

Anti-Heroic Heroes in More or Less Heroic Media

Notes on Visual Folklore of Modern Sweden

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Symbolic representations in the visual arts are defined not only by their contents and formal arrangements but also by the media in which they are presented. The Swedish preference for deheroized heroes has created a national heroic iconography far from that of the public bronze monuments. It was in the illustrated weeklies of the nineteenth century, in the comic strips and the photographic journalism of this century that the national ideal of the unidealized man was created: he is a humble but witty and somewhat anarchistic anti-superman. An experiment in the 1940s to apotheosize the ordinary worker in comic strips was a flop, however. The comic strip medium lacked heroic connotations and so the message was missed. It is within the tradition of photographic documentarism that the ordinary Swede has been given his most sublime apotheosis.

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On the evidence of visual documents

It is easy done – and rather amusing – just to pick up a picture that will *illustrate* some spectacular tendency of an epoch. It is, however, much more difficult – and perhaps somewhat boring – to *prove* to what extent that image really is a significant source for its time – and not an expression of some prejudice.

This predicament is not too complicated to solve if you are dealing with art from older epochs. In that case it is mostly possible to define the person who ordered a piece of art, the ideological originator and the intentions of the artist as well as the sociocultural context for which the work was intended.

But when you are studying modern time, with its enormous output of anonymous and mass-reproduced imagery, you will need further criteria for defining the relevance of an image or a motif. You need instruments that prevent you from discovering mere contingencies and help you to reveal reliable symbolic

connotations among hundreds of more or less capriciously emerging motifs.

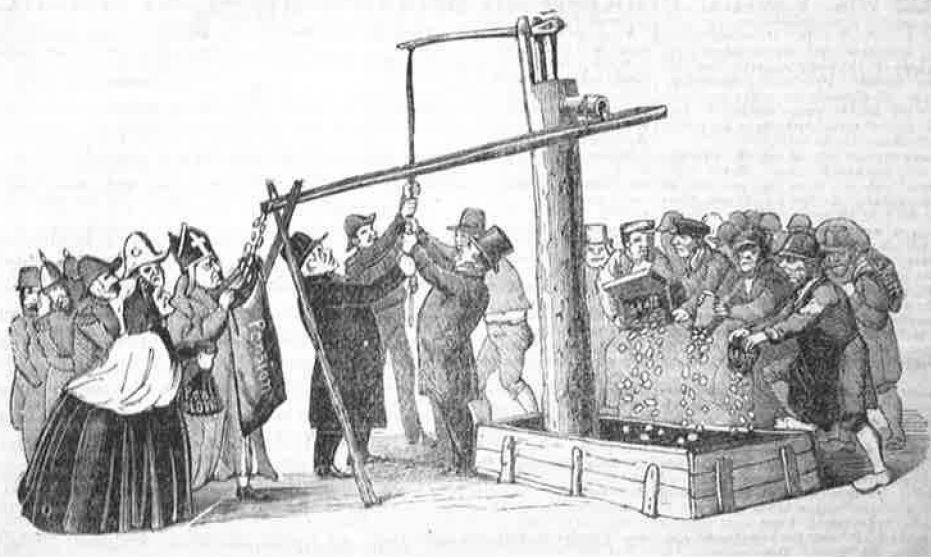
I am not arguing for another experiment within the concept of registering “cultural indicators”. I do not see the point of looking for what you already know that you are looking for. The many types of mass-produced imagery of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries invite you to another strategy, a method that comes close to the way mentality historians work.

Not as a result of statistic sampling but of intimate and chronologically organized acquaintance with lots of different kinds of images of an epoch, you will notice the frequency of special motifs as well as the irregular exclusiveness of other ones. You will also observe how some categories of motifs tend to “cluster” within one national corpus and not in the output of another country. These repertoires will provide matter for putting new questions: What circumstances made these motifs emerge, what urged them to turn up at just

Den stora rikspumpen

eller

hur riksen ständer äga folkets kassor till pensioner åt embets- och tjänstemän samt deras familjer.



