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## The king's speeches Decisions during the 1772 revolution in Sweden

### Abstract

*This article investigates the mood and the atmospheres of the so-called Swedish Revolution in 1772, when King Gustav III carried through a coup d'état. Martin Heidegger's elaborations of boredom in lectures held 1929-30 – a mood that to a certain extent is a parallel to the hesitation of both the Swedish king and the country during the crises which led to the revolution – and Tonino Griffiero's studies on atmosphere enable an affective elucidation of historical documents and eyewitness testimonies. The political decision taken in 1772 emerged from the mood of hesitation.*

### Keywords

*Decision, Mood, Atmosphere*

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## 1. Introduction

The climactic moment of the film *The King's Speech* is when George VI (played by Colin Firth) holds a speech on the radio after the British declaration of war on Nazi Germany in 1939. The king has been stammering since his childhood, but thanks to unconventional speech-therapeutic methods, his problems are slowly subsiding. The transmission of the speech is of huge importance for the country, facing Germany's great war machine since all hopes are gone for a "peace of our time" (Chamberlain's infamous phrase after the Munich Agreement with Hitler in 1938). George VI is convincing in his speech. What the politicians cannot do, a king can: to convince his people as a whole, not only sympathisers with a party. That is the privilege of monarchs – if they become popular, that is.

The royal case to be discussed here belongs however to the late eighteenth century and is a Swedish one – it regards Gustav III who was king of Sweden from 1771 to 1792. He did not stammer; instead, he had been an eloquent speaker since his youth. He was not, like George VI, a ruler of an empire but of a country which only had an imperial past. For a readership of international scholars of Aesthetics such a choice might come as a surprise since knowledge about Gustav III today cannot be expected outside Sweden or the academic circles of Nordic History Studies. But at least opera aficionados do have some knowledge. Anyone interested in opera is of course familiar with *Un ballo in maschera*, but those devoted to Verdi also know that in the original plans for the opera the main character was Gustav III, shot at a masquerade ball in 1792. Now, when the king is identified, we can turn to a story about him and his *coup d'état* twenty years before the murder, which shall cast light upon the phenomenon of political decision.

The article is divided in two parts. In the first part, I shall present the material for two short investigations which form the second part. The material consists of a historical background and documents including an early manuscript by Gustav III himself and a book published in 1778 by an Anglo-Irish author, Charles Francis Sheridan, who was an eyewitness to the revolutionary events in Stockholm 1772. In my investigations, I turn to Martin Heidegger's elaborations of the moment of decision and its relation to moods, and I end with a discussion on the atmosphere, indebted to Tonino Griffero's writings, of the revolution referred to in the subtitle: the Swedish revolution of 1772.

## 2. A background, a manuscript, and eyewitnesses

During his lifetime, Gustav III was an acknowledged name among the monarchs in Europe. Even before his rise to the throne, he was seen as a prince of an Enlightened future, especially among the French *philosophes*. He was applauded in the Académie Française when a letter of his was read aloud since he defended Jean-François Marmontel against the theologians at the Sorbonne University, who accused the author of blasphemy. Voltaire wrote flattering poems to his honour, and Gustav's favourite epic poem was *La Henriade*, from which he could recite long passages by heart. His death was of course the talk of the day when it happened in 1792, but today most people only remember another regicide from that period, the execution of Louis XVI during the revolution in France the year after. The death of Louis was not the death of Gustav. Louis XVI was executed in the revolutionary turbulence by the bourgeois Jacobins, whereas the conspiracy against Gustav was an affair of the Swedish nobility, which had lost much of its power due to decisions made by the king.

As a matter of fact, Gustav III had accomplished a revolution himself in 1772, one year after having reached the throne, the so-called Swedish Revolution. It is today most often called a *coup d'état* since it was a revolution from above, but all over Europe, his actions in August 1772 were described as precisely a revolution. Here, we should remind ourselves of the history of the concept: the term "revolution" had emigrated to politics from astronomy, where it meant the regular motion of celestial bodies back to the same position again, and therefore it could be seen less as a break with the past than as a return to earlier conditions (Koselleck et al. 1984; Arendt 1963). It is true that Gustav III's revolution was intended to turn things back to the way they had been. The kings of Sweden had during the so-called Age of Freedom, which lasted fifty years of the eighteenth century, lost almost all their power to the Council of Realm, the Diet and the committees of the Diet, all of them totally dominated by the nobility. Gustav's father King Adolph Frederick and his mother Queen Louisa Ulrika (who was a very politically minded sister of Frederick the Great) had tried to reinstall royal sovereignty in 1756, but it ended in a catastrophe in which four of the conspiracy's leaders were executed. No-one touched the king and the queen, though, but they had to choose between resigning and make absolution. They conspired again in 1768.

