The Popular Nobel Prize Award Banquet

The Distanced Participation of an Interacting TV-Audience

On the eve of December 10, a Swedish couple sit down to enjoy their dinner while watching the Nobel festivities on television. TV-dinners are ordinarily frowned upon, but on this night it is considered part of the celebration of Alfred Nobel. There are also more elaborate celebrations to be found, where family and friends are invited to a fancy dinner – many times with the TV present and turned on. Sometimes there is a mix of participants attending this fancy dinner, and at other times the "Nobel Banquet" is for couples only (including homosexual couples), or it’s the theme of a girls’ night (ULMA 39316, 39319-39322:1).

These alternative Nobel Banquets represent a new and developing annual festivity in Sweden, and they are often held at the same time as the real Nobel Prize Award Banquet takes place in Stockholm on the eve of December 10 each year. In my paper I shall present this public parallel to the highly exclusive Nobel Prize Award Banquet and touch on historic and international counterparts to it, and the banter and role-play that surrounds it.

The Nobel Prize

Before his death in 1896, chemist, inventor, and businessman Alfred Nobel left instructions in his will for the Nobel Prize. Five years later the Nobel Foundation was created to award advances in Physics, Chemistry, Physiology or Medicine, Literature, and Peace. Later, in 1969, the Nobel Prize in Economy was established in his honour.

Over the years the Nobel Prize Award Ceremony and the following Nobel Prize Award Banquet developed into a grand and well known event that in parts was broadcasted over the radio. Then, in the year 1950, it was broadcasted on Swedish television for the first time. The event was among the first to be broadcasted on television at all, which may have contributed to the special status it came to secure in the public mind (SVT produktion 2004).

In the decades that followed, a television set became part of almost each and every household, and the viewing audience could now follow the festivities as they occurred, almost as if they had been invited themselves. The broadcasts even continued throughout the revolutionary era of the 1960s when class society was largely deconstructed in Sweden. Over time a playful attitude towards the event began to develop, consisting of banter but also of distanced participation in which people dressed up and staged their own Nobel Prize Award banquets in front of their own television sets.
In later years this phenomenon has evolved further, simultaneously becoming both more elaborate and more common, and today there are a variety of privately arranged Nobel Prize Award "Banquets" to be found throughout Sweden (ULMA 39316-39322) (Fig. 23).

**Alternative Nobel Prize Award Banquets**

Alternative Nobel Banquets are not only held in private homes; various organisations may also arrange their own celebration, such as local folklore societies, where the members take turns arranging the banquet and dressing up in white tie or the folk costume of that area and also organisations like the Scouts, United Nations Stockholm, Rotary International, the Order of Good Templars, the Swedish Temperance Organisation, and finally prominent Swedish politicians who were not invited to the real thing (ULMA 39322:3). The Nobel Banquets staged at the Swedish residence in New York are semi authentic, guests include former laureates, and “The Small Nobel Prize Banquet” arranged by the Nobel Museum for children aged seven to eleven (ULMA 39322:3).

The students at some of the Swedish colleges and universities also partake in the celebration by staging their own Nobel Banquets, for example in the cities of Borås, Umeå and Uppsala (ULMA 39322:2). In Umeå the issue of homosexuality raised some questions, as gay couples were welcome to attend the banquet, but were not allowed sit together, because of the level of etiquette in the sitting arrangement: Lady-gentleman, lady-gentleman (Kinberg 1999). According to strict etiquette couples are generally not allowed to sit together anyway. – during the Nobel Banquet for example the Queen does not sit next to the King – however the problem is accentuated when there is an unbalance in the number of men and women attending, as outlined in the example above.

Commercial interests have also picked up on the growing popularity of the Nobel Banquets, and the more exclusive caterers, restaurants, hotels, and inns have begun to offer Nobel Banquets in the same price range as the real banquet. Furthermore professional business tour operators are organising private tours of the Nobel Museum followed by a Nobel Banquet at Stockholm City Hall – i.e. where the real Nobel Banquet is held (ULMA 39322:4).

**Practice makes perfect**

What is more interesting is that school kitchens have begun to serve a Nobel Prize Banquet for lunch at both kindergarten and school. This two or three-course meal is often based on the menu of the previous year’s real Nobel Banquet, but is priced around 10 SEK – compared to the 1.400 SEK that a ticket to the real Nobel festivities fetches (ULMA 39316 - 39318, 39322:2).

