

# Swedes Visualize America: The Dynamics of Post-War Americanization as Mediatization

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In his influential book *Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things* from 1988, Dick Hebdige contributed to the early discussions within cultural studies about how to conceptualize the presence of American culture abroad. He forcefully argued that “Americanization” did not have the homogenizing effects that mass culture theorists had feared for decades:

Rather, American popular culture – Hollywood films, advertising images, packaging, clothes and music – offers a rich iconography, a set of symbols, objects and artifacts which can be assembled and re-assembled by different groups in a literally limitless number of combinations.<sup>1</sup>

Reading Hebdige today is indicative of two important discourses, one of which has become the axiomatic starting-point for anyone interested in the topic, whereas the other one remains highly under-theorized. The first is the insight among scholars about the utterly problematic nature of the concept of “Americanization.”<sup>2</sup> Against definitions that evoke ideas about an ominous one-way transmission, American cultural influence is

1. Dick Hebdige, *Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things* (London: Routledge, 1988), 74.

2. See for example Rob Kroes, *If You've Seen One You've Seen the Mall: Europeans and American Mass Culture* (Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996); Richard Pells, *Not Like US: How Europeans Have Loved, Hated and Transformed American Culture Since World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 1997); Erik Åsard, “The Limits of Americanization in Swedish Politics,” in *The Swedish-American Historical Quarterly*, Vol. L, No. 3 (1999); Reinhold Wagnleitner and Elaine Tyler May, eds., *Here, There and Everywhere: The Foreign Politics of American Popular Culture* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2000); Heide Fehrenbach and Uta G. Poiger, eds., *Transactions, Transgressions, Transformations: American Culture in Western Europe and Japan* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000); James Gilbert, *Explorations of American Culture* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2000).

here conceptualized as an interactive process. While spread across the world, American culture is transformed and subjected to “transculturation” or “glocalization.” In every contact zone between cultures, cultural content is hybridized, selectively integrated and ultimately altered. This in fact parallels insights in cultural and media studies about communication as a cultural process, in which both media producers and consumers partake in the production of meaningful discourse. It is also the essential wisdom of Ulf Hannerz when he made the claim that American culture is “creolized and creolizing,” and that it is a resource that can be made use of in various ways.<sup>3</sup> This dominant perspective generates a focus on the receptional end of cultural diffusion. Accordingly, scholars give attention to how aspects of American culture are transformed by different settings at different points in time. As Heide Fehrenbach and Uta G. Poiger point out in one of the many recently published books on the subject: “There is no monolithic ‘American culture’ but only perhaps an endless stream of image-ideals: culturally and subjectively processed varieties of American culture that serve specific yet endlessly evolving functions for consumer populations.”<sup>4</sup> But equally interesting are the subsequent “imaginary Americas” in different countries, cultural contexts, and time periods.

### **America and Visuality: Here, There and Just About Nowhere...**

The phrasing “an endless stream of image-ideals” points to the second trajectory that I wish to draw from Hebdige. He did not use the concept of iconography by coincident. In effect, visibility can be said to hover over European imaginings of America. The academic interest in “images of America” – a discourse that has for decades engaged European and Swedish scholars – blatantly attests to this circumstance.<sup>5</sup> Attempts to remodel and advance the issue are, however, discernible in many dif-

3. Ulf Hannerz, “American Culture. Creolized, Creolizing”, in Erik Åsard, ed., *American Culture: Creolized, Creolizing* (Uppsala: Uppsala North American Studies Reports, No. 10, 1988).

4. Fehrenbach and Poiger, *Transactions, Transgressions, Transformations*, xxix.

5. In the Swedish context, see for example Harald Elovsson, “Den liberala amerikabilden i Sverige,” in Lars Åhnebrink, ed., *Amerika och Norden* (Stockholm: Publications of the Nordic Association for American Studies, 1964); Nils Runeby, *Den nya världen och den gamla: Amerikabild och emigrationsuppfattning i* →

ferent approaches today. This ongoing debate is not by any means obsolete and the discussion is continually instilled with new meanings and dimensions in a world in which the U.S. continues to hold a unique position.

