The Specter of the Center or ‘Post-Americanization’
America*

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ABSTRACT

This article revisits the perennial question of American influences on national cultures through a reading of a Swedish military recruitment commercial that pitches stock images associated with American popular culture against images meant to express ‘Swedishness.’ Structured by an array of enticing visual, logical, and ideological loops, the commercial constructs ‘America’ as a (benign) specter and turns it into a glocal phenomenon. At first sight a banal—if witty—specimen of Americanization, the commercial, I argue, ingeniously builds on the target audience’s familiarity with and shrewd recognition of American influences and, troubling the emotional charge conventionally ascribed to the processes of Americanization, posits a ‘post-Americanization’ America.

We make room for ‘America’ in a context of meaning and significance that is ours.

Rob Kroes, “Americanization: What Are We Talking About?”

I.

The Swedish semiotic space, like many other national spaces, is saturated with images that are recognizably ‘American.’ Sometimes with dismay and indignation, sometimes with shy pride, Swedes tend to claim that theirs is the most Americanized country in the world. This mixture of affects was masterfully exploited in a commercial that was shown in Swedish movie theaters and on Swedish television in March 2011. The commercial is notable because of the combination of an unabashed invocation of ‘America’ and the sly defiance of it through pitching stock images associated with American popular culture against images meant to express ‘Swedishness.’ The implications of this commercial, however, extend well beyond the brilliant spectacle—and spectacularity—of encounters between

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1 For an excellent, if brief, overview of the discourse of Americanization in Sweden, see O’Dell, 19-44.

2 I use the concepts of ‘America’ and ‘American’ as well as ‘Sweden’ and ‘Swedish’ for the sake of verbal convenience; there should be little need for pointing out that such concepts homogenize heterogeneous and disorderly realities. The commercial as much references American
national clichés. Overtly constructing a disjunctive relationship between the two national identities, the commercial turns out to propose conjunctive ties between them; explicitly playing out the global (and central) role of ‘America’ against the local (and peripheral) one of ‘Sweden,’ the commercial, as I will show, braids them together in particularly rich and complex ways. At first sight a banal, if witty, specimen of Americanization, the commercial, I argue, ingeniously builds on the target audience’s familiarity with American influences and, troubling the emotional charge conventionally ascribed to the processes of Americanization, posits a ‘post-Americanization’ America.

Americanization has of course been a perennial topic in American Studies, especially among non-American Americanists working at the geographical, but not intellectual, periphery of the United States. The impact of American culture—above all American mass culture, oftentimes alleged to be projected by Hollywood cinema—experienced in virtually every corner of the world has been explored, explained, and decried by innumerable scholars. The European Americanists have been exceedingly busy tracing American influences on national cultures and ascertaining differences between the United States, perceived as constituting the center, and its European peripheries. As David Ellwood and Mel Van Elteren remind us:

> Among European observers of American mass culture, from John Ruskin and Ernest Renan to Umberto Eco and Jean Baudrillard, there has always been an awareness of the critical difference, of the “Otherness” of American culture compared to European culture. More often than not, the difference was cast in terms of a critique of American culture, if not in terms of a wholesale rejection of it. The critique of American culture served the defense of a Europeanism [...]. The guardians of European “high” culture have traditionally been at the forefront of attacks on American influence in all its forms and have invariably targeted mass culture.

Tracking the ‘invasion’ of American culture and local forms of resistance to this invasion, often dubbed as anti-Americanism, is so widespread and intense that ‘American Influences’ or ‘Americanization Studies’ can be seen as a subfield of American Studies. Theorized in different ways at various points in time, “burdened by its history” (O’Dell 39), Americanization is doubtlessly a troublesome concept, its processes as alluring as they are exasperating. This knotty play of attraction and resentment toward its object of study ‘America,’ is echoed in the attitudes of non-American Americanists toward the work done at the center of American Studies, the United and Swedish national identities as it produces them. To alert the reader to this, I use quotation marks round these concepts in strategically important places.