That is the background, but what about decisions? In a quite remarkable document, *Réflexions sur ma situation et ma conduit personnelle pour cette hiver decisive* (Reflections on my situation and my conduct this

decisive winter), written in October 1768, we find the hereditary prince Gustav reflecting upon power and the possibilities of a second attempt of the royal family to regain sovereignty. 22 years old, he prepares himself to take an active role in a revolutionary process, which is intended to lead to the sovereignty of his father – not for himself, that is, but with expectations to inherit the power of a sovereign in the future. Actually, it would only lead to a constitutional crisis, but that is not what is interesting to us. What draws our attention is the free reflection upon his revolutionary attempt and the very personal thoughts about his family situation. It is not a letter, not a plan for the revolution, but his own reflections on the historical situation and on that which urges him to act.

The manuscript is in French, with a handwriting which is difficult to read and with grammatical errors. Just like in Prussia, French was the language of high society in Sweden – but a royal person did not have to follow all the linguistic rules. The introductive sentence reads in translation: “The situation in which I find myself is perhaps the most thorny and delicate one in which I would not say a prince of my age but even a hereditary prince of a great monarchy has ever found himself<sup>1</sup>” (Gustav III 1768). So, Prince Gustav begins his reflections, and he soon describes the circumstances. They concern not only his status as a hereditary prince who will inherit a position stripped of power. The country is threatened by a neighbouring country, Russia, which through bribes manipulates one of the two political parties in Sweden, the Caps. The other party, called the Hats, is allied with France, but the French also demand the prince to overthrow the political order – which would lead to a break with the Hat party, likely to become a repetition of the violent events in 1756, if not worse. However, these two parties are insistently attacking each other, bringing chaos to politics, and making Sweden highly vulnerable. Gustav considers a retreat into studies, biding his time, but he also says that his character is such that difficulties are things to be overcome by him. He hesitates, regains his confidence, hesitates again.

Gustav is preparing himself for a decision. But he will have to wait for his great moment, which came only four years later, and these reflections can be seen a preparation for that event. His father died in 1771, and Gustav became king, but that did not change much. At first, he played the role

<sup>1</sup> My own translations from French, Swedish and Italian appear in the main text and the originals in the footnotes. “Le Situation ou je me trouve est peut-être la plus épineuse et la plus délicate ou je ne dis pas Prince a mon âge mais même tout Prince héritier d’une grande Monarchie ce n’est jamais trouvé”. The king’s misspellings are kept without mentioning.

of an obedient, young ruler, without any other ambition than to unite the country (when he did not just amuse himself). At the same time, he planned for a coup.

The revolution in 1772 was not a violent upheaval; no blood was shed. Instead, it can be said to have been realized in four speeches held by the king. The first one took place in the morning of the 19<sup>th</sup> of August 1772. The coup had been planned in detail: it was intended to be a powerful strike against the political order. In the eastern part of the reign, that is, in Finland (which had been a part of Sweden since the fourteenth century) a group of officers had taken control over the most important fortress defending Finland from Russia and was expected to embark with their soldiers for Stockholm – but the winds of the Baltic Sea blew steadily in the wrong direction. In the south of Sweden, another fortress had been taken in command by royalistic troops – but they would also arrive too late. The king's plot had further been revealed by British intelligence, which informed the Swedish government, and they called for loyal troops in order to arrest the king for treason the next day, the 20<sup>th</sup> of August. So, the king was indeed in a hurry, being left alone, without the people he trusted most, and without any military at his command. He was forced to make a very difficult decision: he had to carry out the revolution on his own.

In the morning of the 19<sup>th</sup> of August, Gustav III followed the parade of the Lifeguards to the royal palace, and there he held a speech to the officers<sup>2</sup>. An eyewitness, a captain of the Lifeguards, wrote many years after the event that the young king began to speak “in a very affected state of mind and white in his face”<sup>3</sup>, describing the dangerous situation of the country and the fatal conflicts between the two political parties and seeing the only possible solution in taking a step back to the ancient Swedish freedom bound by law. According to another rendering of the same speech, published in book on the revolution by Charles Francis Sheridan, secretary to the British envoy in Sweden, the king ended his speech with the following question: “Will you be faithful to me as your forefathers

<sup>2</sup> Berlova (2021: 145-58) treats these days of the *coup d'état* from a performative point of view, partly using the same sources as me, but unfortunately over-interpreting the material without a careful critical evaluation of the sources.