The Swedish farmer long represented the mental and visual image of "ordinary man". He was easily identified by his dress: broad-brimmed hat, frock-coat and leather shoes at celebrations. Short jacket, waistcoat, cap and clogs in everyday life, as here in a wood-engraved caricature – called *The Gigantic National Pump* in *Fäderneslandet* from the beginning of the 1860s.

this moment, what changes do they stand for, what do they stand for ten years after their debut, after twenty years, and so on?

In this way I once discovered how the confessionally well-defined guardian angel of Catholic origin was replaced in northern Europe during the nineteenth century by another, less religiously distinct and more folkloristic variant, which was like a transparent incarnation of conscience more than a didactic helper. At the same time, these celestial representatives met competition from immanent helpers like St. Bernard dogs and Newfoundland dogs, who actually rescued humans from being frozen to death or drowning. The many hundreds of variants of these motifs that you will find in the nineteenth century explicitly document the significant shift in the last century from religious definitions of our living conditions to more psychological and existential, non-confessional definitions. This iconographical pattern was quite manifest during the era, though dif-

ferent artists gave the motifs different functions.

The above-mentioned investigation demonstrated internationally homogeneous tendencies. By the same method, but concentrating on Swedish illustrated weeklies, it has been possible to recognize how the mental image of "ordinary man" gradually changed during the mid-decades of the century in so far as the peasant in his folk costume was replaced by the agrarian proletarian – the crofter and the farm-hand – and by unglorifying photographic portraits of the representatives of the Peasant Estate. That seems to be a rather trivial fact, which is even said to be congruent with international trends of the period. But the interesting fact is that this development ended with the final Representational Act of 1866 when the 400-year-old system of the Swedish *Riksdag* with representatives from the Four Estates was replaced by a bicameral Parliament. Swedish farmers have never been serfs,



Eric Hansson,



Nils Magnus Pettersen

From the middle of the 1860s we seldom find dress-iconography used as relevant a connotation for the Swedish farmers. Influenced by photography and by the discreet bourgeois way of manufacturing social power, even the peasants wanted to be looked on as "ordinary" citizens. Wood-engraved photographs of two members of parliament, representatives of the Peasant Estate, in *Nya Frihetsvännen* 1862.

so the image of ordinary man as a farmer or peasant has not been that of a humble creature.

But the most significant feature in the shift of concept concerning who it was that really stood for the "people" was the *de-heroization of the Swedish man*. The symbolic concept of the old yeoman was not replaced by a new heroic concept of an ideal Stakhenovite-worker. Instead the farmers were portrayed like ordinary bourgeois representatives and this soon became the formula for depicting the workers as well. Of course, this was a development predestined by the entrance of photography into social life. But that was not the only reason: we can also trace a very Swedish implication behind this process by which ordinary men were made ordinary. It signifies a feature in the Swedish mentality which says that it is better to look like everybody else and not to appear as an eccentric. Eccentric, then, will be defined as *not* mainstream. So you could also argue that the image of ordinary man just disappeared.

To sum up: in a Sweden in the making that was monarchistic but not royalistic, and in a democracy in the making that was neither utopian nor socialistic and within a growing welfare system that was not just capitalistic or just altruistic, it might be consistent that some new kind of heroic hierarchy had to emerge.

Narrative genres and visual codes

As a child I could never decide what would it be most impressive to be: the fine, timid, well-dressed, short-sighted journalist Clark Kent or his *alter ego*, the muscular, brave, flying Superman, the king of all bodybuilders and boy-scouts. It never puzzled me that I was a girl – girls do not think of that – so my main problem was just which of these incarnations was the most attractive and fascinating. For there was just as strong a fascination in me for the ordinary Clark Kent and his inborn capacities as for the splendid, indefatigable Superman. The everyday guy in his correct suit, white collar and well-knotted tie and with his shy smile and bright intellect hidden behind thick glasses made more of an impression on me than the godlike magician in his tights.

It is a well-known fact that children like fantasy that comes close to reality. And the opposite: we also know that the more true to life a threatening fantasy is, the harder it is to hide from the anxiety it evokes. No fiction will survive if it does not relate to our ordinary circumstances. That is true for adults as well as for children, and so the interrelation between life and fantasy creates that redundancy that is the main and successful feature of all popular culture.