Some schools have embraced the idea and developed it further by arranging workshops and their own evening banquets, with fancy dress and dancing. In the workshops the students learn about manners and etiquette, or invention, or they may research the Peace Prize laureates and make presentations using role-play (ULMA 39322:2).
For many of the younger boys the banquet is a rare, and sometimes a first, occasion to wear a tie. And for the girls a first real occasion to wear a ball gown, high heels, and a tiara, as opposed to playing princess at home. The evening may thus serve a socialising purpose, giving the children a cultural lesson in etiquette, dancing, and manners, and to some extent work, as students sometimes learn to set and decorate a table, and to prepare the food. The younger students at some schools also help serve the food to the older students. Again examples of TV’s presence at the banquet can be found (ULMA 39322:2).

Some schools award prizes for academic excellence to all or some of the best students. Because the date of the real Nobel Banquet is sometimes held during the weekend, the schools occasionally move their celebration to a previous or later evening that works better with the school schedule (ULMA 39317 39318, 39322:2). This is also sometimes the case with the Nobel Banquets held in homes, where the Nobel Banquet is sometimes moved up to New Year’s Eve (ULMA 39316).

Recipe for an alternative Nobel Prize Award Banquet

The ambition level and concept of these privately arranged Nobel Banquets run from basic simplicity to an elaborate festivity throughout, ranging from an ordinary dinner in front of the TV to the whole shebang, with formal invitations specifying the dress code to fancy food, dancing, and even “Hobnobbing in The Blue Hall” – a reference to the Blue Hall of Stockholm City Hall (ULMA 39316-39322) (Fig. 24).

The banquet food served at these private functions may thus run from the ordinary to the exclusive, sometimes inspired by one of the many books or cookbooks on the Nobel Banquet. Even the table decorations may be copied, as the china and crystal and silver- and gold-wear from well-renowned Swedish artists and manufacturers is available to the public in the better-stocked shops (ULMA 39316:39322).

In recent years Swedish daily newspapers have run articles on the topic of “How to Create Your Own Nobel Banquet”, and in the days leading up to the Nobel Award Ceremony and the Nobel Banquet, examples of menus are printed along with tips on where to go for the right, but low cost, dress, hairdo and food (ULMA 39322:1). One such tip suggested going to a Syrian shop for the dress; an example of how a foreign culture in Sweden may suddenly receive unexpected yet positive attention in an otherwise unlikely context (Forsström 2005). It should be noted that I have found no account of immigrants organising Nobel Banquets, however this may change as immigrant children participate in the Nobel activities at school, and may want to bring the celebration into their home as well (ULMA 39317, 39322).

Aside from food, attire plays a major part in the private celebration. Although young Swedes are known for their fashion sense, Swedes in general are not known to be well dressed, rather for wearing functional clothes. The Nobel Banquet, however, is a rare occasion to put on a show, mimicking the glamour and dress code of
the real Nobel Prize Banquet down to the jewellery: Often fake tiaras bought at the toy store, and also sashes, rosettes, and medals (39319-39322). Gender is a factor in this context, since it is mainly females who take the initiative to stage these private banquets, maybe because of a “Cinderella-syndrome/complex” where they, if only for a night, get to attend the proverbial ball (ULMA 39316-39322).

Role-play and banter
At the private Nobel Banquets spirits are high and the mood is playful as people get a kick out of the formal etiquette and dressing up. At the same time, the banter surrounding the Nobel festivities is often peppered with ironic mockery of class and belonging. Also, any jokes consisting of the word dynamite or referring to explosions are appropriate, as Alfred Nobel was the man who invented this explosive substance. For instance, “The Nobel Prize Award was dynamite this year!”

There are various forms of role-play; children acting more like adults and adults mimicking the higher classes (ULMA 39319-39322). The latter is especially apparent when the banter is delivered with a simultaneous change in speech pattern, thus impersonating someone from a higher social stratum, “It is so strange, I did not get an invitation this year.” or “No, I was not nominated this year either, so I didn’t bother to go.” If preparations are still needed in the kitchen, an excuse may also be made in the form of an explanation that is again a social comment regarding class, “Well, you see the kitchen maid is off this evening, so I have to manage on my own”. In reality, of course, there is no maid (ULMA 39319-39321).