<sup>3</sup> Baron Carl Gustaf Liewen, in August 1772 serving as a captain, quoted in Hennings (ed., 1960). “[M]ed stor sinnesrörelse och mycket blek”.

were to Gustav Vasa, and Gustav II Adolph<sup>4</sup>? I will then risk my life for your welfare, and that of our country" (Sheridan 1778: 294).

There was a long silence. Clearly, an objection would have brought another conclusion to the day – but one voice swore the oath of allegiance and was followed by almost everyone else.

Gustav III's next speech, the second one, was not easier since he now had to speak to the ordinary soldiers, of whom no-one knew about his plans and who were used to follow the orders of the Council, whereas there at the first occasion had been officers present who already knew about the plot and who sympathised with the king. But using almost the same words with which he had spoken to the officers, he was again met with enthusiasm. Now the king had military forces on his side.

There was of course also a world outside. The people of the city had understood that something was going on around the palace. Rumours had it that the king's life was in danger, so when the citizens saw him on his horse, riding through the streets with a white handkerchief around his left arm as a sign of the revolution, they cheered and followed his example, knitting handkerchiefs in the same way. Since his travels through the country as crown prince, he had been thought of as being on the people's side against the nobility. This was the moment when the revolution was accepted by the population, yet the king decided to speak to the citizens of Stockholm the next day in the main square of the city. The following report can be found in Sheridan's book on the revolution:

When the king arrived there, a dead silence prevailed. His majesty on horseback, with his sword drawn, advanced some paces before his attendants. He then made to the people a long and pathetic discourse, in a voice so clear and distinct, that his auditory lost not a syllable that fell from him. He concluded his harangue by declaring that his only intention was to restore tranquillity to his native country, by suppressing licentiousness, overturning the aristocratic form of government, reviving the old Swedish liberty, and restoring the ancient laws of Sweden such as they were before 1680. – I renounce now (added he) as I have already done all idea of the abhorred absolute power, or what is called *sovereignty*, esteeming it now, as before, my greatest glory to be the first citizen among a truly free people.

The populace, who had not heard their sovereign speak Swedish since the reign of Charles the XIIth<sup>5</sup>, listened to the king with all that admiration which so unusual

<sup>4</sup> Gustav Vasa (1496-1560) led the liberation of Sweden from Danish domination in the sixteenth century and was elected king in 1523. Gustav II Adolph (1594-1632) made Sweden into a European great power.

<sup>5</sup> The Swedish kings between Charles XII and Gustav III were German speaking.

an address would naturally excite in them. They frequently interrupted him with the loudest acclamations, and many of them even shed tears of joy. (Sheridan 1778: 303-4)

The fourth and last speech was delivered one day later, on the 21<sup>st</sup> of August, before the assembled estates in the Hall of the State at the royal palace. Outside the building, cannons were not directed towards the bay of the Baltic Sea, as usual, but towards the hall itself. The soldiers had even lighted the slow matches, and the ominous smoke could be felt by the politicians in the hall through the open windows. Sheridan continues his story:

The king being seated on his throne, surrounded by his guards and a numerus band of officers, addressed the states in a harangue, wherein he painted the excesses, the disorders and misfortunes into which party division had plunged the nation, in the most glaring colours. He reminded them of all the pain he had taken to heal those divisions, and the ingratitude he had met with in return. He glanced at the infamy they had incurred from their avowed venality, and the baseness of their having been influenced by foreign gold, to betray the first interests of their country. Then stopping short in the middle of his discourse – he cried out, ‘if there be any one among you who can deny what I have advanced, let him rise and speak.’ (Sheridan 1778: 306-7)

No-one protested, as one can expect with so many soldiers loyal to the king around them, and then the king read the new form of government to them, asking for their approval. It consisted of no less than fifty-seven articles, and it seems quite absurd that such a complex text, read to an audience of politicians, should be accepted without reflection, but that was his deal. We now return to Sheridan a last time:

The whole of this extraordinary scene was then concluded in an equally extraordinary manner. The king drew a book of psalms from his pocket, and taking off his crown, began singing *te deum*, in which he was most devoutly joined by the whole assembly. (Sheridan 1778: 308)

That is the main material, with this pathetic ending, where the unison of voices becomes the unison of the country. It was the last phase of the revolution. Sweden had become a new constitution.

