

# Introduction

## *Dark Screens: The geopolitics of Nordic television drama*

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This special collection of articles emerged from a two-day workshop on the topic “Nordic Noir, Geopolitics, and the North” held at Aarhus University, Denmark, 4–5 October 2018. Recognising the unabating popularity of the Nordic Noir genre, the workshop sought to extend current media-cultural discussions of Nordic crime television drama to critically assess how topical geopolitical developments both influence and are interrogated within these fictional narratives. The genesis of this workshop arose from the intersections between the research interests of this special issue’s three editors, building on Anne Marit Waade’s work on the production, aesthetics, and distribution of Nordic Noir television drama, Pei-Sze Chow’s research on the audiovisual representations of transnational regions in Scandinavia, and Robert A. Saunders’s scholarship on the popular culture-world politics continuum, and more specifically his typology of geopolitical television. Over two days of presentations and discussions, participants worked to bridge the gap between diverse but cognate disciplines such as Scandinavian studies, film and television, literature, geography, and international relations (IR).

Generously supported by the pan-Nordic research consortium ReNEW (Reimagining Norden in an Evolving World), which is funded by NordForsk through the Nordic University Hubs initiative, our workshop brought together 21 researchers from across Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Belgium, Poland, the US, and the UK. Their research expertise spanned literary studies, cultural studies, geography, international economics, IR, film and media studies, Scandinavian studies, Russian language and literature, and Arctic studies. The focus of the workshop spoke to two of ReNEW’s research clusters – “Imagining Norden Branding and Nordic Reputation” and “Nordic Culture and Media” – wherein we examined the ways in which the audiovisual genre of Nordic Noir functions as a medium-specific agent of geographical imagination (both within and beyond Northern Europe). We also explored Nordic Noir’s role as a powerful branding agent that mediates the region’s geopolitics and national identities (see ReNEW, 2018). In contributing to ReNEW’s programme for research related to the Nordic region, its history, culture, and politics, the workshop generated discussions on topics relating to Nordic Noir and Norden’s place in world affairs, imaginaries of the

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Arctic and northern peripheries, and the international themes and impact of Nordic drama series worldwide, as well as the politics of Nordic Noir as a form of nation branding. The multidisciplinary make-up of the workshop meant that the task of unpacking the complex articulations of geopolitics in the production and reception of Nordic television drama was approached from different – yet complementary – perspectives. Panels featured papers dealing with empirical audience studies, formal analyses of style and aesthetics, cultural studies, policy discourse analysis, ethnographic studies, historical research, and eco-critical and geopolitical case studies.

The purpose of this special issue is not simply to showcase this diversity of scholarly approaches to contemporary Nordic articulations of “geopolitical television” (Glynn & Cupples, 2015) – not only do the various authors write from different disciplinary fields and traditions, but also include interdisciplinary approaches and perspectives within each of their articles – but also to further advocate for the possibilities of adopting a geopolitical lens for the research, study, and teaching of popular Nordic television culture. We consider geopolitical television an emerging interdisciplinary field of study that goes far beyond Nordic crime series, and one that reflects the interrelation between television narratives and conditions of power, place, and space in innovative and affective ways. We argue that there is an urgency and relevance in an interdisciplinary geopolitical approaches to television studies, given that, as Saunders (2019a) notes, public service and commercial broadcasters around the world are now commissioning more programmes focusing on geopolitical themes. This trajectory is clearly evidenced by storylines of police procedural dramas that now incorporate key (criminal) aspects of globalisation like drug smuggling, human trafficking, and corporate malfeasance, resulting in a media landscape where “a substantial proportion of televised series has become relevant to quotidian geopolitical understanding(s) and geographical imagination(s), arguably more so than any time since the advent of the medium” (Saunders, 2019a: 693). Since Nordic television crime series are a form of popular culture that viewers from within the Northern European countries and outside the region share and engage with, such stories influence the way ordinary people perceive, interrogate, and act in politics and societal conditions. As such, this body of televisual content calls for interdisciplinary approaches to better understand the relationship between the stories and the surrounding society and democracy. From “cli-fi” (climate fiction – works that primarily deal with climate change) and vigilantes, to teen drama and police procedurals, the nine unique contributions to this special issue of *Nordicom Review* span myriad approaches to the question of how contemporary geopolitics shapes and is shaped by screened mediations in Nordic television drama.