There are also examples of people dressing up and acting the parts of King and Queen, the Crown Princess, or Alfred Nobel himself at these banquets. In one instance, a hand puppet placed on Queen Silvia’s hand was used to represent King Carl XVI Gustaf – yet another example of the banter. These celebrities’ lend glamour to the evening and present Nobel medallions and diplomas to the “laureates”. The prizes are often hand-made or in the shape of a gold-covered chocolate medallion, of the same brand as those served at the real Nobel Banquet and sold by the Nobel Museum in Stockholm (ULMA 39322: 2-3).

The nominations for the prize are tailored to suit the “laureates”. For example, an unspecified Nobel Prize can be given by a countryside folklore society for efforts in developing that specific area. A Nobel Prize in chemistry can be given for excellence in the kitchen, and in physics for excellence in handling a vacuum cleaner. At one school, peace prizes were also given to students who had proved themselves to be good classmates (ULMA 39321, 39322:2).

As a contrasting parallel, Ig Nobel Prizes (compare to the word ignoble), are awarded to the funniest and worst scientific works of the year and presented by real Nobel Laureates at a ceremony at Harvard university.

Historic counterparts and democratic aspects
Class snobbery and social division are still all firmly in place, but tempered by the possibility of Everyman gaining admittance (Strong, 2002:308).
A historic parallel to the TV audience who watch the royals eat during the televised Nobel Banquet is found in the Renaissance Banquet, and the sixteenth to eighteenth century custom of popes and royals dining in public; admission to the table was limited and the guests or spectators only had the honour of watching the pope or royals eat and did not partake themselves (Strong 2002:134, 202-258). This effect is achieved now through the science of television; the present-day television viewer takes on the part of a guest at one of these public banquets.

In today’s televised broadcasts from the Nobel Banquets the royals set a higher standard to which many viewers would like to strive, in both decorum and appearance. The idea of bettering oneself is also promoted in the televised broadcasts where prominent Swedish authorities on etiquette, such as author Magdalena Ribbing, are called in to explain the “rules” of the occasion, thus giving the viewers a lesson in etiquette (SVT 2005). This knowledge lends a feeling of equality and belonging, while simultaneously marking the difference in class and education between the viewer and the attending guests.

It is interesting to note that the Nobel Banquet is a rare example of an instance when “The Law of Jante” is largely set aside. The Law of Jante is a term used to describe the Scandinavian parochial mentality, in which jealousy and striving for equality allows people to mock those who consider themselves above others, and never let anyone else feel good about their achievements. During the Nobel Banquet however, the previously mentioned banter with class and belonging has its limits, showing a boundary of this law, when a provocative author and feminist columnist for one of the two largest evening newspapers in Sweden were sent to cover the Nobel Banquet in 2004, the columnist provoked the other guests at her table and the viewers at home by vulgar speech and a total disregard for the “rules” of the occasion. To top things off she gave the Nobel Banquet a very distasteful review in the paper the following day (SVT 2004; ULMA 39316; Skugge 2004: A). All of this proved to be a faux pas and a public reaction to her display of bad manners followed (Karlsson 2004; Skugge 2004:B).

The Nobel Prize is a matter of national pride for many Swedes, and eager viewers wanted to see and hear only of the glamour and therefore disliked the fact that the columnist had misused a much-coveted invitation to the event. By questioning the event and its rules the columnist inadvertently also questioned the distantly participating viewers – a sore spot since the private Nobel Banquets can be seen as a form of “Status-sponging” that undermines the sense of participation the viewers strive for (ULMA 39316).

International counterparts
Making an international comparison one will find that other countries have awards similar to the Nobel Prize. In the United States there is the Laskar Prize for advances made in the field of medicine, in Japan there is the Kyoto Prize for advances in the fields of technology, basic sciences, arts and philosophy, and in Russia the recently established Global Energy Prize is beginning to make a name for itself. Closer to home, in Norway, there is of course the Nobel Peace Prize Award.
Ceremony including the Peace Prize Concert, but even in Norway counterparts to the privately arranged Nobel Prize Banquets are scarce. There are Nobel Banquets staged at the Nobel Institute in Oslo by a firm called Meeting Professionals International, but this is a commercial enterprise and not a widespread custom (ULMA 39322:6).