### 3. *On the mood and atmosphere of the Swedish Revolution*

Hesitation is one of the most prominent elements in Gustav III's decision-making. That may sound odd when we remind ourselves about the situation in which the king found himself in the morning of the 19<sup>th</sup> of August. The military troops sympathising with him would arrive too late, and these were the only forces behind the revolution. He knew that the leading politicians wanted to arrest him. Therefore, he had to rely on his own voice and action, convincing officers and soldiers face to face. The hesitation in his voice, his white face, were noted by those whom he tried to convince, but he regained his conviction and held on to his cause.

But the mood of hesitation followed him, even in his imagination. When he developed a cultural policy in which the first step was to create a Swedish opera, that is, operas sung in the Swedish language instead of Italian, he wrote himself the plans to most significant of works, and in the two major operas, there were key scenes dominated by hesitation. The theme of one of these operas, *Gustaf Wasa* (Kellgren 1942a<sup>6</sup>), is the liberation of Sweden from the Danes in 1523 – a rising led by the future king Gustav Vasa. In a dramatic moment, he cannot decide if he shall risk the life of his mother – who had been taken as hostage by the Danes and was threatened to be killed if the campaign did not end – or continue to lead the Swedish army against the enemy. He asks his men what to do, and *they* convince *him* that the struggle must continue. In the second opera, *Aeneas i Carthago* (Kellgren 1942b<sup>7</sup>), we find Aeneas who cannot decide if he shall stay with Dido in Carthage or leave with the Trojan ships to found the state which would become the Roman empire. Again, it is the people who demands of him that they shall leave. The conflict between family and state was of course the usual one in neoclassical theatre, but Gustav had been personally involved in such conflicts. Hesitation forms a strange pattern in the king's conduct, at least bearing in mind that he restored the monarchic power in 1772 and then in two further steps made himself almost sovereign (or "a tyrant", as his foes said).

When Heidegger turns to the moment of decision in his lecture series *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, held in 1929-30, it does not emerge from the mood of hesitation, but from boredom (for Heidegger

<sup>6</sup> This version of the libretto includes passages which were deleted by the composer Johann Gottlieb Naumann.

<sup>7</sup> Again, this version of the libretto is Kellgren's own final version, printed in his collected works.

on boredom, see for instance Emad 1985, Hammer 2004, Slaby 2010 and Slaby 2017). Yet, there are parallels between the moment of revolution in Sweden 1772 and the moment of lecturing in Germany in 1929. There is grave social unrest in both cases, the memories of recent catastrophic wars are disturbing, the political systems do not seem to be capable of solving the problems – there is chaos instead of stability.

According to Heidegger, boredom is what characterises society at this point in history, and he also calls profound boredom a fundamental mood (Heidegger 1995: 74). That is why he tries to make his audience of students become bored, and he does so with long-winded descriptions of three kinds of boredom. It is easy to say that boredom might prepare someone to take action. However, boredom has, according to Heidegger, also a capacity of being a fundamental mood due to its relation to time. In profound boredom, the human being, or *Dasein*, is dominated by time, which leaves *Dasein* empty and held in limbo. Being left empty means that something like a need or distress emerges, and Heidegger hints at some of these needs in Germany at the end of the 1920s, saying that “everywhere there are disruptions, crises, catastrophes, needs: the contemporary social misery, political confusion, the powerlessness of science, the erosion of art, the groundlessness of philosophy, the impotence of religion” (Heidegger 1995: 162-3). Yet individual needs are not the problem. Heidegger continues: “Not this social misery, not that political confusion, not this powerlessness of science, not that erosion of art, not that impotence of religion – the need in question is not the fact that this or that need oppresses in such or such a way. Rather what oppresses us most profoundly and in a concealed manner is the very *absence of any essential oppressiveness in our Dasein as a whole*” (Heidegger 1995: 163, italics in the quoted text). And this means, with a very Heideggerian formulation, that “the absence of oppressiveness is what fundamentally oppresses and leaves us most profoundly empty” (Heidegger 1995: 164).

As I mentioned, boredom is according to Heidegger not just about being left empty but also being held in limbo. Being held in limbo is of course the opposite of being active, but already in this state of being held back, there is also a first inkling of action. In the momentous moment – in German *Augenblick*, in Danish (since we are approaching Kierkegaard) *Øieblik*, or, in the awkward English translation of Heidegger’s text, *moment of vision* – man is to become what he is, that is, *Da-sein*, being there (on *Augenblick* in philosophy, see Ward 2008; in Heidegger, see Murchadha 2013). And I quote Heidegger again, who answers his own question of what is demanded by this moment of vision: “That the moment of vision

itself be understood, and that means seized upon, as the *innermost necessity of the freedom of Dasein*. What is simultaneously announced is the necessity of understanding the fact that Dasein must first of all bring itself into the realm of what is free again, must comprehend itself as Da-sein" (Heidegger 1995: 165-6). Therefore, the state of being in limbo, being held back, is only the prerequisite for reaching a true state of free activity.