One reason for the magnetism of the concept of the "image" is of course that although "images" commonly refer to comprehensions, ideas, and ideologies, these are strikingly often mediated or made sense of through visual media or visual forms.<sup>6</sup> Still the repercussions of visuality itself as a theoretical problem have been substantially underplayed. As is well established, America has since its discovery been the creation of European wishful thinking.<sup>7</sup> "America" is as much a myth and a dream for Europeans, as it is a geographical and physical place. But equally important, Europeans have constructed the country into an imaginary nation in a literal sense, into a visual and visualized place. In the European imagination, there is to this day something essentially visual (or at least simulated) about American culture. Recently Jean Kempf and François Brunet have pondered this important precondition for European attitudes toward the American nation.<sup>8</sup> From a philosophical point of view they delineate the many ways in which America and the image have

*Sverige 1820-1860* (Stockholm: Svenska bokförlaget, 1969); Eva Block, *Amerikabilden i svensk dagspress 1948-68* (Lund: Liber läromedel, 1976); Lars Wendelius, *Bilden av Amerika i svensk prosafiktio 1890-1914* (Uppsala: Skrifter utgivna av Litteraturvetenskapliga institutionen vid Uppsala universitet No. 16, 1982); Gunnar Eidevall, *Amerika i svensk 1900-talslitteratur: Från Gustaf Hellström till Lars Gustafsson* (Stockholm: Almqvist och Wiksell International, 1983); Olof Ruin, *Amerikabilder: Anteckningar om USA från 50-tal till 90-tal* (Stockholm: Natur och kultur, 1994); Tom O'Dell, *Culture Unbound: Americanization and Everyday Life in Sweden* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 1997); Amanda Lagerkvist, "Just for fun: Bilder av maskulturkonsumtionens Amerika," in Peder Aléx och Johan Söderberg, eds., *Förbjudna njutningar: Spår från konsumtionskulturens historia i Sverige* (Stockholm: Podium, 2001); Martin Alm, *Americanitis: Amerika som sjukdom eller läkemedel: Svenska berättelser om USA åren 1900-1939* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2003).

6. In her thesis Eva Block summarized the usage of the concept of the image. Within the social sciences and in historical scholarship, it has been common to talk about opinions as well as attitudes in terms of "images." The image might refer to a political stance in a particular issue or as in Block's own employment of the concept of an "image of America" where it denotes the complete, cognitive, affective and evaluative structure in the agent (a world picture). The image of America is for Block above all interesting in the way it changes. Block also accounts for a second critical tradition, which uses the concept of images to describe false depictions of the world, which create a pseudo-relationship to it. Block, *Amerikabilden*, 13-14.

7. Sigmund Skard, "Amerika i europeiskt liv," in Åhnebrink, ed., *Amerika och Norden*; J. Martin Evans, *America: The View from Europe* (Stanford: Stanford Alumni Association, 1976), 22f; Kroes, *If You've Seen One You've Seen the Mall*, 123; Pellis, *Not Like US*, 2.

8. Jean Kempf and François Brunet, "Avant Propos," in *Revue Française d'Études Américaines* (No. 89, June 2001).

been fused throughout European intellectual history, from de Tocqueville's conceptualization of America as an imitation to Baudrillard's notion of the simulacrum. The point I wish to make is that this historical tradition of amalgamating America and the image was reinforced by the fact that in the twentieth century, American culture was (or was perceived to be) a culture of images – or “image-ideals” – of films, ads, colored magazines, television, comic books, etc. While the media and imagery are ubiquitous in debates about “images of America” or the dissemination of American culture in the twentieth century, the theoretical ramifications of this correlation are seldom recognized.

