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## **A new perspective on Americanisation - Interactions between Sweden and America in Swedish film culture in the 20s.**

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*Tommy Gustafsson*

This paper will discuss the Americanisation of the Swedish film culture and how this can be studied in a more fruitful way than what's been the case so far. First I will give some background to the problem, and then this new perspective on Americanisation will be illustrated by a few examples.

Research on the Swedish 20th century image of America will, almost without exception, touch on the subject of Americanisation. No matter if the questions are about emigration, economy, new techniques or working methods, these studies will often result in either a very strong positive or an equally negative view when it comes to America's influence on Sweden. This could be described as a kind of love-hate relationship from the Swedish point-of-view of America and Americanisation. When it comes to the cultural sphere, as in the rise of the new consumer and entertainment culture in the first decades of the 20th century, with the cinema as its forerunner, the view of Americanisation has been and still is a very negative one.

On reading the latest overview of Swedish film history, written in the 90s, it becomes apparent that the author sees this Americanisation of the Swedish entertainment culture as a solely negative one. He recreates an established notion that it was precisely Americanisation that destroyed the concept and style of the Swedish national cinema. This style was created in the "Golden years" of Swedish filmmaking between 1917-23, and had directors such as Victor Sjöström and Mauritz Stiller who made films that were received as great works of art. The films also became great commercial successes in Sweden and were exported to about 50 countries around the world.

It is possible to trace the consolidation of this solely negative image to the first overviews of Swedish film history, written in the 40s. This view can also be found in contemporary material, in film magazines which expressed a great national pride, partly because Swedish films did very well abroad. And every single news items about Swedish film published in the foreign press, for example in Britain, France, Belgium, Switzerland and the U.S., were recapitulated and commented on in the Swedish trade magazines during the "Golden years". Among these news items appears the story of a visit made by young David O. Selznick in England in 1923. Here, he met the opinion that "Sweden was about to overtake America's role as the world's leading film country". But Selznick had just brushed this remark aside as a sign of plain jealousy since the

English themselves weren't able to compete with America. In another example from 1921, a writer declared that "Swedish film" has become a sign of quality and it now needs to be protected, partly because the domestic film has to keep up its high standards, but also as a reaction against a foreign film company which started to advertise its films as "Swedish films"

This shows some of the impact that Swedish film indeed had. But as Andrew Higson has made clear in his article "The Concept of National Cinema", one can't simply place a national cinema on equal footing with the films produced in a certain country. This latter notion disregards the consuming part of cinema culture, where films from other countries, especially Hollywood films, have an important impact on the ways the audience sees film and how a country produces films. To reduce a whole country's film production to a national cinema or a national style, means that most of the films produced are excluded from that which is coded national - and as a side-effect that the contents of the excluded films are forgotten. This, of course, provides space for the canonised "national" films to articulate and construct an imaginary and homogeneous national identity and culture that apparently seems to be shared by a nation's citizens.

Among the body of films produced in Sweden between 1917-23, only around 20 have been canonised, some by contemporary critics and some afterwards, giving them a place in the Golden years canon, for example *The Stroke of Midnight* (1921 - *Körkarlen*) and *Sir Arne's Treasure* (1919 - *Herr Arnes Pengar*). However, what this canonical perspective doesn't tell us is that comedies and less expensive films were also exported during the first half of the so called "Golden years". Here the First World War played a crucial role with the changed economic conditions that opened up a space in the world market for Swedish film production.

This more pragmatic view is also something that becomes visible in the discussion in the trade papers. The writers were aware that the new economic conditions didn't apply after the end of the war. The collaborations with other countries during the second half of the 20s, creating the first "Europuddings", were also hailed as a counterattack on the financial dominance of American films, and not as an act against the Americanisation of culture. The films produced, particularly in collaboration with Germany, were also almost unanimously applauded as great modern works of arts. These films also went very well at the box-office in Sweden, Germany and the other Scandinavian countries. They were however not exported to 50 countries, a fact which afterwards have been interpreted as though nobody wanted these films and that the failure was due to the Americanisation of the Swedish film production.

By not considering the factual economic circumstances and reasons at the time, this early Europuddings are now stigmatised as the very essence of Americanisation - and furthermore, this

sort of Americanisation dragged the Swedish national style down into the mud. But there were hundreds of other films made during this period, films that have never been discussed due to the exclusion. Some of them did very well and some failed at the box-office - and this independently if they were "Americanised" or not.