## **The evolution of Nordic Noir**

### **– from popular literary fiction to media studies to IR and geopolitics**

To set the stage for discussing geopolitical aspects of Nordic crime series, it is crucial to introduce some of the historical, institutional, and cultural conditions for television drama and its literary precursor, crime fiction, from the Nordic region. Due to the stunning popularity of authors such as Henning Mankell, Liza Marklund, Camilla Läckberg, Stieg Larsson, Jo Nesbø, and Jussi Adler-Olsen, the Scandinavian detective novel enjoys incredible popularity both within and beyond the region of Norden (Bergman, 2014;

Nesting, 2008; Stougaard-Nielsen, 2017). In Northern Europe, such crime narratives – with their normative social, political, and economic orientations – became increasingly open to influences from, or even mergers with, other genres, for example psychological melodrama, historical drama, and the political thriller (Agger, 2011; Nesting, 2011). While somewhat less obvious in Scandinavian crime fiction’s screened offshoot, Nordic Noir, this ideologically profound genre blending proved highly successful, gaining the appreciation of a broad spectrum of audience segments regardless of gender, age, or demography.

The genre of Scandi-noir crime fiction begins with Inspector Martin Beck, written by the couple Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö in the early 1970s. Drawing on stylistic elements from “hard-boiled” American detective stories, the Swedish duo infused their work with political, societal, and ethical themes that ultimately came to define the genre of Scandinavian crime fiction. Such critical engagement has become a key part of the brand of crime fiction emanating from the region, steadily emerging as a selling point for publishers seeking ever-larger international markets. The Beck novels illustrate social problems in and around the capital of Stockholm, interrogating how children, young people, women, and the poor suffer under increasing pressures being placed on the post–World War II Sweden’s social democratic welfare system [Folkhemmet] (Brodén, 2011). This is also very much the case for Henning Mankell’s stories about Inspector Kurt Wallander; however, in contrast to the (sub)urban settings in the Beck series, the Wallander novels are set in the picturesque coastal city of Ystad in southern Sweden. By doing this, the author underlines a tension between seething societal problems and the region’s self-satisfied local communities, resulting in brutal murders, an abhorrence of the public, and the occasional descent into vigilantism. Mankell became a master of casting a vicious crime against a backdrop of the cosy, touristic, and pastoral scenery of Skåne (southern Sweden) (Bergman, 2014; Waade, 2013). Societal criticism presents itself in these stories through a variety of “ills”, including human trafficking, prostitution, drug abuse, mental illness, and domestic violence. Yet, like Sjöwall and Wahlöö, Mankell’s work also exposed the abuse of power within Sweden’s political and economic systems, peppering his narratives with malevolence on the part of national secret services, political parties, and multinational companies (Stougaard-Nielsen, 2017). By creating female protagonists like Annika Bengtzon and Lisbeth Salander, the Swedish writers Liza Marklund and Stieg Larsson, respectively, injected issues of gender into the genre of Scandi-noir, giving it a particularly female-focused quality that would ultimately be passed on to Nordic Noir television series with the now iconic characters of Sarah Lund (*Forbrydelsen* [*The Killing*], 2007–2012) and Saga Norén (*Bron/Broen* [*The Bridge*], 2011–2018).

Depending on the story and the specific issues the author wants to interrogate, the mix of genre-elements may vary. In general, many of the crime authors operating the 1960s and beyond chose this popular genre to be able to reach a broad audience and engage with ordinary readers. As such, their political engagement included an ambition to mobilise, enlighten, and engage citizens and readers through their work, thus functioning as a sort of longform agitprop meant to salvage the Scandinavian welfare state as it faced pressures from American hyper-capitalism and Soviet-style communism (both later being supplanted by the threat of globalised neoliberalism). Taking its cue from Scandinavian crime fiction’s realistic – even prescient – plotlines and believable,

often flawed characters set in a contemporary, everyday context, Nordic Noir evolved into a genre that engages with societal conditions and problems that citizens and viewers experience in a contemporary society shaped by the Nordic welfare system. An important distinction between Scandinavian crime fiction and Nordic Noir crime series is the significant influence of public service broadcasters (PSBs), especially given the role of state funding in shaping popular cultural output, something that is relatively absent in the print publishing industry.