In the following I will discuss what I argue is an underdeveloped inter-relationship between “images of America” and visuality and visual media. Visual culture has in the last decade emerged as a field of interdisciplinary research concerned with ways of seeing as much as with images themselves and other visual forms. The focus is on the relationship between the viewer and the viewed and on how we make use of images in constructing narratives about society.<sup>9</sup> But as Karin Becker has emphasized, visual culture also implies that we contemplate the relationship between vision and knowledge.<sup>10</sup> And, she maintains, we must ask ourselves why people time and again give their experiences a visual form in the modern age. I think it is important to look closer at what Rob Kroes has called “America's visual Lingua Franca” from the perspective of media theory and visual culture. To achieve a richer understanding of those “images of America” we need to grasp, as Kroes argues, what mediation implies.<sup>11</sup> In addition, we also need to consider how mediatization and visuality play into the European constructions of the American nation.<sup>12</sup>

9. See e.g., Nicholas Mirzoeff, ed., *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999); Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, eds., *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

10. Karin Becker, “Bilden i den visuella kulturen,” in Carl Heideken, ed., *Xpocseptember Stockholm Fotofestival 1998* (Stockholm: Stockholm fotofestival, 1998).

11. Kroes, *If You've Seen One You've Seen the Mall*, 176.

12. The point of departure in this essay is the media culture of 1950s Sweden, which I unearth in my Ph.D. project. In my forthcoming thesis, which deals with America in the Swedish imagination in 1945-65, I explore the dimensions of gender, media and visuality in post-war travelogues. By contextualizing these journeys in relation to a range of other media texts, I encircle how traveling Swedes visualized and made sense of America in this period.

## Swedes Visualize America

As media scholars have persistently stressed, the twentieth century saw an increase in the permeation of media in our lives and our experiences, of mediatization.<sup>13</sup> The post-war years saw an acceleration of these processes. The Swedish post-war mediascape was imprinted by an ascendant presence of American media technologies and genres, in the form of comic books, television, films, the cinemascope system and weekly magazines modeled after *Life*, etc. Among other things this cultural upsurge and plurality of new media forms produced “knowledge” about other cultures, as much as it further formed Sweden into a national collective.<sup>14</sup> Another important trait of this new media culture was the ubiquity of visual forms. Yet another crucial aspect of the time was the cultural Cold War. The United States Information Agency used (visual) media in films, books, booklets, journals, and so on to counter communist ideology and convince Europeans of the pre-eminence of the American way of life. More than any other foreign culture, America entered into our living rooms and in our lives. What did this mean for Swedes in constructing their own “images of America”? As I argue in my Ph.D. project, Swedes in the post-war years were prone to regard America through mediated imagery. But at the same time – bearing evidence to the supreme role of visual media in the media culture of the 1950s and illustrative of the dynamics involved here – Swedes were themselves actively engaged in visualizing their notions of America. In particular, Swedish travelers gave their experiences a distinctly visual appearance.

On Reverend C.G. Hjelm’s book cover many of these “visualizing strategies” were manifest (Figure 1). He portrayed America as something he subjectively looked at through his American spectacles, as the title of his travelogue suggested. At the same time glasses are used to enhance our eyesight and subsequently the authority to present a more truthful version of the place was imparted to this travel writer. Visualization also took place in this montage of mediated childhood fantasies where the

13. Ulf Hannerz, “Genomsyrade av medier: Kulturer, samhällen och medvetanden av idag,” in Ulf Hannerz, ed., *Medier och kulturer* (Stockholm: Carlssons, 1990); Tim O’Sullivan et al., *Studying the Media: An Introduction* (London: Edward Arnold, 1994); Johan Fornäs, *Cultural Theory and Late Modernity* (London: Sage, 1995); Andrew Tolson, *Mediation: Text and Discourse in Media Studies* (London: Arnold, 1996).

14. David Morley, *Home Territories: Media, Mobility and Identity* (London: Routledge, 2000), 9; Orvar Löfgren, “Medierna i nationsbygget. Hur press, radio och TV gjort Sverige svenskt”, in Ulf Hannerz, ed., *Medier och kulturer*.