The question is if this easily can be reduced to Americanisation? There are primarily two facts that speak against this notion. Firstly that the Swedish national style only can be connected to a few of the Swedish silent films, and secondly because of the established notion that the silent film were more international in their character than sound films, with interrelations that went both ways. Not only from America to Sweden and the rest of Europe, but also the other way around with directors, actors, screenplay writers and export of films to America, even though the export had some trouble with the American import restrictions. Instead of simply looking at this Americanisation as a bad influence, it would be more fruitful to see it as an interrelation between several film cultures where something new is created instead of plain copies; a sort of analogue to the pidgin language that emerges in the encounter between two cultures.

In Sweden during the 20s, no governmental regulations or subsidies came to aid the domestic film industry, as was the case in many other European countries when the competition from American hardened. This is not to say that the question of Americanisation was heavily debated. It was. Several motions were presented in the Swedish parliament with the intention to put a stop to the American film's economic and cultural advance in Sweden. Interestingly enough motions recommended that the government initiate protectionist measures to support the Swedish film industry, but they did this with arguments such as that the Americanisation more and more took possession of Swedish mentality, dissolving important parts of Swedish culture - which implied a protection of the Swedish national style. In other words, culture and mercantilism merged and became inseparable entities. The cultural arguments is just varnish that cover the underlying economic reasons since everybody knew that only a couple of the Swedish films were considered as art by contemporary critics.

One example of the international silent movie and its double-acting between Europe and America is the Italian actor Rudolf Valentino's great popularity in American films that spread around the world in the 20s. As Gaylyn Studlar shows in her study, *This Mad Masquerade*, Valentino was never seen as an American male in the US, even if he was marketed with a mysterious past in South America. The films of Valentino were very popular among women. For that reason these films often came to be seen as especially created by and for women with the consequence that the masculinity of Valentino became an ideal based on the desire of female

consumers. In the 20s there were also a noticeable anxiety about this effeminate masculinity, based on female consumption.

From a Swedish-European point-of-view, Valentino's masculinity was discussed in quite different terms. Here he was worshipped because he was able to fill a performance with life and soul - he was able to make the spectator feel. But he was not seen as a matinee star, because a matinee star was just good-looking, a surface with nothing underneath. Valentino, on the other hand, was a fully-fledged actor who could work well with both small and large means. The Europeans thought the American attitude towards Valentino depended on the fact that they simply didn't understand him – he was a bit too sophisticated for the naive Americans. In Europe this naivety wasn't as strong because, as a film magazine writer puts it: "we are children of an older and more distinguished culture where Valentino's exquisite nuances is met with greater understanding." While Valentino was seen as "the Other" in America, in Europe he was seen as being part of European culture.

From Studlar's American perspective several opposite examples occur where Americans saw Europe, and its masculinity, as over-civilised and effeminate. The prime example that is usually is picked as evidence of this negative Americanisation, is that Sweden made its own version of Rudolf Valentino by engaging the South American actor Enrique Rivero for three films by the end of the 20s. This is not unique for Sweden. In the US there were several imitators of Valentino to cash in on his fame, among them Ramon Navarro. But none of these actors were exact copies. In Sweden, Enrique Rivero was adjusted to fit in somewhere between the taste of the audience and the established society's damnation of Americanisation. Both he and the films he participated in were thus shaped by several different conditions and this is an example on how Americanisation obtains a whole new meaning in the encounter with a different culture. Rivero could therefore be cast as a passionate but moderately dangerous Latino lover in one film, and in the next play a decent Swedish navy lieutenant.

The case with Valentino and his imitators can be seen as a transatlantic dialogue, where the battle stood between an effeminate European masculinity and an impulsive childish American masculinity. This could take several expressions, as was the case with Enrique Rivero.

Another example on how the Americanisation was handled can be seen in the Swedish film comedy *Black Rudolf* (1928 - *Svarte Rudolf*). Here the filmmakers choose to mould the Valentino phenomenon with the consuming and film bitten young male. *Black Rudolf* is a male cinematic fantasy, which initially parodies Valentino's sheikh films. The exterior is a desert landscape with a big Bedouin tent. In the tent a married woman waits, not on her husband but on Sheikh Ali-Cazar: "The pride of Nubia, the young lion of the desert – a terror for all ruthless bandits and

jealous husbands", as the inter title reads. We see Ali Cazar, played by the comedian Fridolf Rhudin, in a complete sheikh outfit with turban and cloak á la Valentino. The young female beauty is however kidnapped, and when Ali-Cazar hears about this, he takes up the chase on his white steed and rides at full gallop over the sand dunes to rescue her. He catches and overpowers the bandits, and then he confidently strolls over to meet his beloved.

In this moment the camera takes a step backwards and reveals a screen and an audience; everything that has been shown up to now is a film within the film. When the hero is about to kiss the girl on the screen, he gets disturbed by a palm leaf, that, through another association cut, turns out to be an overthrown plant that irritates the half asleep Rudolf Carlsson in his bed. This other changeover in turn reveals that everything has been his dream, but not a dream of being a manly man like Valentino (that is, from a European perspective), but of being an actor who plays the role of Valentino. Rudolf Carlsson's dream isn't about ideal masculinity, but to make it in the movie business.

