Nation as Decoration

The InVisibility of the US Flag in Sweden

Moa Sundkvist
Supervisor: Johanna Lewengard
Internal tutors: Sara Kaaman, Rickard Heberling,
Behzad Khosravi, Kalle Sandzén
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Abstract

This project explores banal nationalism from a perspective where the visibility and usage of the US flag as decoration on everyday products in Sweden is problematized. In comparison with the Swedish flag which has a history of being “unwaved” because open nationalism for a long time has been thought of as vulgar in Sweden, the frequent reproduction of the US flag seems to elude a critical discussion on national expressions. The effects of using a national symbol for commercial purposes is therefore theoretically and practically researched.

Keywords: Banal Nationalism, Commerce, Decoration, Depoliticization, Flag, Flag of Sweden, Flag of the United States, Invisibility, Nationalism, Repetition, Visibility
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Appendice
1. Introduction

For as long as I can remember, the colors of blue and yellow have been a sensitive color combination for me. As it's associated with the Swedish flag, it has consequently been associated with xenophobic movements as well and from an early age I was taught to avoid it.

As I am now working with graphic design in Sweden, it's been impossible for me to be unaware of this in my work, as I handle these specific colors with extra care, always afraid I would accidentally use them. My feelings towards the Swedish flag have made me aware of flags in general and I find it interesting that such a simple visual symbol can represent something so complex as a nation.

In comparison with the Swedish flag that would be surprising to see in a design context, I've kept noticing that I repeatedly see products decorated with the US flag in Sweden. Ranging all the way from the cheapest items to the most exclusive articles, the stars and stripes appear everywhere as prints on clothing and interior decoration.

Each time I see this I find it equally fascinating to see that a powerful symbol can be used in such a routine way. Contrasting the Swedish flag, this one rather seems to pass unnoticed, eluding a critical discussion on national expressions.

1.1 Intention and questions

My aim with this project is to explore how I can make my observations accessible to others and raise questions concerning visibility of nations in today's visual culture, particularly in commerce. I also want to deepen my understanding of what has influenced the way the symbol of the US flag is seen in Sweden today.

My main questions have been:

How can I bring this observation into the Swedish design (history) context?
How can I broaden the understanding of the relation between nation and visual culture (commerce)?
How can I make what's already before our eyes more visible?

1.2 Delimitation

Being in Sweden, this project is framed by my personal perspective and experiences. Because of this, my work is mainly focusing on the US flag used as decoration in Sweden.

1.3 Overview of the report

In this report I explore and problematize the usage and visibility of the US flag in Sweden from a theoretical and practical perspective, focusing on the relation between nationalistic and capitalistic means.

I will first describe some of my earlier projects that in different ways are connected to this report. I then will explain the theories and expressions in which this project is contextualized (nation-states, nationalism, banal nationalism, waved and unwaved flags) and give a brief summary of the history of the US and the Swedish flag. With this as a background, I will continue describing my working process and why I chose to publish my research as a film.
2. Background

These following projects came about during different courses given in my first and second year at Konstfack, they all relate to the idea of flags, repetition and visibility of nations in different ways.

2.1 Utopia

I believe the book *Utopia*, which was made during one of the first courses I attended at Konstfack, is relevant to mention as my design choices were based on a flag. The word utopia was first mentioned by Sir Thomas More in his book with the same name, published in 1516. The word is compounded by the Greek words for “not” (ou) and “place” (topos) and thus meant “nowhere”. Sir Thomas More tells the reader the story of an island where everything has been solved in the best possible ways, politically and socially, with the result that poverty, inequality, crime etc. is never a problem in this state. Though this is a place that exists in our imagination only, real attempts and experiments to establish utopian communities have been made, especially in the US during the mid 19th century. I based the design of my own book on the flag of Texas due to a small village I found there named Utopia. All design decisions were based on the appearance of this flag; the format, the colors, the effects and the choice of typeface.

![Cover and spread from the book Utopia.](image1)

2.2 Textile Pattern

During a textile pattern course in the spring of 2014 I used the colors yellow and blue together for the first time in order to advise and support the protestation against the nationalistic party named the Sweden Democrats. Although my intentions were to highlight an anti-racist movement, I feared that my message would be misunderstood or misinterpreted due to the color combination of yellow and blue.

2.3 The InVisibility of the Stars and Stripes

During the autumn of 2014 I wrote an essay on my observation of the US flag constantly reappearing in various ways as a decorative print in Sweden. In this essay, *The InVisibility of the Stars and Stripes – Observations on the flag of the United States of America*, I discuss how the symbol of the US flag seems to have become neutralized in Sweden compared to other national flags as it is seen so often.