It is an ingenious plan to let a fictive hero,

like Superman, have two interrelating roles, and we often find the same plot in the old tales where the prince becomes a frog and the poor and brave boy may look like a good-for-nothing. This formula belongs to the classical upside-down theme and in the comic strips the magic point of identification is often put close to our dreams of a harmonious everyday life.

Most entertaining arts subsist by means of this ingenious tension between trustworthy everyday life and credible fantasy. Too much seriousness or documentary realism would have converted Asterix into a tragedy or an indigestible war report. In the world of comic strips it is only the adventure strips that can really tolerate realistic personages, and the reason is that in these stories it is the *narrative* drama that fulfils the need for the fantastic and carries the excitement forward. Spy strips and science fiction series are based on that model. But in the comic strips it is always the figures themselves that must be fabulous. Otherwise the contrast between man and satire will be too great and result in sadism and ridicule.

The visual expression of a comic strip figure is like a signal, which makes us appreciate the joke on a correct level of sympathy and not as a free target for sadism. The alternative strategy to choose between the *narrative fiction* or the *fiction of the visual code* is the most fundamental artistic option for the cartoonist. That choice determines the balance within the strip between all the corresponding elements of verbal communication – literal communication – non-verbal communication – visual communication.

But it is not only the correspondence between the two levels of fiction that may be contradictory in a comic strip. It includes also the inborn conflict between the professional codices and the anarchy of humour. The closer to everyday exercise of a profession the cartoonist puts his hero, the more complicated the role programme will become. The fascination fades in contact with too trivial facts. Adventure agents like detectives, pilots, astronauts are heroes whose professions will not be threatened by everyday gloominess; they are defined by the narrative anatomy of the genre

to be filled by action and excitement. The young successful managing director with his marvellous career, however, will not so easily make a career as a comic strip figure. That will be possible only in the glorifying dreams of the Starlet girl or if he unmask himself as a financial villain – and then he automatically belongs to the adventure strip gang.

If you cannot make fun of a professional he will not be a comic strip success, unless he is an anarchistic character or a repressed figure. Dagwood is the kind of unsuccessful professional who will automatically be a successful comic professional. In Sweden the most loved professional strips are the colleagues of Wilmer, that is the unsuccessful but harmonious young men who will never follow a military career, not even as a recruit.

Working class heroes as entertainment fiascos

At the end of the 1930s the Swedish trade union press was financially established and could afford not only committee reports on their pages but also cultural matter such as short stories and artistic illustrations, photo reportages, etc. This editorial expansion also included entertainment and the national union papers selectively included the well-known features of the regular weeklies, among them the so-called family page. This contained cartoons and puns, riddles and crosswords, etc.

In this milieu a new fashion emerged. It was the idea that every trade union should have its own character in a comic strip. And so there grew a remarkable family of professional characters, all with surnames connoting their business with all the didactic wit of old sign-boards. The house-painters' hero was called *P. N. Selgren*, a name thinly disguising the word *pensel*, "paintbrush"; an English equivalent might be called MacBrush. It was produced for *Målarernas Medlemsblad* 1941–42. The carpenters' idol in the paper *Träarbetaren* was baptized *Träkvist*, which we could translate as Branchy. The tobacco workers voted for *Fimpenström* as the nickname of their character, who might be called Buttson in English.

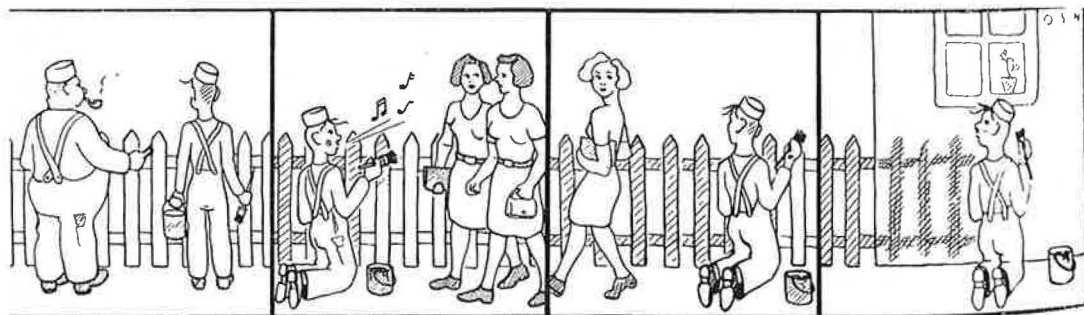
What happened to this good idea so true to