Figure 1: The cover of C.G. Hjelm's *Genom mina amerikanska glasögon* (1949).

urban street merged with the pre-modern symbol of a native American, a boy on his horse and an aerial shot of the Statue of Liberty surrounded our traveling hero who confidently smiled back at the viewer. In another example, a textbook intended for high school children from 1950, the nation was visualized in “glimpses,” bearing evidence to another mode of visualization, expressing less of Hjelm’s omniscience, and more of a fractional viewpoint (Figure 2).<sup>15</sup>

This approach was also an important aspect of the Swedish post-war relationship to America, in which the country was perceived as difficult to fathom. There were numerous vindications in contemporary media texts, of America as something enigmatic and constantly in motion, which made a comprehensive overview practically impossible (even though zooming in on these icons, the Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building, and the Stars and Stripes was an attempt to do exactly that).<sup>16</sup> America was the emblem of a fragmented modernity. This cover could also, however, be interpreted as congratulatory of the grandeur of America, of a place which was magnificent in all its plurality.

### Coca-colonization or Creolization?

From the media historian’s point of view, of paramount importance here is of course the fact that “images of America” are mediated through different genres, different media forms, and different symbolic systems (with different modes of address and different communicative aims) that arguably change the story in decisive ways.<sup>17</sup> We need to raise questions about the specific characteristics of constructing America in different media: in advertising for Swedish products in a colored magazine, in a travelogue published as a book or transmitted by radio, in the form of a

15. Immanuel Björkhagen, *America: Glimpses of the USA: A Reader for Swedish Schools* (Stockholm: Svenska Bokförlaget Bonniers, 1950).

16. Amanda Lagerkvist, “Amerikaresan: Kön och masskultur i svenska reseskildringar från USA 1945-65,” in *Hjärnstorm*, No. 67/68, 1999.

17. Göran Bolin, “Vad är ett medium? En guide genom mediegaxen,” in Ulla Carlsson et al., eds., *Kommunikationens korsningar: Möten mellan olika traditioner och perspektiv i medieforskningen* (Göteborg: Nordicom, 1994).