Though the main focus of the essay was describing the use of the American flag, I wrote it after the Swedish general election of 2014 when the Sweden Democrats became the third largest party in the parliament, and therefore I briefly touched upon the Swedish flag as well; “Last night one could see on live TV how party members of the Sweden Democrats waved energetically their Swedish flags and cheered the party’s success (…)”.³

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¹ Utopia. Encyclopaedia Britannica Online Academic Edition.
² See image on next page.
³ See appendix for image (no.1).
2.4 Nation as Decoration (Sw. Nation som Dekoration)

The most recent project I carried out relating to the subject is the book Nation as Decoration (Sw. Nation som Dekoration), in which I display about 25 objects (scale 1:1) bought in the Stockholm-area visualizing the observation from the essay The InVisibility of the Stars and Stripes. The items are all decorated with the US flag in various ways and presented with the receipts I was given when buying them, as I wished to emphasize the commerce aspect of the symbol and how it’s used to make objects more desirable and salable. By displaying the receipts, the reader can see that the products are sold in a Swedish context.
3. Context

The following are short introductions to theories and historical backgrounds that are of importance for my project.

3.1 Nation-states and nationalism

A nation-state is a term suggesting the ethnical and cultural construction of a state.\textsuperscript{1} It is a relatively new way of seeing the world with the map divided in precisely drawn boundaries. In the medieval times in Europe, maps were less precise, with lands shading off into nothingness, unobsessed with boundaries.\textsuperscript{2}

Nationalism is quite a modern movement and ideology based on the premise that the individual’s loyalty and devotion to the nation-state surpass other individual or group interests. It was not until the 18th century that nationalism started to become a great determining factor of modern history, molding public and private life. Civilization was determined by nationality only at the end of this century.\textsuperscript{3} Both the French revolution and the German romanticism gave nationalistic movements important impulses developing the idea of the nation and the people as one organism.\textsuperscript{4} The ideology involves assumptions of what a nation is; a theory of community and the idea that the world is naturally divided into these communities. However, nationalism does not need to be taught or experienced theoretically as nations are now established all across the globe, transformed into familiar common sense.\textsuperscript{5}

\textsuperscript{1} Nationalstat, Nationalencyklopedin.
\textsuperscript{2} Billig, Michael, \textit{Banal Nationalism}, p.20
\textsuperscript{3} Nationalism. Encyclopædia Britannica Online.
\textsuperscript{4} Boime, Albert, \textit{Waving the Red Flag and Reconstituting Old Glory}, p.4
\textsuperscript{5} Billig, Michael, \textit{Banal Nationalism}, p.63.
3.2 Banal nationalism

The decorative use of flags has been on my mind for quite some time as they are also the most common symbol used to express nationalism. As mentioned in the introduction, the American flag seems to be used as a default image or pattern and I find it equally fascinating each time to see a powerful symbol used like this. Quite often I see the US flag on interior decoration (textile products) and clothing in shops, decorating products of all prices. The socks, pillows or T-shirts could just as well have been decorated with flowers but instead it happens to be with the US flag.

In contrast to the Swedish flag, the US flag seems to pass unnoticed. When observing the use of the these flags today in Sweden, the Swedish flag is a sensitive and politically charged symbol while the US flag is depoliticized and neutralized. There is a significant difference in how these two flags are used; unlike the Swedish flag which can often be seen in gardens in Sweden and rarely in a design context – the US flag is constantly seen as a print but never as a physical flag waving in the wind. It would be surprising to me to see them switch contexts and yet they seem remarkably invisible in the contexts in which they are usually displayed.

National flags are categorized as banal nationalism, referring to the less obvious, less visible ways nationalism is expressed – beyond the conscious awareness. Compared to nationalism restricted to describing the extreme right (a surplus phenomenon), this is the kind of familiar nationalism which is subtle and often overlooked.

Michael Billig, professor of Social Sciences at Loughborough University and the originator of the term (published 1995), describes the term as; "(...) introduced to cover the ideological habits that enable the established nations of the West to be reproduced.(...) Daily, the nation is indicated, or ‘flagged’, in the lives of its citizenry. Nationalism, far from being an intermittent mood in established nations, is the endemic condition." Thus, banal nationalism describes the reasons why people in the contemporary world don’t forget about their nationality as they are constantly reminded of their position in the world of nations. Nationalism makes universal claims, Billig points out, intertwining the national and international.¹

Examples of banal nationalism would be symbols on coins and bank notes, sporting events, the
weather, the difference between domestic and international news and maybe the most obvious one; the national flag.

Because national flags are treated in different ways, a distinction is made between the unwaved and waved flag in the concept of banal nationalism. Some flags are saluted and actively waved but most flags, like the US flag when used as decoration, stay unsaluted and unwaved, are not paid much attention.1 Though forgettable and unsaluted, the unwaved flag is described by Billig as being at least as important as the memorable moments of the waved and saluted one; "The uncoun ted millions of flags which mark the homeland of the United States do not demand immediate, obedient attention. On their flagpoles by the street and stitched on to the uniforms of public officials, they are unwaved, unsaluted and unnoticed. These are mindless flags. Perhaps if all the unwaved flags which decorate the familiar environment were to be removed they would suddenly be noticed, rather like the clock that stops ticking. If the reds and blue were changed into greens and oranges, there would be close, scandalized scrutiny, as well as criminal charges to follow."3

Billig suggests that people don’t necessary feel great when exposed to the flag as they see it far too often to feel that way each time. Rather “they see it too frequently even to notice that they are seeing it”.4

3.3 Stars and stripes

In order to better understand how the US flag has come to be unattached to the idea of expressions of nationalism and a common symbol in Sweden, I summarized its history and the use of it in Sweden.