Comic strips, too, have become popular because of their intimate values. Even this medium can be used to heroize national myths, especially if they refer to everyday life. The most beloved of all Swedish national saints is the lazy, witty, work-shy philosopher Kronblom, today drawn by Gunnar Persson. From 91: an no. 3, 1988.



the spirit of the labourers' need for their own idols and their own heroic folklore? Unfortunately it was an absolute flop! Why? I think that here it would be relevant to cite the much too often used paradox of McLuhan, which says that "the medium is the message". If you put a hero in an adventure strip, he will continue to be a hero. But if you put him in a comic strip he is bound by definition to be a person whom we should laugh at. You ought not, how-

ever, to make fun of the medals of an A-worker. If you do, you are degrading him, yourself, and your own profession. There is an innate contradiction in making fun of a hero, though we mostly have sympathetic feelings for our idols. (But if you shift paradigm and genre once more and put them in a tragicomic tradition, then you may have created a Don Quixote, a Švejk or a Chaplin and yet have saved their heroic human characters.)



"The memoirs of P.N. Selgren", *Målarnas medlemsblad* no. 11. 1941. Comic strip by Olle Svensson. The trade-union press experimented in the 1940s by publishing comic strip characters based on working men executing their profession. This idea was a total flop, as one cannot make fun of virtues that belong to the most important weapons of the labourers.

In order to get their readers to laugh, the cartoonists let MacBrush become an egotistic boaster and Branchy a lazy good-for-nothing who did not want to work. Both of them were probably expelled from their trade unions and their workshops for having disgraced their professions and their comrades. The artists too were probably fired from their editorial offices.

But why? Wouldn't there have been enough blue-collar jokes to fill the family page of every magazine number every week? Of course there were. But as we all know, some of them always tend to be somewhat cruel and marked by personal jealousy between competing interests at the workplace, others will be full of local or personal gossip, and so on. The worst are those that make distinctions between different workers and different skills. Everybody talks about such things but you should never talk aloud about them. They belong to the always amus-

ing but dangerous sphere of rumours and guesses. You cannot make comic strips of that.

Just like the great genres in literature and art, popular culture also has genres that are intimately correlated to taboos and rules in our culture. So if it was a failure to try to make practical jokes of professional ethics, there was another category of blue-collar comedians who survived in the trade union press. They were the comic strip characters of the same generations as the above-mentioned whose acting, however, never concentrated just on professional skills or handicaps. Instead these comic strips focused on ordinary existential troubles and on incidents that may happen to *everybody*, irrespective of whether we are blue- or white-collar workers or if we work in an office or on a building site.

So, as true members of the great *commedia dell' arte* family, the kind little men called *Götlund* (Foundryman), and *Stålfarfar* (Grandpa



"Träkvist", in *Träarbetaren* no. 1, 1947. The carpenters did not appreciate that the comic character of their own magazine was a professional lout, so *Träkvist* (Branchy) did not live very long. Drawn by Spänberg 1946.



The only kind of worker characters that survived as comic strip heroes in the trade-union press were those who were just funny in a normal comic way, as classic *commedia dell'arte* characters. *Spik-Anton*, by Nils Bertil Andersson, is still going strong due to his goodnaturedness. In *Byggnadsarbetaren* no. 16, 1964.

Steel) in the metalworkers' magazines, *Spik-Anton* (Neal Nail) of the weekly of the building workers and *Fikonlöv* (Figleaf) in the paper of the clothing industry workers, have continued to amuse their readers for decades.