Gustav's hesitation is not the profound boredom that according to Heidegger leads to the state of "being delivered over to beings' telling refusal of themselves as a whole" (Heidegger 1995: 162). Yet, there are parallels between the states. Gustav is dominated by time, being left empty, and he is held in limbo. The parallels do not make the moods equal but point at that they pervade the existence fundamentally. Everything before him seems to be threatened, and his situation might be such that everything is lost.

Gustav was not bored, but he was held in limbo, having no political power at the same time as he was requested to act. We can even follow his arguments, where the lack of power is central, but where there are also worries for his family, the need to counteract the political conflicts of the country, the urge to achieve deeds of honour, and, yes, even to bring back Sweden to its great past.

If you look into documents that show how Gustav reflected upon the situation just before the revolution in 1772, nothing will change compared with 1768. The lack of power worries for his family, conflicts in the Diet, the wish to be a hero, and the urge to restore Sweden's great past are all there. Yet, I find traces of something of greater importance. In the historiography of Sweden trends go back and forth, but a general tendency is that the nationalistic historiography of the 19<sup>th</sup> century accepts Gustav III's view on the political situation, i.e., that there were reasons for him to change the nearly democratic order in Sweden (being even closer to democracy than England was at the time) into something close to Enlightened despotism (e.g. Malmström 1877 and Odhner 1885). During the 20<sup>th</sup> century opinions changed; Gustav III was then often seen as a ruler who tried to reinstall the *ancien régime* and who blocked the road to democracy (highly influential was the dissertation in political science Lagerroth 1915). Many of the latest important contributions to the historiography have turned to eighteenth-century discourse, history writing and ceremonies, relating to both the "linguistic turn" of the humanities and to cultural history. Alm (2002) sets out to show that Gustav III and the royal propaganda altered the meaning of concepts such as "freedom",

"equality" and "rights"; Hallberg (2003) studies the use of history as a political instrument; Tandefelt (2007) calls for a contextual understanding which includes the political logics of the past; whereas Wolff (2016) investigates the conceptions of politics within the nobility, exactly the same nobility which turned against the king and of which a fraction planned the murder.

What I want to suggest is that we should understand Gustav III's decision to carry through the revolution in 1772, and later to diminish the power of the aristocrats, giving the lower estates rights to buy the land of the nobility and giving them access to leading positions in society, earlier only available to aristocrats, that all this were due to the king's insight that the political situation was changing in the countries of Europe and that a bourgeois revolution or even a revolution of the masses was close at hand. The renowned English historian Michael Roberts has said that just before Gustav III's revolution, Sweden stood on the brink to a revolution of the same kind as the French, but seventeen years earlier (Roberts 1967: 280). The gradual reestablishment of the king's sovereignty was a way of stabilising the country, and the conflicts appearing in Sweden 1772 were the same conflicts that appeared in France during the end of the next decade. His sovereignty made social equalisation possible, which in France was carried through with violence and terror. That is why his revolution was not only a revolution in the old sense, the astronomic sense of coming back to an earlier position, but also in the new sense of pushing forward to the future.

So many contemporary writings on Gustav III contain ironic remarks on his self-image, according to which he was the saviour of the country, the guarantee for "the old Swedish liberty", being the only person who could save the nation from decomposition. But I am not trying to defend him and his decisions. What I want to do is to inscribe him into a general historical tendency, where the French Revolution has become the main point of reference. The ongoing shift, where the bourgeoisie challenged the ruling stratum, and where they joined forces with the lowest social stratum, took place in many European countries, but it found different expressions due to the different political structures.

The French Revolution meant nothing to Heidegger. His interest was Germany, and his main reference would rather be Herder's break with the French Enlightenment. But in an understanding of history and the logic of historical change, I suggest that we may take Heidegger's thought into account; however, without endorsing his "history of Being", which he developed in relation to different combinations of fundamental attunements in

*Contributions to Philosophy* (Heidegger 2012)<sup>8</sup>. Likewise, that which in his treatment of action leads to decisionism, may be used in our understanding of the phenomenon of decision – exactly what I have been trying to do.

