both style and narrative.

Now, in my interpretation I have taken for granted that Swedishness is the obvious subject matter of the film. However, is this presumption necessarily true? I will conclude with some remarks concerning the reception of the film by critics in Sweden and the US. What is conspicuous is that each country regarded the film as a homage to their respective nation. Although the reception in both countries regards the film as a celebration of their respective nation, there are differences in the level of appreciation. Just as Swedish music in the film suggests the popular, the regional, the individual, and the American music suggests the national,

the official and the collective, the critical writings emphasize the same in their interpretation of the national significance of the film.

The Swedish critics emphasized the Swedishness and the typical national characteristics: honesty, hardiness, stubbornness, practicality, idealism, dauntlessness and true kind-heartedness. Besides the usual discussion concerning the advantages or disadvantages of the achievements of the actors, the critics repeatedly return to assertions about the Swedishness of the film and the genuine Swedish quality. Although some critics rightfully consider the film too chauvinistic in its assertion that the battle was decisive for the American Civil War, this is considered less important in light of how the film manages to accentuate the national. The Swedish-American press emphasizes in its advertisement that Ericsson originated from Värmland, that the film is about the “assiduous, self-sacrificing and unpretentious creator of the Monitor”, otherwise they write mostly about Victor Sjöström and his career. To sum up, Swedish critics, and perhaps the Swedish audience, primarily noticed and appreciated the film’s depiction of Swedish characteristics, feelings, region and nation, all elements intertwined with one another. In my view, the music contributed greatly to this reading of the film.

The American critics, on the other hand, regarded the film as an American drama, and as the first American drama to be produced in Europe. By no means is the film interpreted as Swedish, and if the Swedish critics considered the film to be a tribute to Sweden, the Americans conceived of it as a tribute to America. In the marketing of the film in the United States as well as in the critical writings, it was stressed that it was the first film produced by one country as a goodwill gesture towards another country. Many critics also described the film as well made. Even if the language was Swedish, the Americans considered it an American film in many respects and often the film is entitled *The Great John Ericsson*. The idea that the film’s mission was a gesture of good will on the tercentenary celebration was not pure invention. In order to make this clear, and probably also to clarify this to the unaware American public, the film seems to have been produced in two versions. The Swedish diplomat, Count Folke Bernadotte, introduces the American version, tells about the jubilee, and then greets the American people (advertisement about the film in *Time* no. 38).

Obviously, the American critics regarded the film as American because of its treatment of American history, and this part of the history was of course very decisive for the development of the American nation. Some very prominent Americans are characters in the film, for example Abraham Lincoln and several naval officers. Corresponding to the Swedishness of the



American history. Ericsson demonstrates the Monitor to sceptical American naval officers.

film and its emphasis on the region and connected significations as discussed above, the US was in contrast represented as official, national and collective, and the music both expresses and constructs this interpretation.

In most cases, the American critics wrote positively about the film. As an example, the *New York Times* wrote that as far as they knew, this was the first foreign film to deal with American history (*New York Times*, 1938). With refreshing self-depreciation, the critic wrote that the American public is so used to American films depicting the history of other nations, that it is “a blessed shock to find ourselves on the receiving end for once.” (*New York Times*, 1938). The paper also wrote ironically about the idea that two Swedes were responsible for the total victory of the Union in the Civil War, but so did Swedish critics. All American critics found it peculiar that the characters are speaking Swedish – obviously, the film was perceived as so American that the Swedish language seemed discordant. One critic expressed the opposite opinion; the *Los Angeles Evening News* wrote that the film was so good “that it hardly seems incongruous

to see an American drama enacted by Europeans in a foreign tongue” (*Evening News*, 1938). The *New York Times* also found the film technically up to Hollywood standards, and that the players were first rate. The writer of the article had a very positive attitude towards the good-will gesture and meant that this was far more important than discussions about who won the war. Not all critics were that overwhelmingly positive though. William Boehnel of *The New York World Telegram* was less positive and generous. He found the film so “appallingly inefficient, at times ludicrous, the pictures naiveté is so pronounced” that he doubted the producers were serious (*New York World Telegram*, no date).

John Ericsson: Victor of Hampton Roads was a Swedish nationalistic film about the Swede, or the Swedes, who wins the American Civil War through Swedish qualities and the Swedish talent for invention. I am quite convinced that, to Swedish viewers at the time, this would be very clear, just as it is very clear in my interpretation that this is a national chauvinist film that served the Swedish politics and ideology of the time. However, the Swedishness and the national and regional aesthetics that for us seems so conspicuous were hardly perceptible to the Americans. The images of Sweden and the Swedish imagery in this film seem to be merely a Swedish conception. On the other hand, in the American conception, this is a film about American images and American imagery. You can find both aspect in the film, depending on your perspective. Perhaps the national identity and national characteristics are located only in the mind of the beholder.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 According to Wikipedia http://sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ack_V%C3%A4rmland,_du_sk%C3%B6na (20090818), this song is more likely to be known in English speaking countries as *Dear Old Stockholm* through among others Stan Getz and John Coltrane, who have paraphrased it extensively.
- 2 Actually, Charlie Petterson is a real figure although not a friend of Ericsson. He worked on the Monitor and loaded the canons with double portions of gunpowder, exactly as in the film. See Åberg, 1994.