Their inventors apparently had found the proper level of familiar joking but the success was basically due to another fundamental circumstance. If we analyse these characters psychologically we will find that they all connect to a favourite ideal, idealized personality in Swedish folklore. That is the kind little fellow without social advantages and often without either job or money. The authorities might define him as work-shy but he has nevertheless a miraculous capacity to earn his living in one way or another. He is clever in a way that is both astute and wise, and could also be characterized as a self-taught philosopher and a connoisseur of the art of living. Even when he is an employee and manages his social duties correctly, he has strong personal integrity *vis-à-vis* his job and does not bother whether people find him odd or crazy. This is the model of all the beloved anarchic heroes of old tales and of the most popular Swedish comics, whether they be called *Dummer-Jöns* eller *Svinaherden* or *Kronblom*, *Åsa-Nisse*, *Filip*, *Bellman*, *Ville*, 97: *an Karlsson*. They were the anti-heroic heroes that appeared after the peasant had dissolved as symbol of the Swedish people. The muscular socialist proletarian of Walter Crane's model dominated the national scene only on the first of May.

Media and Messages: bronze statues versus paper photographs

During the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of this century, hundreds of public monuments in bronze were erected all over Sweden, in squares and parks. The motif repertoire was dominated by statues of living and dead kings, princes, marshals, noblemen, industrialists, bankers, engineers, poets, musicians, scientists, etc. This activity may lead to the conclusion that this was an extremely nationalistic period in Sweden.

As monuments in bronze, furthermore, are by convention culturally highly ranked as a medium for representative art, the output of monuments between 1870 and 1920 consequently could be analysed as a remarkably heightened interest in national symbolism. The motifs, however, do not focus on specific nationalistic themes if they are all more or less directly intended to celebrate the great deeds of the founders of old and modern Sweden. The most striking trend is, however, the marked interest in creating monuments to regional heroes and a regional self-consciousness more than a homogeneous nationalistic concept.

On top of that comes the fundamental fact that the general education concept was distributed to new social classes during this period by means of expanding school education, books, newspapers, illustrated weeklies, etc. By this a new historic consensus was established, defining the most important events and actors of Swedish history, local as well as national. The



In the period 1880–1910 Swedish history was “illustrated” publicly and three-dimensionally by an enormous output of bronze monuments, placed in parks and squares all over the country. Here one of the most famous exponents of Swedish national history in the nineteenth century, the poet and historian Erik Gustaf Geijer, poses as a statue in front of Uppsala University. Erected in 1888, sculptured by John Börjesson and cast in bronze by Otto Meyer.

popularizing historical tendency thus became as important a cause behind the zealous commissioning of monuments as the supposed chauvinistic reasons. So we can see the extended representational contributions of the public visual milieu in Swedish cities as a three-dimensionally illustrated history book, fully parallel to the popularizing panoramas of Swedish history published in the same period.

To this comes the trivial fact that Sweden before the middle of the 1870s could not afford domestically produced bronze monuments. From 1790 and 1870 we had no inland bronze foundry and had to engage foreign founders, especially Germans. From the 1880s Sweden was self-sufficient in the art of colossal bronze statue casting, thanks to Otto Meyer; in the following decades he collaborated above all



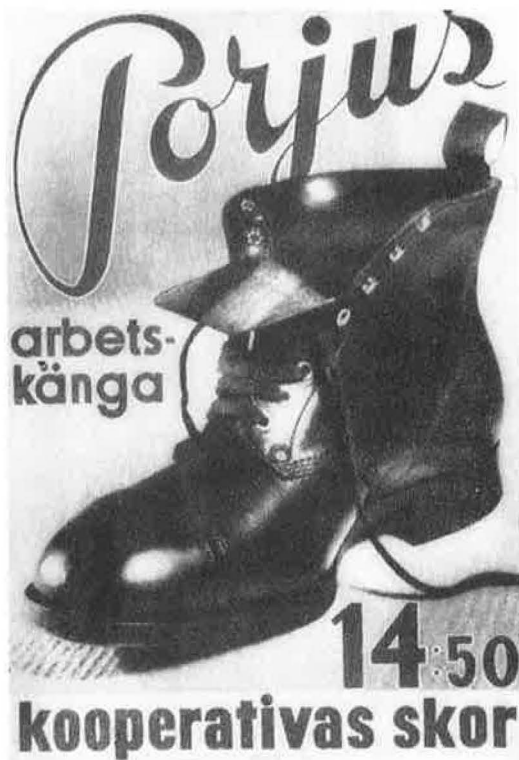
Though not as financially or artistically impressive as marble or bronze, photography became the most heroic medium for manifesting the concept of a democratic Sweden. Thus the group portrait of workers at their workplace has become a heroic genre of its own in modern Swedish pictorial iconography. Here the painters celebrate their finished work at the *People's House* in Stockholm 1903.