3.3.1 The history of the US flag

The 13 stripes of the US flag represents the original states and the stars the current number but there is no known or official assignment of meaning or symbolism to the colors.5 What it expresses today is hard to answer though many Americans would probably say that it’s associated with freedom and liberty as the American history is often seen as a struggle of defending freedom, especially the freedom of the individual. Being American is strongly associated with the idea of being good, as the US history often is depicted with the emphasis on the positive.6

The first official national flag of the US was formally approved in 1777. In the 19th century the flag was mainly used for government and military purposes. Though there were no exact directions on how to produce the flag, the look of it varied widely and the arrangement and the style of the stars differed as the number of stars also grew with the adding of new states.7

In the 1830–40s, in the pre-Civil War period, the flag became more popular among the public, e.g. as decorative art in advertising and political campaigns. It could also be found on consumers items and on hotel buildings.8 As the Civil War which started in 1861 also became a fight for the flag, it started to become an everyday object and a symbol of something that belonged to everyone.9

After the WWII the Stars and Stripes flew in cities across Europe as American forces had defeated German armies.10 During the cold war, after WWII, the American flag symbolized a nation that had become the acknowledged superpower known as "the free world".11

It has been stated that the iconic flag paintings by Jasper Johns12 was the start of a cultural revolution as he depicted the US flag and placed it in a 'high-art’ context.13 (The artist commented the reason for his work with the following words; "One night I dreamed that I painted a large American flag and the next morning I got up and I went out and bought the materials to begin it.”14) This new way of breaking with

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1 Billig, Michael, Banal Nationalism. p.40
2 Ibid. p.10
3 Ibid. pp.40–41
4 Ibid. p.58
5 Flag of the United States of America. Encyclopædia Britannica Online.
6 Kemmelmeier, Markus and Winter, David G. Sowing Patriotism, But Reaping Nationalism? Consequences of Exposure to the American Flag p.862
7 Leepson, Marc, Flag: An American Biography, pp.83–84
8 Ibid. p.86
9 Ibid. pp.91–92
10 Leepson, Marc, Flag: An American Biography, p.213
11 Ibid. p.219
12 See appendix for image (no.2)
13 Boime, Albert, Waving the Red Flag and Reconstituting Old Glory, p.3
14 Jasper Johns, Flag, MoMA (Museum of Modern Art)
the ritual and emotional display encouraged a semiotic exploration of patriotic symbols.\(^1\) By placing it in a gallery where no one felt inclined to salute it, the flag was suddenly taken out of those sites where the ritual of respect usually would take place. It became, as other pop art subjects absorbed from mass media, just another flat, depersonalized motive.\(^2\) When the flag could be seen as any visual object, it was no longer tied to be seen as a conquest or a universally accepted patriotic symbol. This new perception in turn made it possible to question connections between the flag’s meaning in theory and American domestic and foreign policy in practice.\(^3\)

During the Vietnam war, the US split into two groups, those supporting the war and those opposing it. For both sides the flag became important, adopting it as a symbol of their opinions and activities. Not only was it, as often is the case, a pro-war symbol. It was also used in protest against the war e.g. displayed upside down, as a poster with the stars arranged as a peace sign, worn as T-shirts and bandannas or just simply displayed. The war has been described as “a cultural war using the flag as a primary symbol”.\(^4\) About the same time, in 1969, NASA (after setting up a Committee on Symbolic Activities) planted the US flag on the moon.\(^5\)

Not so long ago, after the terror attacks on 11 Sept 2001, sales of flags soared and in the months that followed several States adopted new mandatory or encouraging laws about the use of the American flag as it became a symbol of a nation united against terrorism.\(^6\) A result of this was e.g. the Mississippi State Legislature which enacted a law that required all public school classrooms to display the flag and to recite the Pledge of Allegiance daily in the beginning of the classes.\(^7\)

### 3.3.2 The US flag in Sweden

The Americanization of Sweden has a long history, starting in the end of the 19th century with what was called the “America fever” as people emigrated when bad times in Sweden coincided with the good times of America.\(^8\) During the 20th century, the Anglo-American culture has influenced people in Sweden (and in other nations all over the world) through cinema, art, music, television, food etc.

The information about the use of the US flag in Sweden is limited, though there is some knowledge about the use of it in the 1960s; Because of the American policy, the flag then became a symbol of aggression by the Swedish Left. An expression of this is for example the Swedish artist Carl-Johan De Geer’s silkscreen print USA Murderer\(^9\), depicting the American flag with swastikas replacing the stars.\(^10\) This was, however, contrasting the Swedish rockers who at the same time were waving it from cars or bikes stating their cultural belonging.\(^11\)

### 4. Method (Visual research)

My initial idea was to work in parallel with theory and practical (visual) work as a way to explore possible ways to reformulate, contextualize and publish my material from the book Nation as Decoration, researching the subject more thoroughly in a theoretical way and finding a personal point of view on this at the same time. I intended my visual work to be supported by theory and vice versa.

A source of inspiration has been Metahaven (describing themselves as a studio for design, research, and art)\(^12\) based in Amsterdam. I find their ways and methods of discussing contemporary politics with a visual perspective interesting in relation to my own practice, especially their book Uncorporate Identity which I was reading in the early phase of this project.

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1. Boime, Albert, Waving the Red Flag and Reconstituting Old Glory, p.3  
2. Ibid. p.16  
3. Ibid. p.24  
4. Leepson, Marc Flag: An American Biography, p.229 (Political scientist; Robert Justin Goldstein)  
5. Ibid. p.239  
6. Ibid. p.253  
7. Ibid. p.256  
8. Utvandringen till Amerika (The emigration to America). Nationalencyklopedin.  
9. Original title: USA Mördare (My translation)  
10. See appendix for image (no.3)  
11. Raggare (Rockers). Nationalencyklopedin. See appendix for image (no.4)  
I thought the use of the US flag needed to be seen in relation to the use of the Swedish one as my observation is about how differently they are perceived. It therefore early on became important for me to understand my problematic relation to the Swedish flag. For sure, it can partly be explained with growing up in a family where my mother e.g. can comment on her flowers on the balcony saying; she had accidentally planted yellow and blue flowers together and then realized what she had done. Immediately she planted some red ones among them so that the neighbours wouldn’t think badly of her. From discussing this sensitivity towards these specific colors with others I found out not everyone had the same experience. This made me interested in finding out more about why I was taught to avoid blue and yellow.

These colors are now mainly associated with the nationalistic party the Sweden Democrats (founded in 1988) for me, it is today the third largest political party in the Swedish parliament as they received 12.9% of the votes in the Swedish general election of 2014. The party grew out of the racist movements Bevara Sverige svenskt (Keep Sweden Swedish) and Sverigepartiet (The Sweden Party). A documentary series called Fosterland was broadcast in Swedish Television in the early phase of this project. It told about the growing nationalism in Europe and how it expresses itself differently in different countries and in different political parties. The journalist interviews representatives of movements such as Front National in France, Golden Dawn in Greece, Fidesz in Hungary, Eurasia Party in Russia and also the Sweden Democrats in Sweden, trying to understand the way they are thinking. It was obvious from the documentary that the flag is a central symbol in nationalistic movements of today. This made me question the uncritical and swift use of national symbols for commercial purposes even more. Because nationalism is a global phenomena, I thought any repeated expression of a specific national belonging must be considered problematic.

I found a text, A flag for all occasions? The Swedish experience (2007), by Orvar Löfgren (professor of ethnology at Lund University, b.1943) where the idea of waved and unwaved flags is commented on

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1 My translation
2 My translation
3 Sverigedemokraterna (The Sweden Democrats). Nationalencyklopedin.
from a Swedish perspective, it claims the power of the nations who have perfected the art of unwaving flags is underestimated, suggesting the Swedish flag can be seen very often and therefore has become invisible to the Swedes. The Swedish self image is described as being a non-flagwaving nation; “representing a friendly non-aggressive type of national identity (...) Flags are waved in the USA, in France or Britain, but not here.” This quote caught my attention because it added an extra dimension to the use of the US flag in Sweden, making this phenomena seem more absurd and contradictory. Because I recognize this self image, and as I can identify with it personally, it became more clear to me why I reacted to the use of the US flag to start with. When reading about the history of the Swedish flag, the use of the US flag became more complex and I better understood why open nationalism is considered vulgar in Sweden.

4.1.1 The history of the Swedish flag

The Swedish flag is not dated but the oldest depiction one knows of so far is traced back to the sixteenth century. The off-centre Scandinavian cross flag on a plain background was influenced by Sweden’s chief rival Denmark. The basis for the colors blue and yellow were probably taken from the state coat of arms (a blue shield with three golden crowns). In the 18th century it was mainly used at sea on war- and merchant ships, though it was still unusual to see on land. During the period when Sweden and Norway were a union (1814–1905) the flag looked slightly different.

In the latter half of the 19th century the flag slowly started to become a civil symbol, transforming from being a military and royal symbol to representing the state. More national properties were then added and were successfully integrated among the people in the construction of the Swedish nation. About a hundred years ago, a private association created the “Day of the Swedish Flag” (1916) to promote the flag and to give the national holiday a more open and less conservative appearance as waving the flag could still be seen as an elite practice.

In 1936, a book named Sweden: The Middle Way was published. It was written by an American journalist and depicts Sweden as a nation aiming to overcome social conflicts in order to build a welfare state, located somewhere in between capitalism and communism. Sweden was portrayed as an island of peace in Europe, an image gratefully accepted by people in Sweden since it was consistent with the self image of identifying themselves with progressivity. Over all, the WWII became a national renaissance where values as freedom and democracy began to be thought of as historical foundations for Sweden.

In the post-war period, national expressions were toned down in a reaction towards the horrible events of the war. As nationalism had become associated with fascist states, people in Sweden turned their backs to nationalism, toning down those kinds of expressions. As nationalism didn’t belong in the modern people’s homes, an aim to achieve modernity took its place instead. What was alien couldn’t be recognized and visible and so the national properties were shamefully dismantled. The Swedish flag waved more seldom as a national symbol, instead it colonized the private sphere leading to the Swedish

1 Löfgren, Orvar, A Flag for All Occasions? The Swedish Experience IN: Flag, Nation and Symbolism in Europe and America (ed.) Hylland Eriksen, Thomas and Jenkins, Richard. p.137
2 Flag of Sweden. Encyclopædia Britannica Online.
3 Tollin, Göran, Flaggan och Fanan – Regler och anvisningar, p.13
4 Unionsflagga. Nationalencyklopedin.
5 Löfgren, Orvar, A Flag for All Occasions? The Swedish Experience IN: Flag, Nation and Symbolism in Europe and America (ed.) Hylland Eriksen, Thomas and Jenkins, Richard. p.139
6 W. Johnansson, Alf, Nationalism IN: Flaggor, från fälttag till fokfest. p.25
7 Ibid. p.28
8 Ibid. pp.29–30
9 Ibid. pp.30–31
flag mainly being used to celebrate family events in the 1940s. The flag-waving became less official and more festive as this habit spread and in the 1950s it became common in gardens and in private spheres in general. The flag became during this period of time domesticated and more familiar as it was now also produced in miniature sizes.

In the 1960s the Swedish flag became a representation of outmoded, oppressive and conservative nationalism. The left-wing movement thought of the blue in the flag as something symbolizing the establishment in society. As you wouldn’t find as many private flagpoles as in Scandinavia at the time they became part of everyday life to the extent that they became invisible. This was even commented by the Swedish King in his Christmas Speech in 1985 as he said the flag was seen more often than before.

As Sweden joined the European Union the flag also invaded the supermarkets signaling that the food was Swedish and not imported from other European countries. This time the debates on immigration also grew more tense leading to a change in the flag symbolism in late 1980s and early 1990s. The flag then became a symbol for inclusion and exclusion as neo-Nazis used the flag as a symbol of racism and ethnic nationalism.

In 1983, the 6th of June (from 1916) was officially ranked as “Day of the Swedish Flag” and in 2005 established as an official holiday.

4.2 Consequences of exposure to powerful symbols

The research study *Sowing Patriotism, but Reaping Nationalism? –Consequences of Exposure to the American Flag* examines the consequences of exposure to the US flag on Americans’ sense of national attachment. The researchers’ hypothesis was that if the flag serves as a reminder of America’s own superiority in the world, the Americans would probably also be more likely to embrace inequality between groups more generally. Participants were asked to answer a questionnaire that measured patriotism, nationalism, social dominance orientation and authoritarianism either in a room decorated with the American flag or in a room where it was absent. They also carried out a second experiment where the questionnaire was printed either with or without an image of the flag. The study supports the idea that the American flag increased nationalism (defined as superiority over others), but not necessarily patriotism (defined as love and commitment to one’s country). Or as stated in the report “In other words, the flag did not reliably enhance love and concern for one’s country, but heightened participants’ desire for the United States to dominate other nations.”

What is suggested is that the patriotic display of the flag may instead increase nationalistic sentiments, emphasizing the self-description of being the “best country in the world”.

This study made me question whether this frequent exposure of one particular nation also has consequences on people’s national conceptions in Sweden. As banal nationalism is a concept that describes the small ways people are discreetly reminded of their nation, it’s not the same thing to be reminded of another nation. Still I thought, banal nationalism is relevant to discuss even when it is displaced, especially when it expresses itself in a nation that is highly influenced by the nation displayed. It has been demonstrated that when exposed to potent cultural symbols, individuals are likely to think and behave in ways which are consistent with the worldviews and values with which the cultural symbols are associated. How is the way people perceive the world in Sweden then affected by the visibility of the US flag? I emailed professor Michael Billig, the writer of *Banal Nationalism*, to find out his thoughts on this.

Extract from my email to Billig:

Due to the fact that the Swedish flag has become a symbol for racism and nationalism (in Sweden) – it’s not used in the same way the American is. As the nationalist movement at the same time is growing here (as in other European countries) I have started to question if there are consequences to the visibility of the “stars and stripes”.

My questions to you are therefore; Do you believe these unwaved US flags displayed on objects in Sweden still unconsciously bring the idea of nations and national borders to the minds of people (even though it’s another nation’s symbol)? And therefore in the long-term, strengthens the nationalistic way of conceiving the world?

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2 Flag, Nation and Symbolism in Europe and America (ed.) Hylland Eriksen, Thomas and Jenkins, Richard. p.4
3 Svenska flaggans dag. Nationalencyklopedin.
4 Kemmelmeier, Markus and Winter, David G. *Sowing Patriotism, But Reaping Nationalism? Consequences of Exposure to the American Flag* p.868
5 Ibid. p.861
Extract from Billig’s answer:

The questions you are asking are essentially empirical questions and I have no direct data. However, I will make one comment regarding the showing of the American flag in countries like Sweden. The flag is unlikely to make non-Americans feel personally American, but the flags may function as a form of cultural imperialism – they make America and its cultural products seem familiar and friendly. Imagine if the continually viewed were not the American flag but the Russian one? What would you think were happening? If you can answer that hypothetical question then you might have a clue about the familiar situation.

After the contact with Michael Billig, I replaced the US flag with the Russian.1 I then thought about how little I think of the US flag as a national symbol compared to others. Knowing my reading of this symbol differed from other national flags, I started to question my perception of it. I found I couldn’t control how I perceive this symbol, but I wondered what would I think of it if I could see it more objectively as any other flag. This, of course, I can only imagine as I grew up and still live with the presence of US culture in my everyday life.

The Swedish writer Maria-Pia Boëthius wrote “Sweden is increasingly identified as a spiritual state of the United States, more American than North America”.2,3 “This could be explained through the concept of soft power which is a term coined by Joseph S. Nye and described as something that arises from the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideals and policies. Nye writes; “When you can get others to admire your ideals and to want what you want, you do not have to spend as much on sticks and carrots to move them in your direction. Seduction is always more effective than coercion, and many values like democracy, human rights and individual opportunities are deeply seductive.”4

Billig says the flags may make the US culture seem familiar and friendly to us. This is linked to the “mere-exposure effect”, a hypothesis where the repeated exposure of a specific object leads to an emerging preference for it (even though the individual doesn’t have to engage in any sort of behavior, nor being offered positive or negative reinforcement). The frequent exposure leads to an attachment

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1 See image.
2 My translation.
3 http://www.etc.se/ledare/sa-skapar-usa-fiendebilder
4 Nye, J.S. JR. Soft Power: The Means To Success in World Politics, p.10 (preface)
as its familiarity demands minimal investments of energy, even when exposures are not accessible to
awareness. It’s allowing the person to distinguish objects that are safe from those that are not and this
has been described as “the most primitive basis of social attachments”.¹

4.2.1 Design perspective

One of my initial questions was; How can I bring this observation into the Swedish design (history) context?
Many Swedish companies produce and design prints stating the US as a nation, either with the flag or
through text (names of cities, universities etc.), referring to the US in different ways. Some Swedish
companies also present themselves as American.

As the producers have the power to decide what to reproduce, I thought it would be interesting and
relevant to hear their point of view of using a national identity to make their products more attractive.
I formulated some questions that I e-mailed to some Swedish companies (H&M, Lexington, Lindex and
KappAhl) about their views on the US flag:

* What do you think the US flag symbolizes/expresses?
* How do you relate to the original/interpretations of the flag in the design process? (Copyright)
* When did you use the US flag on your products for the first time? (Year, product description)
* How do you wish products with the US flag to be perceived by the consumers?
* Are there statistics on whether the US flag as a motive affects the sale of a product?

Unfortunately, it turned out none of the companies were able to get involved in student projects.
Afterwards, I realized the questions were too specific and that I should have asked more generally about
their use of nations and national symbols.

4.3 Visual work

As mentioned earlier on, the unwaved flag describes the forgettable and unsaluted flag, though being
at least as important as the memorable moments of the actively waved flag. The visibility of the US flag

¹ Zajonc, R.B. Mere Exposure: A Gateway to the Subliminal.
as decoration on everyday products falls below this category as it is then indirectly placed in an everyday environment. I thought it would be interesting to place and display my collected objects in a “flag context” again to stress their relation with national flags. At first I had an idea of printing the objects on textile and exhibit it as a flag and maybe add movement to it. Once I realized the feeling of a waving flag would be hard to simulate in a still piece of fabric, I started to think of possible ways to add this movement. Though I had never before worked with film, or in the film programme Adobe After Effects in which I started to work, this medium became an option as a flag-waving 3D effect could then be applied to my visual material. It was interesting to see what happened to the objects when they were given this movement, contrasting their otherwise lifeless appearance. I believe adding movement repositioned them into the context of being flags in a way that wouldn’t be as directly communicated in e.g. a print.

The effect made the objects wave as flags, though this movement is not illustrating the “waved flag” as described in banal nationalism, which is describing the actively saluted one. Instead the objects in my sketches waved like flags in the wind from a flagpole, categorized as unsaluted and unwaved within the concept of banal nationalism.

4.3.1 A matter of contexts (neutralized)

As I was sketching this I started to become aware of the differences of the use of the Swedish and the US flags in Sweden. It became clear to me that they were both more neutral in certain contexts than in others. It was interesting to see these US flag objects waving silently, as that’s the context where the Swedish flag usually seems neutral. When given movement the items weren’t as invisible any more as they aren’t usually seen in that way. I therefore started to think of ways to use the Swedish flag in the way it’s hardly ever used in Sweden, viz. as mere decoration.

I started to sketch with the colors of the Swedish flag in different ways which I would never have done otherwise. Something interesting happened when the products were placed on a blue and yellow background as it in a subtle way contextualized them. When playing with this color combination I believe I lost some of my “fear” of using them together. Though to clarify, it was never my intention to neutralize these colors or to make them become unproblematic, rather the opposite.

4.3.2 Writing

As I consider the report writing and my research being a comprehensive part of my work, I also wished to summarize my reflections and research on the subject and publish this. After deciding on the film as...
my medium for this project, I thought I was going to write a short text and add it as a text in the film. Later, being introduced to the term *film essay* by one of my tutors, I also thought about publish the text as a voice-over together with my visual material. I recorded my written text together with a professional and combined the moving images with my text. I worked for a long time trying to unify them but I eventually decided to leave the text and the voice-over out. This was a hard decision to make because I had been working with the text and the recordings for quite some time but I still wanted the images to speak for themselves, leading me to keep the writing separate from the actual film.

## 4.4 Rejected sketches

Throughout this process some visual work was created which would not be part of the final result. As my thoughts concerning the visibility of national symbols have changed with the theory I've read, some sketches were rejected as I realized they didn’t communicate what I wanted to express in the end. The following are some examples of these rejected ideas.

### 4.4.1 Swedish national border

For a while, my concern was whether the visibility of the U.S. flag strengthens a nationalistic way of perceiving the world in general in Sweden. I wanted to see what would happen if I tried to emphasize this, leading me to place the objects on images of the Swedish national border. Though I thought some-
thing interesting happened with the reading of the objects, I later figured out that this didn’t communicate my thoughts on the subject and I decided not to go further with this.

4.4.2 Actively waved

As I wanted to make the objects saluted in the ways actively waved flags are, the wave effect I had added earlier on wasn’t enough. The objects still seemed too much like unwaved flags appearing like they were waving discreetly from a flag pole, untouched by the human hand. Thinking of the flagwaving that appears when a flag is saluted and more actively waved, I made the objects move over the surface, by making the objects fly in and out of the film on a background of a sky. Because I wanted to stress the context-based neutralization of the US flag in comparison with the Swedish, I couldn’t justify actively waving the objects and chose not to go on with this idea.

4.4.3 Background patterns

The closer I came to the final result I realized I wanted to include the colors of the Swedish flag in the film somehow. These are sketches of the various ways I tried to include yellow and blue in the film, I chose not to go on with these background patterns since they were taking too much attention away from the waving objects.
5. Result

My final, visual result is a film consisting of thirty scanned everyday objects bought in Sweden, all decorated with the US flag. I added a flagwaving movement/effect to the objects and they are placed on a blue background and have yellow frames (referring to the Swedish flag and context). Every object is visible for 8 seconds and then fades into the next one. The film is about 4 minutes long but since being in a constant loop, it has no obvious beginning or end. Apart from the film, the master presentation and the spring exhibition at Konstfack are also results of this project.
5.1 Presentation

In my presentation I chose to talk about the reason for this project, why it’s an important subject to me. I also gave a brief introduction to my research on nationalism and banal nationalism. Over all I summarized what I had learned so far and my thoughts on where the project was going. The film was at this time unfinished, in the sketching phase, so I only presented a short sample of it. My critic was Mahmoud Keshavarz, design researcher and currently PhD candidate and teacher in design at the School of Arts and Communication of Malmö University in Sweden. The discussion that followed the presentation concerned the following; my choice of the flag as a representation of a nation among others (such as e.g. passports, ambassadeurs etc.), to whom I direct the project (producer versus customer as the receiver) and in what context I want to place it. Keshavarz suggested performativity as part of the end result. He also problematized the idea of invisibility due to visibility, emphasizing that it could also be the other way around; visibility can spring from invisibility in the sense that if you’re used to seeing something, you may react to its absence. This was brought up for discussion because of the subtitle of the project, *The invisibility of the US flag in Sweden*, and as I was suggesting that the US flag is seen so often that it’s easily overlooked. I thought it was interesting to hear this as I found it intriguing to think of different ways invisibility may also effect people. Over all, I came to see my project from new perspectives after the discussion and I considered his comments. However, at this point, I had decided I was producing a film which was directed to the visitors of the spring exhibition. There wasn’t enough time to rethink the project at whole and so his comments and thoughts didn’t directly effect the outcome presented in the spring exhibition. They will however be useful for my future work.

5.2 Exhibition

In the exhibition space I screened my film on a large flat screen TV, a format which seemed relevant as Sweden is highly influenced by American culture and movies and TV-programs play a critical role in the familiarization of the culture of the United States. The wide rectangular shape of the screen also has similarities with a flag. The TV was placed on a white podium at a height of about 150 cm so that the visitor had to look upwards to watch it. I decided on the podium and the height in order to reference the traditional white flagpole used in Sweden and the height of the flags waving from them. The podium was standing in the middle of a corridor, facing the direction of the entrance from where the visitors would come. This decision was made after a meeting with one of the curators for the Konstfack spring exhibition, Jonas Nobel. In the beginning of planning the exhibition space I had ideas on hanging the screen from the ceiling, though due to to the weight of it and because of safety
considerations, I decided to use the podium.
Because I quite late in the process decided on not using the voice-over for the film, a short text was instead presented next to the film in the label sign to add criticality to the reading of the work.¹

¹ See appendix for full label text

Final exhibition set up.
6. Reflections

This project started off with a simple observation which I have explored over a longer period of time through writing, researching and experimenting. The theme of this project, which I started to formulate in the autumn of 2014, is something I’ve been thinking about for a long time but haven’t before put into words or visualized. The theory on banal nationalism has helped me to contextualize this phenomenon and the more I’ve learned, the more complex and interesting it has become. I’ve gained new knowledge both theoretically and practically. I have now a better understanding of how visual expressions are tied to the political structures in which I live and I have also learned how to produce and work with film during this time. Though I never used the recorded voice-over in the end, I also learned about working with writing, recording and to combine audio with moving images.

In the beginning I thought this project would end up in a physical, printed book. However, through the process I came to find another solution on how to publish my research material. By deciding on working with film, which I had never done before, I found a new way of expressing my ideas. Looking back, I should have started earlier with planning and making the final decisions about the details of the film and it would have been better if I had worked more with the presentation of the film in the exhibition space. However, I thought of the spring exhibition being a relevant context to present the research in because this made it possible for me to communicate my work to many of the potential consumers of the objects. Because I want to start a discussion concerning the use of national symbols for commercial purposes, I hope some of the visitors of the exhibition will reflect upon this.

My initial questions for this project were how to bring my observation into the Swedish design context, how to broaden the understanding of the relation between nation and visual culture and how to make what’s already before our eyes more visible. I believe I’ve been able to answer those questions and that the film both places this phenomena in the Swedish design discourse and visualizes something otherwise overlooked. However, I believe the question about broadening the understanding of the relation between nations and visual culture is something that is only partly communicated through the film. Rather, the theory that I’ve studied and written about in this report has been a way for me to personally contextualize my work and to better understand why I find this an intriguing subject to study.

The book with the same name (Nation as Decoration), which I made earlier, contained a lot of the material later presented in the exhibition. I see the film as a refinement of that book, a more complex yet somewhat more accessible way of presenting the research. I found the film medium a good way to present my material in the exhibition though now as the exhibition is over, I can see that a complementing book or printed matter would make this project last longer and easier to spread. It would be helpful in order to place my observation in the Swedish design (history) context which was one of the intentions with my work. At first I thought it seemed unnecessary to make both a film and a book but now I think they could be useful in different contexts and complement each other. I therefore wish to publish a book

Left: Me looking at Jasper Johns painting ‘Flag’ (spring 2014).
Right: My work exhibited at Konstfack (spring 2015).
as a continuation of this project in which the text which was never used in the film would be printed.

When placing my work next to others that are also dealing with the US flag (such as e.g. Jasper Johns ‘Flag’), it’s clear to me that I’m not alone in questioning this particular flag, powerful images and national symbols in general. As they can’t be neutral expressions it seems relevant to discuss their visibility from all sorts of perspectives in different ways.

In the end I feel motivated to continue working with the subject. The tutorings and the interesting discussions during these, and in other conversations with other people, has made me motivated to continue with this project because of its complexity.

7. Conclusion

When reading about the history of the Swedish flag it became clear to me why my personal view of it is so problematic. I have never before researched or expressed this in words the way I have in this project. By exploring a small and personal reaction on today’s visual culture, greater structures in society have become visible, making my surroundings more understandable to myself and hopefully for others as well.

Because I find banal nationalism and the use of national identities for commercial purposes being such a complex and interesting subject, I believe I will continue working with this and hopefully be able to develop and find more ways of exhibiting, publishing and discussing this research. I therefore see this project as a foundation for my future work in which I wish to expand and further explore this phenomena.
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Appendice

No.1
Party members of the Sweden Democrats waving Swedish flags during the election night (Sept. 2014).
Image retrieved from: http://www.dn.se/
Photo: M. Hallgren

No.2
Flag, art work (various techniques) by the American artist Jasper Johns from 1954.
Retrieved from: http://www.moma.org/
No.3
Left: Silkscreen print (USA Murderer) by the artist Carl Johan DeGeer from 1967. Reprinted copy from 2004 made from the original.

No.4
Rockers in Sweden.
Image retrieved from: http://www.ne.se/
Photo: L. Allard/Reportagebild/Pressens Bild
Nation as Decoration

The national flag is a common reminder of living in a world of nations and states, divided by precisely drawn boundaries. It is used to decorate the everyday environment, constantly reminding people of their membership in a group.

National symbols are also used for commercial purposes with the aim to make products become more attractive, and because a flag can inspire a kind of magical awe and respect in the viewer, what and who it represents is also perceived as admirable and valuable.

In Swedish commerce, the U.S. flag is repeatedly used as a default image or pattern, decorating basic objects with the aim of making them become more desirable and sellable. Meanwhile, the Swedish self-image involves being a ‘non-flagwaving’ nation because open nationalism has for a long time been thought of as vulgar; flags are to be waved elsewhere but not here. However, the presence of any national symbol indicates that there are other, absent ones, which are considered less desirable, unworthy of the same visual reproduction.

Through symbols and images, stories are expressed in our day to day lives. The way we perceive our surroundings is affected by these visual expressions. When repeatedly exposed to the same symbols, we don’t necessarily pay attention to how many times they are projected onto us, or to the message that is communicated. Instead they easily become legitimizied and pass us by unnoticed.

Powerful symbols expressed in banal ways are easily overlooked, though they still serve as reminders, maintaining and reinforcing our constructed reality.