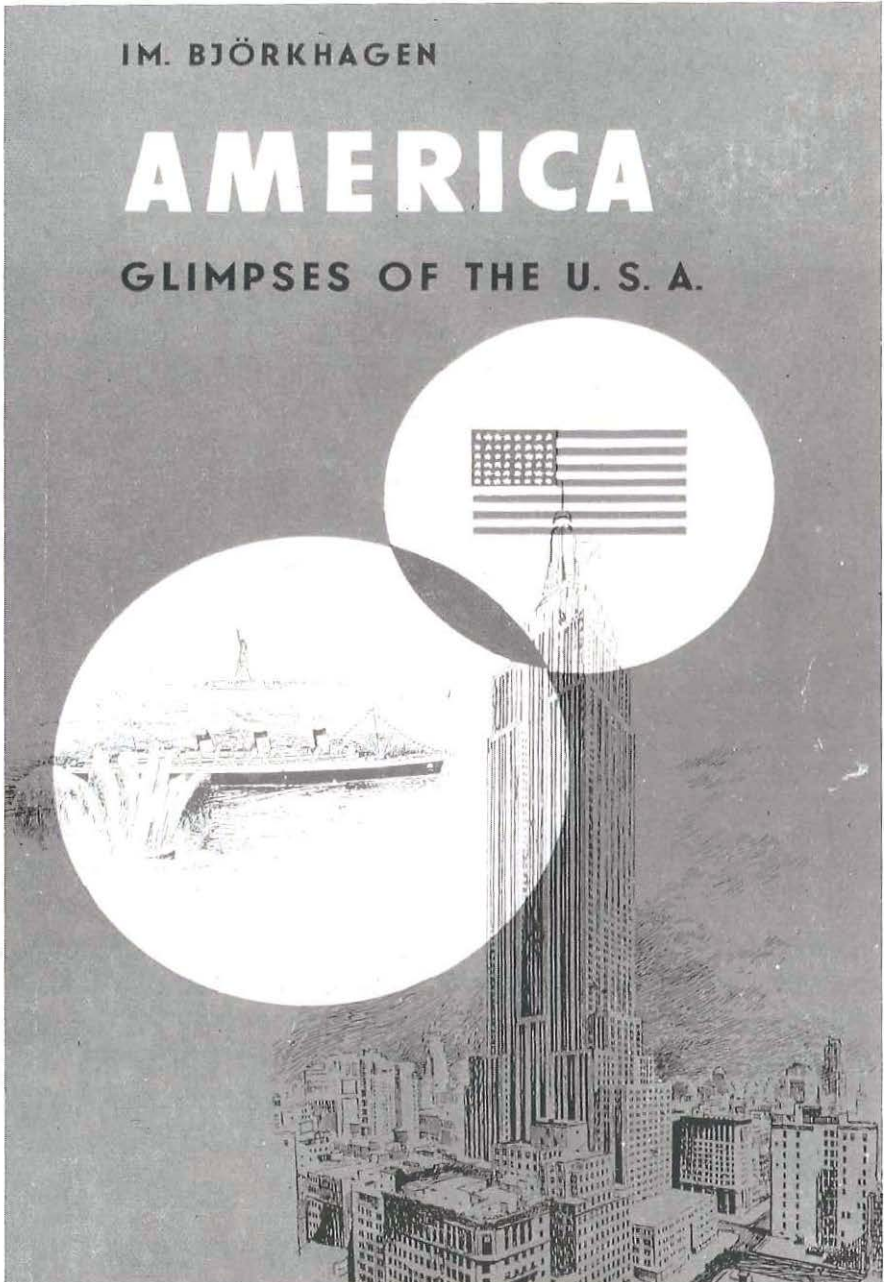


Figure 2: The cover of *America: Glimpses of the U.S.A.* (1950).



political editorial in a newspaper, in a film or in a textbook with its educational mode of address. To qualify answers to questions about visualization, moreover, I argue that we need to look closer at the culturally and contextually specific meanings involved in appropriating the familiar content of American media.

Media critics and advocates of the thesis of cultural imperialism would in all probability describe Hjälm's book cover as a prime example of Americanization as mediatization. They would find ample evidence of how his mind became "managed by the media industries." They would argue that Sweden had been "coca-colonized," that Swedish attitudes and anticipations were manufactured by Hollywood or the United States Information Agency, since the photographic material reflected American national icons and its "way of life" uncritically and at times laudatory. They would question in what way these examples verify the general pledge that American images and symbols were creolized. From this point of view, the fact that the textbook cover draws on another mode of visualization expressive of an image of America that was constantly moving out of sight – a place that was impossible to grasp in all its dynamic mobility – could actually be said to reflect the *American* ideals of exceptionalism and movement. This argument is further strengthened by the fact that parts of the book were written by the United States Information Service in Sweden which also "benevolently assisted with advice concerning the choice of literature and illustrations etc."<sup>18</sup>

I would like to point out some dimensions that complicate such a view. The strong thesis of cultural imperialism is refuted by the fact that Swedes did not imagine America exclusively through powerful media representations.<sup>19</sup> What these Swedes brought into the picture was of course their own political, national and visual culture. Inherent in this contact zone were also (among other things) European and Swedish traditions of visualization, in which Europeans have been privileged to embody a position of superiority toward other cultures. Visualizing is also part of the historical record of anthropology and patriarchal Euro-

18. Björkhagen, "Förord," in *America: Glimpses of the USA*.

19. The thesis is also refuted by the fact that Swedish travelers to the U.S., while fancying many cultural products from America, simultaneously expressed a seminal critique of the ideological power of the American mass media in the immediate post-war years. Lagerkvist, "Just for fun."

pean traveling. To be able to make sense of the Other, s/he has been visualized in this Western tradition. In the case of America, this was played out when Swedish travelers expressed an unconditional and absolute view of the country, through a confirmation of what they already knew to be "true" via those media events that preceded their journeys as well as through their position as "well-informed Swedes." This approach I term the "medial attitude" (borrowing from Edward Said's notion of a textual attitude) which means that our preconceived ideas of a place – constructed through prior textual representations – are taken to express the unequivocal truth about the visited culture. Hjelm's visualization in this way expressed a conviction about the essential character of America and the Americans.

