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# Translating the self

## The definition of a Swedish/Scandinavian identity in travel writing

In the study of tourism and travel writing it is a well-known truism that the travel narrative is just as much a representation of the home culture of the travel writer as it is a representation of the foreign culture that the writer visits. Travel writing is a specific act of cultural translation, in which the travel writer, by representing the foreign, in effect translates it into something known, thus packaging it and making it meaningful for a home audience. In that process they also implicitly interpret their own culture and nation. In the following paper I will focus on the idea of the travel narrative as an implicit story about the self. In other words, I will look for a Swedish identity in texts that are supposedly about faraway, exotic places.

In order to do this I will refer to Swedish/Scandinavian travel journalism from two different times, and see how the writers in various ways make use of and contribute to the construction of a Swedish identity, and how this construction relates to societal issues at the time. I will also describe how the travel writers of my study can move between their Swedish identity and a more broad European identity, and how the image of Europe changed in significant ways over the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The texts I am referring to here is a series of articles written by a Danish travel writer called Hakon Mielche who wrote for *Allers Familj-Journal* (*Allers Family Journal*) about his journey to Australia in 1956, and the narratives in the Swedish travel magazine *RES*, from the 1990s and onwards.

Hakon Mielche was a very prolific travel writer and adventurer who published many books on travel, including many guidebooks. After having travelled through Australia he wrote a whole series of articles about the country, 33 in total, which were published over almost a year in the magazine.<sup>1</sup> The series was introduced in the editorial as “our new glorious travel narrative” promising “excitement and drama”. The articles covered a whole spread and then continued over a few columns

further into the magazine. The layout was often colourful with large pictures. *Allers Family Journal* contained stories about exotic faraway places already in 1879 when the magazine was first published (as *Illustrated Family Journal*). In the mid-1950s the magazine carried a proliferation of stories about travel but Mielche's series of articles about Australia was the longest running travel narrative at that time.

The articles about Australia were educational, as well as of course entertaining, the purpose was to present unknown facts about a faraway country rather than to present a possible tourist destination. The topics ranged from Australian history, colonial history, wildlife, the fate of the aboriginals, the outlay of the cities, and the process of immigration, just to mention a few. Although 11 years had passed since the end of the Second World War, Mielche started the very first article by evoking the horrors of war and the plight of the refugees. He traveled to Australia on a boat filled with immigrants and the underlying theme of his articles was his journey from a tired and wounded Europe.

The main thesis in Mielche's text is that Australia was the future, and this was put forward in a constant catchphrase reading "Olympialand: den nyaste världen" (Olympialand: the newest of worlds). Australia was the future in the sense that it was a new home for the European post-war emigrants. It was also the future because it was a vast continent that could still be discovered, when the rest of the world was already mapped and explored. Mielche wrote in a time of decolonization, which was discussed explicitly in the text. Mielche concluded that the days of the heroic white man were over, in the old colonies of Africa and Asia. He wrote "the Gold Coast has gained its independence. South Africa is causing trouble, and there is also trouble in Kenya and Cypress. Hong Kong is no longer what it used to be." But, he argued, in Australia there was still much to explore.

In Australia, the white man could show that he was still hardworking and strong. Mielche projected his colonial nostalgia onto the continent and Australia was thus a place for European history but paradoxically it was also a place for a European future. It was the future because it was still "undiscovered" but also by being an ideal post-war nation defined by antiracist multiculturalism, and a rational, ordered immigration process. For Mielche, Australia represented a future that was not just its own but also that of the Western world in general. He wrote that the (European) immigrants, together with the (white) Australians would create a new "race" (quotation marks in original). This new "race", he claimed, will perhaps "despise tradition in the typical relaxed Australian manner, display the sense of precision and technology typical of the Germanic nations and the light, musical sensibility of

the southern Europeans”. The crisis of Europe, brought on by war and decolonization, meant that the future had to be located somewhere else and together, Mielche imagined, European immigrants would create an ideal Western nation in Australia.

Australia functioned as an ideal Europe, to such an extent that it was almost needless to deal with a real Europe. When writing about the lives of the immigrants in Australia, Mielche was silent about the realities of immigration in Sweden, even though he encountered the same European nationalities in Australia that also moved to Sweden during the 1950s, for example Greeks and Italians. The only time he concerned himself directly with Sweden was when he wrote about specific Swedish immigrants, all of whom were dead at the time.

Sweden was instead implicitly present when Mielche described the immigration process. He was very involved in the fate of the immigrants, he traveled with them on the boat from Italy to Australia, and he also devoted a whole article to the process of assimilation into their new country. Immediately upon arrival they were taught English by patient teachers, Australian labour unions carefully monitored their work conditions and social services were available to them, all according to the laws. The immigrants were grateful, hardworking and happy in their new homeland, and in a way they were ideal citizens. Mielche’s description of the process of assimilation was a very positive image of a well-organized process, mimicking contemporary Swedish ideals of an orderly and generous welfare state that took good care of its citizens.