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3 For a systematic, if somewhat dated, study of the impact of Hollywood on European national cultures, see the collection of essays *Hollywood in Europe*, ed. David Ellwood and Rob Kries. A good survey of the influences on and resistance to American culture across a number of European countries is offered in the volume *The Americanization of Europe*, ed. Alexander Stephan. Unfortunately the concept of Americanization Studies seems to have established itself as (almost) synonymous with ‘assimilation’ or ‘acclimatization,’ not least due to the series of ten volumes called *Americanization Studies: The Acculturation of Immigrant Groups into American Society*, published between 1920 and 1924, sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation.
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States itself. As Rob Kroes, among others, points out, “scholars studying America from abroad have led lives of derivation, at an intellectual periphery that took its cues from a center situated in the United States,” while their own work has “remained relatively obscure in the center” (“American Studies”), this double bind causing resentment and irritation. It is this twinning of proximity and distance, fascination and fear, otherness and selfhood, the central and the local at the core of Americanization that was cast for me in deep relief—and ultimately revised—by the commercial to which I now turn.

II.

Not demanding a particularly high dose of cultural competence or literacy to understand its overt message and intentions (which lies, as we know, in the very nature of such mass cultural products), the commercial offers an array of enticing loops—visual, logical, and ideological—which I track in my analysis to argue that these loops become the building blocks of a post-Americanization attitude that places ‘America’ as the center.

The commercial, titled “Welcome to Reality” and available on the Web, falls structurally into two parts. The first, which I will refer to as ‘American,’ plunges the viewer into a series of rapidly changing scenes of military action performed by dimly outlined silhouettes of soldiers while a voice-over narrator says in English:

We can’t offer you an epic opening scene in which models pose as Marines. We can’t offer you the opportunity to suddenly rise out of the water holding some weird futuristic weapon. We can’t offer you top secret hit-and-run missions in unknown territory. We can’t offer you ridiculously dramatic music playing in the background or even my cool American voice.

At this point the scene changes abruptly and a second, ‘Swedish,’ part, opens up as the camera zeroes in on the face and upper body of a soldier in green-and-brown combat fatigues. Obviously exhausted, the soldier breathes heavily as he looks at a group of soldiers ahead. Two soldiers turn back and help the tired soldier catch up with the group while a voice-over, promptly embodied in the soldier now turning toward the camera, says in Swedish: “But we can offer you our reality. An education that leads to a job where you can make a difference. For real.” That we are watching a military recruitment commercial becomes clear only when the final image is flashed on the screen, encouraging the viewer to apply to be admitted to the army. This end, then, stands in a stark contrast to the initial scene in which the viewer is abruptly plunged into what appears to be a preview for an action film rather than an ad.

It is important to understand that the commercial was made at a watershed moment in Swedish military history. Peacetime conscription in Sweden ceased in 2010, to be altogether replaced with contracted personnel. Moreover, although the Swedish armed forces have taken part in peacekeeping missions abroad for a number of decades, for the first time in almost two hundred years, Swedish troops now find themselves in combat situations. Unlike previously, those who join the
army are expected to be ready to be stationed abroad, often in Afghanistan, for a period of time. Little wonder that in this radically new situation, the Swedish army turned for inspiration to the practices common in the United States, a country with a long tradition of professional recruitment. To increase recruitment, several commercials were commissioned by the Swedish Armed Forces (Forsvarsmakten) from the Swedish advertising agency DDB (Doyle Dane Bernbach), part of DDB Worldwide Communication Group Inc.

Given the strong tradition of Sweden’s self-fashioning as an anti-military country, it is quite remarkable that, to encourage young Swedes to become soldiers, the commercial activates a set of popular staple images of American militarism, incarnated in war films. As I will show, the commercial that I focus on is organized by reiterations of stock characters, scenes, and even phrases (such as “make a difference”). But what is most striking is its structure of juxtaposing of ‘American’ and ‘Swedish’ images and the incessant piling up of dichotomies; as a result, a sense of an insurmountable difference between American and Swedish military cultures is created. I would like to dwell in some detail on the commercial’s excessive coding of difference as this excess is also the basis of the loops and reversals in the coding that are of interest to me.