This means that Gustav III's hesitation was fundamental. The whole society seemed to be built on shifting sands, with political contrasts that made the country impossible to rule. The change of mood that followed, from disruptive hesitation to a unifying and nationalistic enthusiasm, meant a new configuration of the world, which would last during the whole Gustavian era but slowly losing its formative power.

I have commented on the sovereignty of the monarch, his hesitation, his decisions, his actions, but what about the people? When trying to picture the popular reaction to the 19<sup>th</sup> of August 1772, we may have Tonino Griffero's reflections on atmosphere and politics in mind, which he made in the essay "Like leaves in the wind: Does democracy have its own atmosphere?" (Griffero 2020). We could also, just as Griffero does, go all the way back to Gustave Le Bon's pioneering but negative study of the crowd, first published in 1895, in which he points out that "mental contagion" guides the human being (Le Bon 2002: 14-24) and where he treats the relation between crowd and leader (Le Bon 2002: 72-89). Henri Lefebvre then responded to Le Bon some forty years later in a defence of the *revolutionary* crowd of the Revolution, in which "anxiety" and "hope" were the main affective elements of the revolutionary mentality (Lefebvre 1965 [1932/34]: 184). Even if Lefebvre's text is missing when Ben Anderson, in a much-quoted article (2009), juxtaposes a contemporary discourse on atmospheres and Marx's observations of a revolutionary atmosphere in the period before the dramatic events in 1848, they both see the progressive possibilities of a shared affectivity (for an historical overview of research on the crowd, see Borsch 2012). Anderson takes Gernot Böhme's "new aesthetics" into account, but he leaves the main reference to a philosophy of atmospheres untouched – Hermann Schmitz's extensive treatment, in which the situation (*die Situation*) is key. In Schmitz, felt-bodily communication allows for a collective atmosphere to emerge, which are always grounded in the chaotic-manifold entity of the situation (Schmitz

<sup>8</sup> The translators of Heidegger's work have chosen "basic disposition" for *Grundstimmung* whereas I prefer "fundamental attunement". For my reason to do so, see Wallrup 2015, 5-6.

1999; 2014). That element is however central to Griffero's illuminating essay (see also Runkel 2018).

We do have sources describing how the citizens of Stockholm and the soldiers reacted in the revolutionary situation. They have already been touched upon, but an obvious problem is how reliable these sources are. One of the eyewitnesses wrote down his testimony more than thirty years after the event. I referred earlier to Sheridan's book on the revolution in Sweden, and he seems to be trustworthy since he was representing Britain, a country allied with Russia against France, and therefore with no interest in beautifying the event. He was present in Sweden at the time. But it seems as if he himself had to rely on textual sources to some extent, and the most important of these were writings produced by those close to the king, leading to a suspicion that those might be part of the royal propaganda. We find almost the same description of the king's speech at the main square in Stockholm in a widely read letter intended for publication by the Italian *abbé* Domenico Michelessi, invited by the king to be present at his coronation in 1772 and then becoming his intellectual voice in Europe when the story about the revolution was to be told (Michelessi 1773). It is either the case that they were both present and perceived the situation in the same way or that Sheridan had used Michelessi's text.

Yet, the sun was shining the whole day (Odhner 1885: 13). That seems to be an irrelevant observation, but is it? The sun rising above the awakening city, which was to experience a revolution taking place before the eyes of the citizens, a revolution with no blood shed. People began to move towards the palace, and they were met by the king on horseback followed by soldiers. They saluted him since they were convinced that he was on their side against the aristocrats. It is said that everywhere the king went in Stockholm, he was met with enthusiasm. Sheridan writes: "So much was the king beloved, that the people (some of whom even fell down upon their knees) with tears in their eyes implored his majesty not to abandon them" (Sheridan 1778: 298). The famous songwriter Carl Michael Bellman had written the song "*Gustavs Skål*" ("The Toast to Gustav"), praising the king, and it soon became widely spread in Stockholm in the aftermath of the revolution<sup>9</sup>.

I have chosen these examples to give a hint of the atmosphere in Stockholm on the day of the revolution. Using a distinction made by Furio

<sup>9</sup> I learnt the song in the early 1970s, when I was just a child, and it also became a traditional folk dance which can be seen on YouTube today. That says something about the popularity through history.

Jesi, it was closer to being a revolt than a revolution, since it had the radical openness of a revolt, being a caesura in historical time: “In a revolt, in fact, a reality manifests itself which in its turn is objective, collective, exhaustive, exclusive”<sup>10</sup> (Jesi 2022: 27). Would it be trivial to say that a heavy rain that day would have changed the character of this revolution or revolt? The atmosphere would certainly have been another one, not as enthusiastic and overwhelming. Would even the success have been possible?