The different cinematic layers with distinct inter-textual references to American film complicate the very phenomenon of Americanisation as a cultural disease and the transatlantic dialogue concerning masculinity. The movie fanatic Rudolf Carlsson is a grown up man who has covered his walls with pictures of movie stars, while the contemporary anxiety concerning Americanisation and the influence of films were aimed at youths of both sexes, who were believed to be misled by the muddled and untraditional American ideas on how life should be lived. The fact that the Swedish filmmakers chose to portray an adult man as movie crazed, contains a large amount of irony aimed back on those who saw the Americanisation of the Swedish society as threatening. As many other comedies, this one contains a subversive element that can be said to ridicule the whole Valentino cult. At the same time, however, the film also has a laugh at the Swedish male's attitude towards the consumption based masculinity, by showing the imaginary final result: a man that has, from young age, been exposed to all this Americanisation.

In the film we get to know that Rudolf Carlsson works as a shopkeeper at a department store and that his life "also is a desert in the daily grind". Nobody wants his manuscript on liquor smuggling, and while waiting for success, he does a close reading of the book "The Art of filming", while practising intimate love scenes on the department store's dummies to the boss's great annoyance.

After this the film enters a new stadium where Rudolf is conned to think that his film manuscript has been accepted, when the truth is that the filming is just a front for real liquor smuggling. The story ends with the capture of the smugglers, but it takes the whole length of the

film for Rudolf to discover that it's all been a con. When he by chance passes a real filming in the end, and gets offered a part, he declines by saying: "Don't you try that with me, sir. From now on I'm going to earn my pay in an honest way!"

This humorous example - for the detractors of Americanisation surely a deterrent one - of the new consumer based masculinity is thus returned to order in the end of the film. A relieved reviewer in one daily paper described this as a "recovery from megalomania". Before the end, though, the film moves around in a dream world with clear connotations of Hollywood's dream factory where, according to the detractors, a false masculinity was produced that had, just like Rudolf Carlsson's own dream world, little to do with reality. Or at least with the reality, with its norms, that the detractors preferred.

But the spectators of the 20s did have distance to what they saw in the cinema. The whole film was undeniably built on the fact that the viewers could recognise all the inter-textual references to American film and the different kinds of masculinities in them. To dissociate oneself from something, at the same time that one knows one's way about, is an established narration that gives room for allusions of all kinds, and in this case the contemporary society's highly complex relation to masculinity. The image of the consumer based masculinity is therefore, if exaggerated, not an all-fictive one, but created on a contemporary society's disparate ideas and prejudices.

*Black Rudolf* got predominantly good reviews with the sense that the filmmakers had "accomplished a cheerful joke with the film crazed Fridolf Rhudin". The intricate opening of the film was the most mentioned scene, often described as "brilliant" since "it immediately gave the viewer access to the hero's dream world and personality." More interesting still are the reviews that didn't care about the film and the reasons they stated. Firstly, there are those who thought that Fridolf Rhudin's "helplessness" weren't acted and that he actually was "monotonous and not so laughable" or even "ridiculous". In other words, Rhudin's personality (in which masculinity is a part) was connected to the fictive Rudolf-character in a way which reveals a scepticism towards the whole phenomenon of the film crazed male.

There is another group of reviewers who complained about the actor's performance as a whole, and especially about the exaggerated acting during the fictitious filming of Rudolf Carlsson's liquor smuggling manuscript. The acting in these scenes is deliberately exaggerated with clear allusions to American film melodramas, something that yet again points to the two-way interaction of the international silent film. But it also tells us about the sensitivity that surrounded Americanisation and consumption, since something that obviously was a parody, deliberately was misunderstood as yet another Americanisation of Swedish film - and in prolongation, of Swedish



society. Conversely there was a majority of reviewers that didn't see this as particularly problematic, and instead both noticed and appreciated the filmmakers playfulness with consumer based masculinity.

These examples have shown that the so called Americanisation of the Swedish film production isn't easily reducible to the few films canonised as belonging to the "Golden years" of Swedish filmmaking. A vital exchange continued, with a transatlantic dialogue between American and European filmmakers. It is true that some saw this as something bad which undermined the traditional society, but many others saw it as something new and good. The Swedish filmmakers were aware of this contemporary turbulence surrounding the film and consumer culture and they also put it into use in their films, using inter-textual references to Hollywood which the Swedish audience knew well. And in the process they did not make American copies but distinct Swedish films with American allusions.

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