The opening close-up of a camouflaged face of a presumably American soldier is followed by a series of scenes of combat in the air, at sea, and on land, with groups of soldiers moving from place to place at breakneck speed (fig. 1-3). I say ‘presumably’ American, since there are no visual signs that mark the figures in the first part of the commercial as Americans; the identificatory logic is established aurally, through a distinctly American voice-over. While the commercial depicts the American soldiers moving arbitrarily from left to right, right to left, up and down, and toward the center—emphasizing their omnipresence and their command of all space—the Swedes are mostly centralized, remaining rooted in the same place (easily recognizable as typical of northern Sweden), acting in real-time, and moving first toward the viewer and then away from him/her (fig. 4 and 7). Unlike the camouflaged faces of ‘American’ soldiers, the Swedes are ‘natural’ and distinctly individualized (fig. 5 and 6). Weapons that figure prominently in the first American part of the commercial are nowhere in sight in the ‘Swedish’ part. The fully trained bodies of American soldiers, metonymically linked with high-tech machines—and thus to prowess and inhuman performance—are juxtaposed with the vulnerable-looking Swedish bodies in training, their vulnerability emphasized in the scene in which their backs are exposed to the viewer’s gaze (fig. 7). The images of human bodies in the ‘Swedish’ are replaced by images of the machine in the ‘American’ one, and scenes charged with super-human violence are contrasted with a scene of physical shortcoming. In brief, Americans, appearing to be little more than destructive action machines, are shown in stark contrast to the all too human and tired Swedes, running in a rather awkward and jumbled way. An audience familiar with Freudian symbolism would undoubtedly notice too that the American section contains several phallic images (fig. 10); in the Swedish one, if we watch carefully, we can see a single long plait of braided hair sticking out from underneath the wool cap of a female soldier to the right (fig. 7). The limpness of the braided ponytail, drily and brilliantly limned in the commercial, speaks for itself. The differences
between images are reinforced by other changes: the color palette shifts from an almost monochrome scale of grey-to-black, disrupted only by an occasional dramatic explosion of red, to the subtler, muted colors of the green-and-brown fatigues and the white of the snow; nighttime gives way to daytime; the sound of American English is replaced by Swedish and the epic background music by a soundtrack of tired breathing. Even the mode of the commentary changes: it shifts from mocking—or perhaps typically postmodern irony and humorous self-reflexive references to “ridiculously dramatic music” and “cool American voice”—to a tone marked by a high level of sincerity and earnestness.

This series of visual, auditory, and narrative dichotomies is epitomized in the choreography of the central fence scene. On the left side of the fence American soldiers; on the right, Swedes (fig. 8 and 9). The spatial composition of this moment of change merits attention, since it encapsulates the central distinction of the commercial, that between phantasmagoria and reality. As many semioticians have pointed out, the information value of left and right, and top and bottom is deeply engrained in all cultures. In Western cultures the left is marked as “given,” as something that the viewer recognizes as familiar, something that is already known. The right is the site of the “new”: it is not yet known or agreed upon (Kress and van Leeuwen 181). The top is coded as the “ideal,” as showing us “what might be” in opposition to the bottom that marks the “real,” the “what is” (Kress and van Leeuwen 186). The American soldiers’ movement from left to right and upward suggests that the viewer will encounter something new. And indeed we do see something new: a Swedish soldier on the ground; we hear new sounds, we are in a new setting. What is interesting, though, is that the Swedish soldier remains in the left-hand corner for quite a long time; he does not run to the right, to the ‘new.’ In fact, there is hardly any movement whatsoever. The soldier, and the viewers, are arrested in the site of the ‘given’ and ‘real’ which thus becomes the habitat of the Swedish army.