with the two outstanding and prolific sculptors John Börjesson and Theodor Lundberg, who produced most of the monuments of the era, originals and replicas. A new branch of reproducing industry was established and it contributed greatly to expanded sociocultural *know-how*.

Bronze monuments are characterized by their strong representational values and they are at the top of the hierarchy of artistic media intended for public display, ranked next to marble statues and monuments in stone. At the same time, however, the bronze statue is looked on as a "cold" medium because of its proportions and its predisposition to demonstrate artistic and cultural prestige. It does not suit well as a medium for illustrating everyday life of more intimate human values. So you will find that the popular rhetoric of modern Sweden soon preferred other channels and media for monumentalizing its own cultural norms and preferences.

For the Swedish working-class movement photography became the most reliable and relevant medium for heroizing their social life and the progress and memorable events of their political struggle. If the small visiting card portrait of the 1860s was the great breakthrough for private visual communication, *the group portrait* became the most significant instrument for the working class in creating collective identity and confirming an independent social integrity. These group portraits typically documented holiday celebrations and picnics arranged by the local trade union clubs or events at the workplace, such as when a building was finished. Branch after branch paraded in front of the photographer with their union banners in the background and often in white collars or with clean aprons over their worn working clothes in order to honour the result of their efforts.

Gradually a convention was established during the nineteenth century which ranked photography as the most democratic visual medium, free as it was supposed to be from cultural connotations. Its further advantages as a medium for a new era included its documentary capacity. Though the documentary authenticity of photography has been challenged



Even by photography it is possible to heroize a boot, a motif well-known from high art. Advertisement in the Swedish co-operative press and a fully adequate exponent of the layout ideology of the "functionalistic" press in the 1930s.

right from the beginning, it has also been held as the most unique and important contribution of photography to the visual arts. With the ever growing rapidity of the photographic techniques during this century, the role of photography as the most matter-of-fact medium has been further improved by the photo journalists.

Politically radical avant-garde groups like the Russian modernists and the Bauhaus and artists like John Heartfield exposed democratic truthfulness of photography as an aesthetic norm. "Die neue Sachlichkeit" in the 1920s formulated a programme for book and newspaper design as an applied art, which was further profiled during the 1930s. The main components in the layout system were black-and-white photos, grotesque typography and no capital letters. The intention was to create a design as free from style eclecticism as func-



A monument will not be monumental if incarnated in the wrong medium. For the Swedish mentality this image of the silent, humble, patient, skilful worker would be impossible to demonstrate in any other medium than photography. Cover photograph for the co-operative magazine *vi*, 25 March 1944.

tionalism in architectural art. In that way a normative newspaper layout was created with just as strong a democratic challenge as the architectural programme and it was soon adapted by the social democrats in Sweden as their ideological publicistic idiom. First to adopt it was the illustrated weekly of the Co-operative Society, *Konsumentbladet*, later called *vi* ("we") (1934). This magazine strongly influenced the trade union papers for some decades thereafter.

In these magazines you will find some of the most significant and spectacular examples of how the Swedish press used photography in heroizing ordinary men. The medium was heroic and the photographic style was heroic with

its clean lines and dramatically well-balanced grey tones. But in the men's positions or acting there is no extravagance or posing. They demonstrate nothing of that ideal anatomic strength or beauty that the emblematic socialist hero exposes. They are silent men, extraordinary only in their total humility and integrity.

The little man was finally apotheosized in a medium that was truly congruent to his actual appearance. The frequency of this motif in Swedish press imagery confirms that this became the authorized and accepted vision of the beloved, unglorified everyday hero of the "new" Swedish people.

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