We may also ask what kind of atmosphere it was. At this point in history, it is too early to differentiate between totalitarian and democratic atmospheres, as Griffero does in his essay on modern political atmospheres, but his reference to a charismatic personality is relevant for our Swedish case: the king used his often-stated charisma during his speeches, and he also did so when moving around in the city during the day of the revolution. I follow Griffero in his suggestion that we should resist the emotional monopoly of charismatic atmospheres to reactionary or totalitarian movements. The revolutions that took place around 1990 in Eastern Europe – in the Baltic countries, in Czechoslovakia, in Poland, and in East Germany – were of the people but had often charismatic leaders (Lech Wałęsa in Poland, Václav Havel in Czechoslovakia and Lennart Meri in Estonia).

Can we come closer to the atmosphere of public opinion that Griffero calls for? That would be “the climate or collective affective intentionality prevailing in a certain *milieu*, which, precisely by acting as a latent and nonthetic background, through a complex felt-bodily communication based on motor suggestions and synaesthetic characters influences the specific felt-bodily resonance that tacitly guides behavioural patterns and values (even phantasmatic) of a given community” (Griffero 2020: 161).

Regarding the documents left to us, I think that I have already reached the limits of what can be said about these past political atmospheres. The sun was shining. Lots of people were approaching the palace after hearing rumours that the king’s life was in danger, and they cheered when he saw that his was safe. Everywhere he went, he was met by his enthusiastic people. The day predicted a new start for the country, even a new era. The city became a vibrant body.

Yet, there is something to listen to (or, to listen to with the eyes, see Example 1). It has the same elements of a people coming together, a

<sup>10</sup> “Nella rivolta, infatti si manifesta una realtà che a sua volta è oggettiva, collettiva, esauriente, esclusiva”.

military frame and the formation of nationalism. It is an interplay between king and people. What I intend is a scene from the opera *Gustaf Wasa*<sup>11</sup>, in which the Swedish army led by Gustav Vasa reconquers Stockholm. I have already mentioned the operatic work above, composed by the German Johann Gottlieb Naumann with the libretto written by the leading Swedish poet Johan Henric Kellgren to plans made by Gustav III. However, it was premiered in 1786, so how can this opera be of any relevance for the revolution in 1772?

Gustav III drew a parallel between his own revolution and Gustav Vasa's rising in his speech to the estates on the 21<sup>st</sup> of August 1772, saying that they had both saved Sweden from "an unbearable reign and repression"<sup>12</sup> (Gustav III 1772: 422). He had, as we saw, referred to his predecessor's name already two days earlier, on the day of the revolution, when speaking to the officers and soldiers. A libretto on Gustav Vasa's liberation was by then on its way, written by *abbé* Michelessi and a close circle of friends, but it was never set to music. Yet, the idea was brought up by the king, who a decade later developed these ideas in his own plans for the opera, the great storming of Stockholm included (Skuncke and Ivarsdotter 1998: 100-13).

The music to the scene is composed according to characteristics of that which in the musicological topic theory is labelled "military music" (Monelle 2006; Harringer 2014), with its fanfare-like motive in trumpets and horns, answered by bright strings. However, no clear demarcation can here be made between a military and a festive atmosphere. The vocal interaction between the king and the soldiers could further easily be transferred to an interplay between a king and a jubilant crowd of people.

<sup>11</sup> A recording has been made of the opera, Johann Gottlieb Naumann, *Gustaf Wasa*, Virgin Classics 5 45148 2 1, 1996. The scene is the sixth of Act III, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4AmqV\\_kyXOg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4AmqV_kyXOg) (from 14'35). Accessed: 3 August 2025.

<sup>12</sup> "[E]tt olidligt värde och förtryck".

Theatern förvandlas och föreställer Stockholms fästning, flankerad af torn som äro en taille. Mot fonden ser man slottet, tornet 3 kronor och spirorna af St. Nicolai och Riddarholms kyrkorna. Hafvet är i fonden, där man finner en del af danska gallererne för ankar. Man ser ock från sidan af Christjens läger och en hop tät redan nedslagna. Hela theatern är uppfylld av krigsfolk. Danskarne äro åtföljd af sin *porte-étendant*, som förvaras af hans livvakt mot en hop svenskar hvilka redan omringat honom, detta formerar en pantomin strid. En försvärking af danskar kommer ut ifrån staden, för att friläsa konungen; som då får se Gustaf ånlands i spesten för en stor barailon, skyndar in i staden och bommen faller. Gustaf Olofsson Stenbock för svenska banéret och följer Gustaf öfver allt. Tinnarne på muren äro garnerade med pikar; och danska tropparnes fanor synas vifta på flera ställen. Svenskarne nalkas och hämta fram stormstegar. Gustaf uppmuntrar dem med hand och röst.