Mielche’s ideas about Australia were born out of the crisis of Europe, a crisis brought on by the Second World War but also by the end of colonialism. Australia could redeem that, and the myth of an imperial Europe and the West could continue. Significantly, Mielche was able to imagine a continuation of the West as the undisputable leader of the world. In the mid-1950s it was still possible to defend an ideology of European/Western supremacy, even though Mielche paradoxically mixed his ethnocentrism and colonial nostalgia with antiracism and ideals of multiculturalism. About 50 years later it was no longer possible to argue for a continuation of this myth of Europe, or even the West, as superior, which I will show in my analysis of texts published in the travel magazine *RES* during the late 1990s and early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The magazine of my study was started in 1981 under the name of *Resguide (Travel Guide)* and was the first of its kind in Sweden. The name was changed to *RES* in 1994, and the magazine is currently published with 6 issues per year. In an analysis of these texts it is clear that Europe is in a crisis in a fundamentally different way compared

to the crisis described by Mielche, and that this late 20<sup>th</sup> century crisis is mainly a response to globalization and especially the rise of Asia in the world economy. As a response to these developments a European identity becomes a problem, because Europe is perceived as being left behind in a way that it has not been before.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1970s, Japan became an economic power to rival that of the US. This was an important event since it was the first time in modernity that a non-western power aspired to such prominence and it put into question the role of the West as the undisputable site of modernity. The response was a vilification of Japan, not least in European travel writing, that largely focused on Japanese modernity as somehow faulty and even perverse.<sup>3</sup> Since the early 1990s however the Japanese economy has slowed down. Attention was shifted to the so called Asian tigers (Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea). Around the turn of the millennium it was instead China that came into focus, but no matter which country or region that is in focus the image of the West is fundamentally challenged.

This development and subsequent European crisis is reflected in *RES*. The writers are awestruck by what they see in the Asian metropolises but it is also undeniably disquieting for them. In short, places associated with the economic success of Asia, such as Hong Kong, Bangkok, Shanghai, Tokyo and Taipei, are described through references to mushrooming skyscrapers and hurried business men. The main image is often a busy street and other popular themes in the photographic representation of these cities are traffic jams, skytrains and crowds. Interestingly, the crowds are reinterpreted to be a sign of efficiency and progress while historically in European travel writing crowds in Asian countries have been interpreted negatively as a symbol of chaos and backwardness. The crowds become a metaphor or even an embodiment of the economy moving forward.

Despite the downturn in the Japanese economy Tokyo remains the very symbol of a new Asia. In a text about Tokyo from June 1999, one of the writers, Johan Lindskog (who later becomes the editor in chief) describes Tokyo as the future and marvels over the intensity and commercialism of the city in which “everything is being sold, all of the time. Tokyo never takes a break.”<sup>4</sup> The intensity and production of Tokyo is the cause of inferiority for the European traveller. He writes “suddenly it is I who am old, conservative, left behind. My money has no value. My knowledge is not sought after. I am merely a relic from a world that they don’t care about. Nobody wants me. They just look at me and then they return to their lives, their production, their superiority. It is a very unfamiliar experience for a middle-class European.”

Lindskog also compares his arrival in Tokyo to the experience of the Swedish emigrants arriving in the US. In this article the writer can define himself both as European and Swedish, and both identities are fraught with inferiority in the encounter with the Asian megalopolis.

To some extent contemporary travel writing constructs a cosmopolitan traveller, which implies that nationality is downplayed and supposedly emptied of meaning. In *RES*, nationality is rarely explicitly mentioned but at the same time the home culture of the writers is of course always the implicit norm against which they measure the foreign. This home can be defined as Sweden, Europe or the West, and the identity of the writers can shift between being Swedish and being European or Western, depending on the context. The Swedish identity carries slightly different connotations than the broader European identity, and the Swedishness of the writers can be used to further clarify the contrasts between the West and Asia.

In an article about Hong Kong from 1994, the writer, Agneta Engqvist, refers explicitly to her nationality to argue that few others than Swedes react strongly to the extreme polarization of rich and poor in Hong Kong.<sup>5</sup> Sweden is also implicitly present as a comparison when she writes that in Hong Kong “there is no social security, but neither are there any significant taxes.” Hong Kong becomes the opposite of the writer’s country of origin where the negative aspects of capitalism are supposedly cushioned by the political system and by the supposed solidarity felt by the inhabitants. The Chinese are instead impressed by “the three M’s: money, Mercedes and mobile phones.” Sweden is here implicitly and explicitly portrayed as a land of social justice and equality in comparison to the glaring inequality of Hong Kong, the contrast would have been less clear if the writer had referred to a European identity.

This comparison between Asian injustice and Swedish ideals of equality can also be applied to gender roles, most notably in texts about Japan and Tokyo. In his article about Tokyo from June 1999, Lindskog and his girlfriend have a discussion with a young Japanese woman who is called Yumiko: “Yumiko is confounded over the fact that a man knows how to use a vacuum cleaner. At first she thinks that Anika [the writer’s girlfriend] is lying. But Anika tells her that I iron as well. And do the dishes. And the laundry. Yumiko looks at us with bewildered eyes. She can’t believe that it’s true. Really? Then she looks at me. – But what about you? Your pride?” The writer also deplores what he calls the “Lolita porn-style” of Japanese teenagers.