As I have shown with regard to the cover of *America: Glimpses of the U.S.A.*, this illustration also evokes more than one possible reading from a Swedish post-war horizon. Hence, the meanings of those icons arguably shifted when a Swede/European looked at them and/or reproduced them through words and images. So, in assessing the connections between Swedes' images of America and American media power, the Swedish and European traditions of visualization have to be accounted for as a specific kind of "creolization."<sup>20</sup>

Some 20 years ago, Gunnar Eidevall explored the predominantly positive attitude toward America in Sweden in this period.<sup>21</sup> These sentiments echoed much of Alva and Gunnar Myrdal's influential and almost germinal celebration of the country in their *Kontakt med Amerika* from 1941 or Herbert Tingsten's praise of the nation in the late forties and early fifties for that matter. The claim I wish to make is that although this position was underlined on a political and ideological level in many media texts of the time, exploring visual culture opens up new dimensions to the relationship. Charting this route makes it possible to lay bare a crucial field of tension in the process of "Americanization," i.e., in what I

20. Bringing in the discursive repertoire of European and Swedish traveling into the analysis in order to describe the visualization process as an active mode of creolization as I have done, is however not to exhaust the matter. It is also fruitful to regard travelers' way of seeing in relation to their media culture and to the communication technologies they employed. See my paper "'We See America': Mediatized and Mobile Gazes in Swedish Scriptings of New York in Post War Travelogues," Paper presented at "3 Cities. New York, Chicago, Los Angeles. Cultures and Representations II," Nottingham University, April 4-5, 2003.

21. Eidevall, *Amerika i svensk 1900-talslitteratur*, 98.

describe as a cultural and national (as well as physical) *journey* from the old European center to the new one towards which everything gravitated: America.

### Conclusion

In closing, I would like to suggest that the important trajectories of “images of America” could be fruitfully embarked upon by pondering the significance of the mediated relationship to the nation and of visuality itself for these understandings. Questions about what mediatization is, how mediation works, and why visualization is employed should in themselves be the subject of a debate about an imagined America. In addition, genre is indispensable for moving ahead on this task. Consequently, I argue that on the matter of “images of America” there are several as yet practically unexplored but important points of convergence between media studies and American Studies.

The tendency among many historians to regard the media in general and visual media in particular, as *either* a compliment to more trustworthy sources *or* (to the contrary) as a plain and simple source of information, pertains to the discussions about Americanization and “images of America” as well. Likewise, many scholars concerned with Americanization see the media as a co-product of commercialization.<sup>22</sup> Here I wish to draw attention to the media as a primary site of meaning-making in relation to America. The media is of even greater consequence in what one might call the business of transatlantic identity work, i.e., in the constructions of Americanism vs. Europeanism, than has been heretofore recognized. This is of course true especially for the thesis of cultural imperialism, where the media is reduced to means of economic and military control of other cultures. But the claim is also relevant in relation to debates about “images of America,” since the meanings of the media go deep and diverge at the same time. The media is, when placed within culture and society, a driving force in its own right in cultural transforma-

22. See, e.g., Richard F. Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

tions and transactions. But in delineating the complex dynamics of "Americanization" as mediatization, it is urgent that we highlight the many different and contextually dependent and negotiated meanings of media and visuality.

On the other hand, media scholars have a good deal to learn from the field of American Studies. For example, the trait in the history of mass communication research itself, of what W.J.T. Mitchell has called fearing the image, crisscrosses media discourse in which the media and in particular American media, have been traditionally regarded as a problem.<sup>23</sup> I suggest that this intellectual current could be productively historicized within the discourse of European imaginings of America. The fear of the image is often also from a European point of view a fear of America, and in its turn this anxiety encapsulates a range of dystopian social narratives about mass culture, modernity, and change.

Media scholars have long since left the naive notion of "images" (as either reflecting or distorting "reality") behind, and rightly moved on to constructivism and representation. I argue however that in the case of imaginary America, the concept of the "image" is outstandingly apt and central in its potential to bring into light the lingering of visuality in this discourse and the age old practices of visualization. But sticking to the concept also makes it possible to harness the more traditional metaphorical employment where it denotes ideas, ideologies, opinions, narratives, discourses, or attitudes. Hence, readdressing the issue of "images of America" by adding dimensions of visuality and mediatization, provides a promising possibility of moving forward in the field.

23. W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).