While Nordic crime drama series tend to attract a broad mass-audience within the Nordic region, subtitled foreign drama remains a niche market in a global context, attracting cosmopolitan and high-end audiences (Jensen, 2016). The interesting aspect in this context is the fact that many of the most popular crime drama series from the region are produced by PSBs, often as inter-Nordic collaborations and co-productions, and sometimes in collaboration with other European broadcasters or commercial production companies. This strong collaboration within the region is bolstered by the fact that the PSBs attract broad audience segments within the region (Syvertsen et al., 2014), while producing high-quality drama series that are acknowledged internationally despite using local languages, settings, and actors (Jensen & Jacobsen, 2020).

When we look at how crime series and crime fiction has been studied academically, we see two overall tendencies. First, despite the decades-long popularity of the genre among readers, viewers, publishers, and broadcasters, it is only recently that scholars have turned towards comprehensive research on the phenomenon, with interest being mostly confined to perspectives drawn from media, literature, and Scandinavian studies. However, other disciplines are increasingly turning their attention to such cultural production, from human and social geography to IR to gender studies. An example that demonstrates this recent interest is the pan-European, comparative, and interdisciplinary research project dealing with contemporary crime narratives, EU Horizon 2020 project DETECT (Detecting Transcultural Identity in European Popular Crime Narratives), which brings together scholars, industry professionals, and cultural producers to explore the ways in which fiction interacts with politics, economics, and culture across the Continent. Second, parallel to the development of crime fiction and crime series as a global media commodity and popular culture, we see a growing interest for the phenomenon from scholars representing disciplines beyond media studies and literary studies. Saunders's (2019b) work on Nordic Noir and geopolitics, from a spatially orientated IR perspective, is an example hereof. The ReNEW research project is another example where, in this case, Nordic Noir is studied in an interdisciplinary, pan-Nordic, and international context and related to other prevailing phenomena and challenges within the Nordic welfare society. Apropos of such a focus, the articles in this special issue provide a glimpse into the ways in which a fast-changing Norden is a region that is very much engaged with the outside world.

## **Overview of the contributions**

Reflecting the interdisciplinarity of the aforementioned ReNEW workshop, the articles included in this special issue are drawn from a diverse array of academic approaches, from a focus on production (Hansen) to audience studies (Ratilainen) to geocriticism (Saunders). Likewise, the articles engage with a wide variety of topical issues, from ecol-

ogy (Souch) and decolonisation (Chow et al.) to terrorism (Dodds & Hochscherf), racism (Stougaard-Nielsen), and petro-politics (Mrozewicz). The *fil rouge* running through all these analyses of Nordic Noir – and related series – is that televisual content produced in Northern Europe is anything but insular. Given that Nordic Noir both screens globalisation and is globalised in its distribution, we argue that – as a genre – Nordic Noir engages with the world as a “single place” (see Robertson, 1992). Simultaneously inward- and outward-looking, the narratives that define Nordic crime dramas thus have proved highly marketable beyond the shores of Norden, as evidenced in Waade’s collaborative project “What Makes Danish TV Drama Series Travel?” (Aarhus University, 2019). And as consumption of series like *Wallander*, *Bron/Broen*, and *Okkupert* [*Occupied*] expands farther afield, the more globally orientated these stories become. This establishes a tension that is shaped by a powerful popular-geopolitical feedback loop (Saunders & Strukov, 2017) – one that functions both as a generator for national identity-production at home (often against a defining “Other”, be it the EU, the US, the Middle East, or “Africa”), while also reifying externally generated images and stereotypes of the region (primarily as an eco-friendly, septentrional utopia defined by homogeneity and the freedom from want). As the contributions to the issue suggest, there is a great deal of complexity that exists in the gap between these two flows, whether we speak of thematic elements, audience tastes, production decisions, landscape representation, character development, or the politics of international reception.

Given its global scope, this special issue opens with Pei-Sze Chow, Robert A. Saunders, and Anne Marit Waade’s article, “Geopolitical Television Drama Within and Beyond the Nordic Region”. Focusing on the polyvalence of the Swedish-Danish co-production *Bron/Broen*, which has been adapted several times over, including in US-Mexican, UK-French, and Russian-Estonian contexts (see Saunders, 2019b), the authors interrogate Viu/HBO Asia’s Singapore-Malaysia localisation known as *The Bridge*. Drawing on the flurry of extra-regional Nordic Noirs such as “Tartan noir”, “Outback noir”, and so forth, Chow and colleagues introduce the notion of “tropical noir” as a conceptual device to interpolate what is maintained, what is lost, and what is gained by shifting the narrative to Southeast Asia. In keeping with the ways in which “Nordic stories” transfer to places far from Northern Europe, the second article in the issue is Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen’s “*Wallander*’s Dark Geopolitics”. Mixing analysis of both Henning Mankell’s written work and televisual adaptations, Stougaard-Nielsen charts the changing dynamics of post-Cold War politics on the figure of Inspector Kurt Wallander, pivoting back and forth between a “cracked” Swedish welfare state and “other worlds” in rapid political transition from South Africa to the Baltic States.