Lindskog’s article about Tokyo exemplifies how the foreign destination can be used to enhance an image of the self and of a specific

Swedishness that becomes clear in comparison with the foreign. In *RES* a specific Swedish identity is connected to ideals about equality and is ultimately associated with innocence. The writers can withdraw from their Europeanness in order to claim a more innocent Swedish position when this is desired. Agneta Engqvist, who wrote about Hong Kong in the mid 1990s, claims that she is sometimes “the target for Chinese coolness or peevishness”, despite the fact that she “has nothing to do with the British manner of superiority”. Being Swedish becomes an innocent and neutral position in relation to the Chinese and the British.

A similar position is claimed by Märten Blomkvist in his article about Hong Kong, published in January/February 1997.<sup>6</sup> The article is written only a few months before the so called British handover of Hong Kong to China, which took place on the 1<sup>st</sup> of July that year, and Blomkvist jokingly interrogates into his own feelings about the demise of the British Empire, which implicitly represents European superiority in general. Blomkvist can take a European viewpoint and construct a European “we” in relation to the “them” of Hong Kong. He writes for example “In Europe we have a tendency to regard houses as being fairly stable. We think that it’s a complex business to build them, contemplate it carefully before we get to it, and imagine that the result will stand for decennia to come”. He then argues that in Hong Kong this is not the case. He is also writing from the perspective of a European in his constant evoking of the British Empire, when he is uncertain about whether he can express nostalgic sentiments about the era of colonialism or not. Even when Blomkvist ridicules sentimental attitudes to the British Empire, the colonial world that is rapidly disappearing is somehow familiar in contrast to the new global Hong Kong of booming capitalism and gleaming skyscrapers.

But at the same time, Blomkvist is not British and can therefore without much effort distance himself from the Empire when needed. Just as for Engqvist, the innocent nature of the Swedish gaze allows for Blomkvist to withdraw from any problematic aspects of a European heritage of colonialism by emphasising that this is more specifically a British heritage. Hence, the nationality of the writers in *RES* is used to argue for a position of high morals. Furthermore, it is often used to mark a clearer distance to Asia than what can be done with a European identity.

Returning to the example of Hakon Mielche, he writes from the perspective of a European, concerned with the future of Europe but he can also claim a Scandinavian identity when he comments on the behaviour of other nationalities, for example the prudish Anglo-

Saxons and the passionate Italians who are unable to control their emotions. His Scandinavian identity is then a supposedly neutral platform, a position of power, from which he could describe the immigrants who originated from other parts of Europe. Mielche did not use a Swedish or Scandinavian identity to hide from problematic notions of being European. Mielche was able to depict the colonial era as a time of European glory and it is clear that this glory was pan-European; the Swedish readers could take pride in it. Comparing the texts from 1956 with those from the 1990s and onwards there is a clear difference in the idea of Europe, the myth of Europe is in a much deeper crisis at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century than in the middle of that century.

Travel writing is often imagined as a form of appropriation in textual form, and as being intimately connected to the colonial project, not least since Edward Said's theories about the role of colonial travelogues in his pivotal book *Orientalism* from 1978. The actual process of colonialism in itself is a form of violent reinterpretation of a territory. As an example, European colonial powers often tried their best to recreate their homelands in the exotic colonies.

For Mielche it is possible to appropriate Australia textually and imagine it as a new Europe, in his interpretation of the foreign it becomes completely domesticated, which of course is facilitated by the history of British colonialism as well as contemporary European immigration to the continent. Sweden is not mentioned explicitly more than a few times but it is present through Swedish ideals of a rational and ordered society, especially when Mielche describes the efficient and organized immigration process. For the writers of *RES* this appropriation of the foreign is not possible. The foreign can no longer be made known and appropriated in such a casual manner, and an important reason for this is the changed role of Europe, which is especially obvious in articles about global cities in East Asian. Instead of conquering the foreign territory the writers are engulfed by the megalopolis. For the late 20<sup>th</sup> century travel writers of *RES*, a European identity is sometimes problematic and they occasionally use their Swedish identity to escape from a history of European imperialism but also in order to create a clear difference between their own culture and what they experience in Asia.

#### Noter

<sup>1</sup> Hakon Mielche, "Olympialandet – den Nyaste Världen, Med Hakon Mielche i Australien", (Olympialand – the Newest of Worlds, with Hakon Mielche in Australia) *Allers Familj-Journal* issue 20–53, 1956

<sup>2</sup> David Morley, and Kevin Robins, *Spaces of identity: global media, electronic landscapes and cultural boundaries*, Routledge, London, 1995, p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> See for example Ian Littlewood's *The idea of Japan: Western images, western myths*, Secker and Warburg, London 1996

<sup>4</sup> Johan Lindskog, "96 timmar i Tokyo" ("96 hours in Tokyo"), *RES*, June 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Agneta Engqvist, "Nedräkning" ("Countdown"), *RES*, March 1994

<sup>6</sup> Märten Blomkvist, "Var verkligen Noel Coward här?" ("Was Noel Coward really here?"), *RES*, January/February 1997.