Also in the United States, a somewhat surprising parallel is to be found in the glamorous Academy Awards. Some may resent this comparison between the prestigious Nobel Prize Awards and the more commercial Academy Awards, but nevertheless the Nobel Prize and the Academy Awards share some defining characteristics. The Nobel Prize Award Ceremony and the Academy Award Ceremony are both televised, and not only in their own countries but all over the world. The two events can also be defined as entertainment, as world renowned entertainers are hired to perform for the attending guests and TV-viewers. Furthermore, the guests include the glamorous, rich, and famous celebrities that TV-audience are interested in; the Nobel festivities involve the Swedish Royal family and the occasional celebrity or well-known politician, and the Academy Awards involve movie stars – often referred to as the American equivalence of royalty.

The annual broadcast from the Nobel Prize Award Ceremony and the Nobel Banquet is one of the most important occasions of the year when it comes to the Swedish Royal family’s exposure; the same is true for the Academy Awards and the movie stars walking down the red carpet. At both events a lot of attention is therefore made to detail, thus adding to the glamour of the occasion. In interviewing these famous people and investigating the clothes and jewellery they wear and the hairdos they show off, the television cameras takes the viewers closer to the royals and the stars than even the invited guests attending these events. This intimacy makes both royalty and movie stars seem more personable, thus also making them easier to identify with and to mimic.

Alternative Academy Award Parties

Swedes stage their own Nobel Prize banquets, and Americans throw private “Oscar bashes” – from casual get-togethers, where they watch television, critique the stars, and predict the Oscar winners, to professionally organised costume parties where they dress up as fabulous or favourite movie stars (ULMA 39322:6).

If you want to organise your own party, Fox News homepage gives tips on what to eat. The Washington Post online on what the best party themes are – themes inspired by the nominated movies. ABC’s homepage advises what to eat and how to pick the winners. Tips are also given at Oprah.com, the HGTV homepage, and About (ULMA 39322:6).

Not only is there banter about the Nobel Banquet, but also about the Academy Awards, and not just made by the TV-host. On LA Weekly’s blog the joke of the lost invitation is expressed as, “I wasn’t invited to the Oscars, an oversight on somebody’s part I’m sure”, by Linda Immediato, lifestyle editor for the LA Weekly (http://laweeklyblogs.com). Assistant Professor Nancy McEntire, at In-
diana State University, USA, was kind enough to send me a few jokes told by her students. Several of these were gay jokes, related to the film Brokeback Mountain (2005), with lines like “Have you heard that cowboys like ridin’, ropin’, and redecoratin’?” or that they had to change “saloon” to “salon” in filming Brokeback Mountain?

Like the privately arranged Nobel Prize Awards, the guests at the more elaborate private Academy Award parties may take home a prize of their own – in the form of a gilded plastic Oscar or an Oscar made out of gold wrapped chocolate (ULMA 39322:6). Again it is mainly women who organises the parties, and the Oscar ceremonies is even referred to as the “Super Bowl for women” (http://www.cbsnews.com).

While researching alternative parties, I found a second degree of distanced participation: Jen Chaney, movies editor at the Washington Post, organises web-parties where a group of people who don’t know each other get together on line to discuss the show they all are viewing… together, but not. The guests are asked to “Bring the wine, cheese and snarky comments”:

Welcome to our Web version of an Oscar party. This is my third year hosting one of these discussions and, thanks to the wonders of technology, I’m typing from my couch this time, watching the red carpet action on my high-definition TV. So it’s almost as good as being at the Kodak Theatre, plus I don’t have to wear a gown and uncomfortable shoes (http://www.washingtonpost.com).

Besides the American Academy Awards there is also another European parallel to be made. Kate Smith, a doctoral student at the University of Sheffield, England, drew attention to the Eurovision Song Contest parties in the UK, where people dressed up in front of the television set during the final contest. Terry Gunnell, Associate Professor in Folkloristic at the University of Iceland, reported that the same thing happened in Iceland, sometimes with people singing along, similar to Karaoke.

Conclusion
The privately arranged Nobel Prize Banquets constitute a developing annual festivity in Sweden, involving banter and role play, and with parallels to both historic custom and current day international events. The alternative Nobel Prize Award Banquets are arranged in private homes, by various organisations, at kindergarten, school, college and university, by the more exclusive caterers, restaurants, inns and hotels, and by business event organisers and so on.