The principle of disjunction that orchestrates the commercial is grounded in two very different types of aesthetics. The first type, that of a series of brief shots rapidly replacing each other, is that of the glance: it is momentary and casual, requesting no effort (see Hansen); it is sometimes called the aesthetics of ‘postcinema’ or of ‘erasure’ and regarded as a regime of TV spectatorship (see Ellis). The aesthetics of the ‘Swedish’ part is that of a spatio-temporal and narrative continuity, of close-ups and long-distance shots of long duration; typical of the traditional cinematic technique, this is the aesthetics of the gaze (cf. Sarlo 304-05). To put it in a different way, the aesthetics of the glance of the first part is followed by the aesthetics of the gaze in the second, thus linking the American military to the fleeting and the Swedish to the solid.

The logic of the commercial equates the U.S. army with unreality and fiction (or, if you prefer, with Hollywood or Baudrillardian simulacra) against which realism and reality of the Swedish army is cast. The lacunae or erasures in the first part of the commercial significantly add to the effect of unreality: the enemy the American soldiers are fighting remains invisible: the danger seems to be lurking in nature, it is everywhere, asking for vigilance and pre-emptive action. Although the viewer gets a couple of glimpses of wreckage, there are no images of casualties
and death is strictly out of bounds despite the ferocious gunfire. Moreover, the spectacle of ‘America’ that the commercial stages is shot through with spectrality: the phantom-like figures emerging from the water, the disembodied voice-over narrator of the first part, the indeterminate referent of the plural pronoun “we” and “my cool American voice” (is it an American speaking on behalf of the Swedish army or a Swedish military person impersonating an American?). Importantly, by fashioning the first part on the genre of film trailer and thus throwing the viewer into the realm of the fictional and imaginative, the commercial de-territorializes and disembodies America, turning it into a figment of (our) imagination, a mere fictional ghost-like entity.

It is this spectral America—America as a specter—that is used as a reference point to assert the Swedish army’s national specificity, or more precisely, the stereotype of it being grounded in reality. The commercial both draws upon the popular cultural imaginary of America and customizes it to suit Swedish ideological purposes. The viewer is assured that that the Swedish army does not share the aggressive and imperialistic ambition to be everywhere but remains in one (national) place or territory. To be a soldier in Sweden means not to be immersed in an American action film scenario but to be anchored in real life; to be a Swedish soldier is not so much an adventure as a job. Rather than bringing destruction and death, a Swedish soldier makes a difference by being helpful. (Note, though, that the Swedish soldiers only help one of their own!) The ethos of the Swedish army as a friendly and dependable peacekeeping force motivated by empathy and a desire to bring aid is distinctly visualized in one of the final scenes in which one soldier holds the back of another to assist him in catching up with the group. In contrast, American soldiers, although shown as working in groups, are clearly delineated as individuals whose bodies never meet. While in the ‘Swedish’ part the camera dwells on touch to signal intimacy between soldiers, the ‘American’ soldiers touch nothing but their guns.

III.

However, this seemingly clear-cut message turns out to be much more ambiguous. The demarcation lines between the two different ‘national’ ideologies—or, rather, mythologies—are troubled by many considerations. First of all, we should note the disjunction between the visual appeal and the aural narration that undercuts this appeal through a reiteration of negations. This strategy of renunciation is central to the presentation of ‘America.’ Second, the use of American English is important, since this language holds a special fascination for young Swedes as a tough (not to say macho) *lingua franca*. In presupposing that the target group is fluent in English, the commercial appeals to their sense of cosmopolitanism rather than nationalism. Third, the immersion of the viewer in a rapid flow of decontextualized images and sounds resonates with other cultural experiences of the target audience brought up not only on action films and TV but also on video games, more often than not quite violent and built on stereotypes. At the same time, however, the commercial expects the prospective conscripts not only
to recognize stock images but also to keep a rather mature, perhaps even amused, distance from them. The immersion, then, competes with the expectation of the target audience’s possession of sufficient cultural competence to reflect on the commercial’s construction of its message. But the Net generation, used to constantly checking emails, Facebook, or Twitters for notifications and expecting everything to occur instantly, at the click of a button, is likely to feel more at home with the aesthetics of the glance than that of the gaze. Thus the American unreal may be found more appealing than the Swedish real. Significantly, the very economy of the commercial privileges the American: the duration of the first part is allotted almost four times that of the ‘Swedish’ one (it lasts thirty-seven seconds versus nine), nesting the viewer firmly in the narrative of the unreal.

All these factors work together to actually enhance the allure of the American part of the commercial against which the Swedish sequence may appear quite dull, perhaps even pathetic; after all, isn’t the attractiveness of the American action film hero far greater than the image of a tired soldier? Nevertheless, uncertainties and ambiguities proliferate. At what should we laugh: the absurdly macho American soldiers or the embarrassingly unfit Swedish one, clad in green camouflage fatigues that make him an easy target against the whiteness of the snow? What exactly is being mocked: the unrealistic but very seductive scenes in the American section or the realistic but quite boring Swedish one? Does the visual rhetoric of aggression and war that permeates the ‘American’ part of the commercial perpetuate and celebrate violence or, as the commentary would have it, does it expose, critique, or perhaps even condemn it? Does the Swedish part endorse the presumably national virtues of solidity, realism, and dependability, or does it in fact undercut them? Has the American military topos influenced—perhaps even infiltrated—the Swedish army, or has the periphery skillfully appropriated the ‘American’ military mode and ‘Swedishized’ it?6

The commercial seems to want to have it both ways. It uses the imaginary America that the target audiences are assumed to find attractive to entice their attention while at the same time fostering a national Swedish pride. The commercial invites the viewers to enjoy the spectacle of ‘American’ army prowess while simultaneously encouraging a critical (ironic) distance from it; it appeals both to the fantasy of being an action hero that so many American war films promote and to the nurturing impulses propagated in Swedish society. Displaying the Swedish army’s lack of the prowess in contrast to the American one, the commercial transforms this lack into something positive. This looping of national mythologies gets an extra twist if we know that the first part of the commercial is not a montage of clips from American movies but of scenes played by Swedish soldiers. The weapons that the viewer is explicitly told are not offered to the Swedish recruits are, de facto, in the possession of the Swedish army. ‘America,’ as it is, has been appro-

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6 The ideological clashes—but not ambiguities—that are played out in the commercial triggered a heated online debate. The first comments were written in Swedish, but very soon the language shifted to English and the discussants moved away from the commercial to issues such as the role the United States and Sweden played in WWII, the threat of communism, imperialistic ambitions of the United States, etc. These comments indicate the high emotive appeal of the commercial; its use of cultural stereotypes clearly catalyzed the viewers.
propriated (perhaps even engulfed) by ‘Sweden.’ Rather than fearing or combating American influences, the Swedish army, the implication seems to be, can capitalize on them to forward its own agenda. Tapping into a distinction between the local and native (Swedish), and the global and foreign (American), the commercial simultaneously de- and re-territorializes both countries. In short, the commercial titillates with a promise of an unproblematic combination of the global and the local: a Swedish viewer (i.e. potential soldier), can both inhabit and dis-inhabit the territories of ‘America’ and ‘Sweden.’ Both staging and disarming, so to speak, the global-local opposition, the commercial positions the viewer in a glocal cultural universe, a universe of free-floating clichés about ‘America’ (and, for that matter, also ‘Sweden’).

The term glocalization indicates that globalization consists of two connected but opposite processes: it homogenizes ideas and practices across national borders, but it also induces local adaptation and multiplication of differences and triggers a reassertion of boundaries. Initially introduced in the 1990s by sociologists such as Roland Robertson and employed to describe, for instance, branding processes, technological applications, construction of urban environments, the term glocalization has now entered the register of ‘the culture sector.’ Glocalization is sometimes understood as synonymous with “internal globalization” and is used to refer to the fact that “large numbers of people around the globe are exposed to other cultures on a daily basis without crossing borders on a regular basis, simply through the variety of communication media” (Roudometof 121). In short, glocalization points to the simultaneous “closeness in distance” and “relative distancing from what is close” (Hernández 92). As such, it seems to me to aptly describe the kind of knowledge production that has been the hallmark of many Americanists working off the American center. Emphasizing that American influences have had unpredictable and varied effects within different national cultures, non-American Americanists have long been engaged in detecting local constructions of ‘Americanness’ and their variegated versions. As Kroes reminds us, the “waves of American culture that wash across the globe” are met in unruly ways: they may be resisted, negotiated, appropriated, re-cycled, mimicked, re-functionalized, or parodied (“Americanization” 177). To describe these “unruly ways” that are mobilized to deal with Americanization has been an important task of non-American Americanists. This task is now under new pressures: the pressures of the ‘post-Americanization’ attitude.

IV.

The commercial discussed in this article confirms what has become a given in ‘American influences’ studies: that in principle there are an “infinite number of local experiences of and responses to something globally shared” (Ellwood and Van Elteren). But it also profoundly troubles the conventional binary responses to Americanization, responses that uncannily resonate with those ascribed to both

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7 See for instance, Bell and Bell’s work on Americanization in the Australian context or Singer’s tracing of France’s ‘succumbing’ to Americanization after the 1960s.
globalization and glocalization. Zygmunt Bauman’s claim is emblematic in this respect: according to him, glocalization entails “mixing attraction with repulsion: love that lusts for proximity, mixed with hate that yearns for distance” (133). The commercial at hand undermines such simple love-hate responses by playing on a broad spectrum of mostly positive affects and feelings: surprise, delight, admiration, compassion, excitement, pleasure, confusion, and amusement, as well as a tiny dose of anxiety or fear. These responses, to repeat, are put in motion by piling of stock cultural images about ‘America,’ images so familiar that they are automatically associated with fiction.

In audaciously (re)producing media-created and globally circulating images of (fictional) America, the commercial relies on the target audience’s shrewd recognition of American influences and its acceptance of them. Posited as a specter, the commercial’s ‘America’ is not threatening or sinister but entertaining; it is amusing rather than perturbing, welcomed rather than dreaded. Above all, however, it is a given, a presence saturating everyday life, often indistinguishable from what may be considered native Swedish. Thus re-functionalized, this ‘America’ is quite different from the one posited in the ‘American influences’ debates; a profoundly glocal one, it is an America fit for the ‘post-everything’ generation, a ‘post-Americanization’ America.

Post-Americanization may resonate with Fareed Zakaria’s concept of a post-American world order, but it is meant to indicate a somewhat different phenomenon. Zakaria coins the term post-American to describe not the decline of America, but rather “the rise of everyone else” (1), especially China and India as economic powers. While the United States remains a politico-military superpower, when it comes to industrial, financial, educational, social, and cultural dimensions we are “moving into a post-American world, one defined and directed from many places and by many people” (Zakaria 5). In a similar vein, ‘post-Americanization’ is not meant to indicate the erasure of Americanization; we have not moved beyond or come to an end of American influences. Instead, Americanization can now be taken for granted, especially by the ‘post-everything’ generation that is the primary target audience of the commercial discussed here. While for Kroes’s generation, the generation that came of age in the late 1960s, the processes of “mak[ing] room for ‘America’” were discernible, challenging, and troubling (“Americanization” 335), for the commercial’s target audience America has already filled the room and the seams between what is ‘American’ and what is national are blurry; when made visible in sites of entertainment, ‘America’ itself appears as an endearing simulation. So conceived, this domesticated ‘America’ is the ultimate success story of Americanization. This, at least, seems to be the message of the Swedish commercial.

While ‘Americanization’ and ‘globalization’ are not identical, globalization always bears an indelible mark of Americanization, so it is not surprising that the repertoire of affects toward globalization seems to be identical to those toward Americanization.

The term ‘the posteverything generation’ (without a hyphen) was coined by Nicholas Handler, but the concept of ‘post-everything’ has been in circulation for a while to indicate a proliferation of ‘post’-coinages such as post-industrialism, post-materialism, post-modernism, post-humanism, post-historicism, etc.
Works Cited