From here, the contributions sharpen the focus on geopolitics, examining how post-millennial world affairs manifest in screened drama from the North. In their article, “The Geopolitics of Nordic Noir: Representations of current threats and vigilantes in contemporary Danish and Norwegian serial drama”, Klaus Dodds and Tobias Hochscherf unpack the geopolitical logics of series such as *Ørnen* [*The Eagle*] and *Kriger* [*Warrior*]. Using Scandinavian society’s hypocrisy and complacency in the current world order, the duo elaborate on the ways in which Nordic Noir screens an imaginary, where military veterans are the “only people adept at responding to threats and crises”. Robert A. Saunders’s article, “Landscape, Geopolitics, and National Identity in the Norwegian Thrillers *Occupied* and *Nobel*”, interrogates Norway’s two most successful geopolitical

dramas (which are also examined in Dodds & Hochscherf's article). Drawing on the cinematic tools of "scaping" (affective audiovisual representations of space) and "scoping" (limiting the frame of view through diegetic lenses), his contribution is concerned with how Norway's territory is screened – particularly against other "national spaces" (i.e., Russia and Afghanistan) – and how these series' visualisations impact national identity in contemporary Norway.

Transitioning from power politics into an analysis of Norway's ecological paradox – that is, a "green" country that generates wealth from "dirty" oil – Anna Estera Mroczewicz, in "The Landscapes of Eco-Noir: Reimagining Norwegian eco-exceptionalism in *Occupied*", looks at *Occupied*'s reimagining of "Norway's exceptionalist relation to nature" through the lens of what she calls "white ecology". Irina Souch picks up on similar themes in her article, "Transformations of the Evil Forest in the Swedish Television Series *Jordskott: An eco-critical reading*". Taking a rather different approach to geopolitics – one more attuned to politics of the *geos* – she assesses how *Jordskott* depicts the "aggressive powers of nature"; in drawing on elements of Northern Germanic paganism, we see how the series presents an indictment of neoliberal policies that have led to the environmental degradation of Sweden's ancient forests.

Shifting gears from content to production, Kim Toft Hansen, in his article "Nordic Noir from Within and Beyond: Negotiating geopolitical regionalisation through SVoD crime narratives", provides valuable insight into geopolitical codes and visions that inform Nordic Noir's continued evolution and unflagging popularity. Taking a wide-angle approach, he demonstrates how commercial broadcasters such as Viaplay, HBO, and Netflix have adapted "banal Nordism" – once the domain of regional PSBs – to profit off the worldwide interest in all things Scandinavian. The final article turns to audiences and their relationship with everyday (or at least screened representations of) Norden. Focusing on the explosive popularity of the teen drama *Skam* [Shame] in Russia, Saara Ratilainen, in her article "Norway Reimagined: Popular geopolitics and the Russophone fans of *Skam*", engages the "geopolitical reasoning" embedded in narratives and representations of Nordic countries through the medium of fan forums. While the series lacks the serial murder and atmospheric murkiness of other television artefacts discussed in this issue, Ratilainen demonstrates that the generic interest in the region that fuels international viewership of crime dramas likewise influences the popularity of web-TV offerings like *Skam*. Indeed, in dealing with controversial issues such as religion, racism, and LGBTQ+ identity, *Skam* functions as a paragon of the growing import of Nordic television beyond the realm of noir.

Set against the current global fascination with the Nordic region, this special issue of *Nordicom Review – Dark Screens: The geopolitics of Nordic television drama* – expands the scholarship of geopolitical television within and beyond Norden. Both collectively and individually, the contributions that follow demonstrate the increasingly profound impact that media from Northern Europe commands, while simultaneously examining the critical potential of cultural production in the current era of deterritorialised television production, distribution, and consumption. Combining empirical case studies, theoretical analyses, and critical readings, the subsequent articles highlight the growing power of Nordic crime fiction, and especially its screened offshoots, in an increasingly interconnected world, while also providing greater insight into how the region sees itself.

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