6.Scenen  
(Gustaf och hans folk)

N.7

**Allegro**

2 Oboi *f*

Fagotti *f* <sup>a 2</sup>

2 Corni in D <sup>a 2</sup> *f*

2 Trombe in D <sup>a 2</sup> *f*

Timpani *f*

**Allegro**

Violini I *f*

Violini II *f*

Viole *f*

Violoncelli e Contrabbassi *f*

**Ex. 1.** J. G. Naumann, *Gustaf Wasa*, Act III, scene 6, no. 7, bb. 1-18. Swedish Musical Heritage, Royal Swedish Academy of Music, 2025. Public Domain.

7

Ob.

Fag. <sup>a 2</sup>

Cor. (D) <sup>a 2</sup>

Tr. (D) <sup>a 2</sup>

Timp.

VI. I

VI. II

Vle

Vc.e Cb.

13

Ob.

Fag. <sup>a 2</sup>

Cor. (D)

Tr. (D)

Timp.

VI. I

VI. II

Vle

Vc.e Cb.

As Gernot Böhme has pointed out, music on a theatre scene may produce the atmosphere of a specific era (Böhme 1998: 81). In the case of the scene from *Gustaf Wasa* we can, as modern listeners, perceive a late-eighteenth-century militariness that was probably experienced as non-historical by the audience – as if the atmosphere of rising dwelled outside time or connected the points in history together. This brings up the question of what a *musical atmosphere* is (overviews can be found in Riedel 2020 and Wallrup 2024). The word is not uncommon in today's music criticism but almost never conceptually clear. In the context of opera aesthetics, however, it has been suggested to be the spatialised feeling effused during an actual performance, in contrast to the virtual mood of the work (Scassillo 2020). Another suggestion, now formulated in relation to instrumental music, is that “atmosphere” is one possible translation of the German *Stimmung*, whereas “mood” might be more accurate in other instances according to the affective affordance of the music (Grimley 2016). From an anthropological perspective, Riedel (2017: 185) holds that atmosphere is “an operative force that mediates between self and collective shaping the very relation between processes of individuation and collective”, continuing Schmitz's situational point of departure, but leaving a normalising conception of the felt-body behind. In my own treatment of the concept, I have stressed the historical dimension. Musical attunement situates the listener into a world relation where affective words such as “affection”, “feeling”, “mood” and “atmosphere” must be understood historically, not only in the sense of having positions in history, but also of affording a perception of history (see Wallrup 2015: 179-81).

This leads to the historical situation of the *Gustaf Wasa* performance at the Royal Theatre in 1786. There are witnesses of how the audience reacted, indeed so concerning the reconquest of Stockholm (Schyberg 1991). In this huge success of the work, which was later often called “a Swedish national opera”, the audience was incapable of distinguishing the happenings on stage from reality when the Swedish army attacked the royal palace which had been occupied by the Danes. From the standing parterre, the audience were shouting “hit 'em, hit 'em, hit 'em” (Schyberg 1991: 320). It is not good music. Thematically, it is repetitive with its fanfare rhythm, almost like a short eighteenth-century version of Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony, in which the war machine just continues its movement forwards. The military-nationalistic affect of the scene is disturbing. Nevertheless, the music helps us to register the late resonances

of Gustav III's decision to take Sweden upon a new road by going backwards, his revolution.

I think that we *may* perceive something of the atmosphere after the moment of decision in the music. As Schmitz has written, "More than all other forms that transmit atmospheres, acoustic forms, especially the musical ones, have the advantage that they do not merely exist, but also grow, i.e. bring their history along with them" (Schmitz 2020: 66-67). However, if the affirmative citizens preceded the enthusiastic opera audience, then we should bear in mind that Gustav III had been preparing military campaigns already before his revolution, knowing that there was a secret pact between Russia, Prussia, and Denmark, giving allowance for a joint attack on Sweden if the constitution was changed in support of the monarch. Later, he planned for a war on Denmark as well as Russia. When Sweden eventually went to war, against Russia in 1788, it began with many more defeats than victories and ended with a last successful naval battle. The borders did not change, nor did the threat from Russia subside more than momentarily. But Gustav III came closer and closer to the moment of regicide.

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