Maybe the increase in privately arranged Nobel Banquets is connected with the rising popularity of the Swedish monarchy and a surge for the exclusive – expressed for example in the current turn from sex to luxury in commercial advertising in Sweden. But on a deeper level the distanced participation of the national Swedish viewer can be seen as holding an important democratic aspect; for citizens to connect and identify with a national function and as an expression of national
pride and a developing sense of nationality in an ever more international society, where national identity and uniqueness can easily be felt to be fading.

This paper has also been translated into Swedish: “Den alternativa nobelfesten. En tv-publik:s festdeltagande”, in Bodil lajv. Festskrift till Bodil Nildin-Wall den 18 januari 2007. Marlene Hugoson (ed.), Uppsala 2007. In addition you can read Professor Christina Fjellström’s article “’Vad är väl en bal på slottet...’ Nobelfest i slott och koja” [“What’s a Royal Ball...’ Nobel Banquet in Castle and Cabin”] in Nu gör vi jul igen [Making Christmas Again], Charlotte Hagström, Marlene Hugoson and Annika Nordström (eds.), Göteborg 2006.

Notes

1 I thank Kersti Wilkström, Curator at the Nordic Museum in Stockholm, for the perceptive information.

1 The study on the privately arranged Nobel banquets is part of the project Förändring av sedvanor [Changing Customs], a documentation of current Swedish customs and the extensive changes they are undergoing, which was initiated in 2003 by the Folklore Department at the Swedish Institute for Language and Folklore in Uppsala (formerly the Institute for Dialectology, Onomastics and Folklore Research). The project has focused on the more constant Swedish folk customs – such as annual festivals and celebrations and life cycle celebrations.

3 When Alfred Nobel drew up his will, stipulating, among other things, that the Nobel Peace Prize Award Ceremony was to be held in Norway and not Sweden, the two countries were still a union. This arrangement continued after the union came to an end in 1905.


5 The idolisation and mimicking of royals can be found around HM Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom, and whenever there is a grand royal wedding.

6 I thank Laura Aronovici, Supervisor at the Nobel Museum Shop in Stockholm, for the information about the chocolate.

7 I thank Stephen Mitchell, Professor of Scandinavian and Folklore at Harvard University, for the information on the Ig Nobel Prizes.

8 Over a long period of time Publik spisning [Dining in public] could be found in courts around Europe, for example in the court of Swedish queen Christina in the seventeenth century, and Swedish king Gustavus III in the eighteenth century (Strong 2002: 134, 2002: 298).

9 The term Jantelagen was coined in 1933 by Norwegian-Danish author Akse Sandemose in his book En flyktning korsar sitt spår [A Refugee Crosses His Tracks], in which he listed the ten commandments of Jante.
I thank Professor Anders Gustavsson and Professor Arne Bugge-Amundsen, at the Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages at University of Oslo, Norway, for the information.

The Emmy’s, Grammy’s, Golden Globes, or Tony Awards could also have been used as a comparison as there are private parties of the same kind in connection with them, but they would have made poorer examples in this study.

Abbreviations
ULMA: Uppsala landsmålsarkiv [The Uppsala Archive of Dialectology, Sweden]. This was formerly a separate archive, but is now incorporated with The Swedish Institute for Language and Folklore in Uppsala.

References
Archival sources:
Institutet för språk och folkminnen [The Swedish Institute for Language and Folklore] Folkmässessamlingen i Uppsala, ULMA [The Folklore Collection in Uppsala, ULMA].

Internet sources:
Google search engine for “Nobel”, “Nobelfest” [Nobel Banquet], “Nobelmiddag” [Nobel dinner], “Nobellunche” [Nobel lunch], “Fredspriskonsert” [Peace Prize Concert], “Nobel Peace Prize Award Ceremony”, “Peace Prize Concert”, “Academy Awards”, “Oscars”, “Oscar bash”, Oscar party”, “Emmys”, “Tonys”, “Golden Globes”. The research material collected is too extensive to be presented as a whole, but can be found in The Research Archive of The Institute for Language and Folklore, in Uppsala, Sweden (ULMA accession number 39322). Presented below are the Internet sources directly cited in the text.


http://www.google.com/, search words = “oscar night party” “live coverage at the 78th academy awards”.

Literature:


Newspapers.


Television & DVD:

