

Manufactured Exoticism and Retelling the *Story of a Crime*: the Case of Sjöwall and Wahlöö's Reception in France

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Between 1965 and 1975 Swedish writer couple Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö wrote a series of ten police procedurals, to which they gave the collective title *The Story of a Crime* [*Roman om ett brott*]. The idea behind the decalogue was to employ the crime novel 'as a scalpel to slit up the belly of the ideologically pauperised and morally debatable so-called welfare state of the bourgeois type' (Wahlöö 1967, p. 176, my translation) and to formulate a Marxist critique of successive Swedish Social-Democratic governments' flirtation with capitalism (Lind 2012). The generic template would allow the critique to be accessible to readers from all social layers and educational backgrounds, and show international readers the downsides of the embellished image of 'the Swedish model', largely created by Sweden's 'talented PR man [...] Olof Palme', as Sjöwall explains in a recent interview (Lind 2012). While this was a didactic and highly politicised literary project, the engagement of French publishing and media with translations of *The Story of a Crime* suggests different considerations. The reception of these writers in France is simultaneously symptomatic of an ongoing international branding of the contemporary Nordic crime novel and — when investigated in a historical perspective — revelatory of specific internal conditions within the localised cultural setting of this host country.

From Erotica to Exotica: the Reception in France of Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö

The shifting evolution over the last 40 years in the reception of Sjöwall and Wahlöö in France — from the first translations launched in the early 1970s to the way the works of these writers are embedded within the current reception of *noir nordique* — demonstrates how the image of the Nordic region is not static, but historically contingent. The selection and labelling involved in the marketing and critical reception of these writers bear witness to varying preoccupations at specific times in a process not only concerned with aspects of the representation of the Swedish Other, but also responding to various personal and commercial imperatives in France. The cultural transfer of these Swedish writers' novels seems, moreover, a case in point because they directly and consciously deal with images and counter-images of Sweden produced internationally.

The Story of a Crime was introduced to the French public in three stages, with editions that each highlight, project, or indeed invent a hypothetical Scandinavian sensibility as part of the different marketing strategies of the publishing houses involved.

The first translated edition was a half-hearted, and commercially rather unsuccessful, attempt by Editions Planète to introduce Sjöwall and Wahlöö to a French readership. Between 1970 and 1972, Planète commissioned translator Michel Deutsch to translate Sjöwall and Wahlöö from the English of the American edition. Being at two removes from the Swedish original, the French translation consequently — but perhaps unintentionally — omits parts of the more political passages in the fifth and sixth novels, *Brandbilen som försvann* (1969) [*The Fire Engine that Disappeared*, 1970a] and *Polis, polis, potatimos* (1970b) [*Murder at the Savoy*, 1971], relating to Swedish police reform in 1965 and its consequences. Furthermore, the release of the novels did not follow the chronological order in which they were intended to be read, and Planète — due to the low sales figures — stopped their publication of the series after the sixth novel.

Sjöwall and Wahlöö viewed the series as ‘one long novel of about 3,000 pages broken into ten individual parts, or indeed, chapters’ (Sjöwall and Wahlöö 1973, p.24, my translation) which, in order to lure the crime reading audience in, would remain ‘as good as apolitical [until] the fourth or fifth book’ (Hertel and Larsen 1973, p. 14). Therefore, considering that the writers do not start revealing the political agenda until the middle of the series, the actual revelation of the *big* crime committed by Social-Democratic governments was thus lost for French readers in this first attempt to acquaint them with Sjöwall and Wahlöö.

The image of Sweden that Planète was using to brand *The Story of a Crime* contradicted the purpose of the series, almost to the point of its self-destruction. The photographs on the front covers show increasingly naked women posing in settings and colour schemes connoting those of pornographic magazines of the period. The original title of the fifth novel in the series, *Brandbilen som försvann* [‘The Fire Engine that Disappeared’] (1969), translates into a different, erotically charged reinterpretation in the French edition, *Feu à Stockholm* [‘Fire in Stockholm’] (Sjöwall and Wahlöö 1972), a suggestively altered title, further reinforced by the front cover featuring a nude, supposedly stereotypically tall, blonde ‘Scandinavian’ model on an orange-red background of flames.

Swedishness is exploited in the marketing strategy, but only as a signifier of exoticism. The exotic representation of this land of the North cultivates a view of Sweden as a pornographic paradise, where sexual liberation is in full swing. However, this is rather paradoxical as the pornography industry — though certainly more liberalised in 1960s Scandinavia than in France — is routinely, throughout the series, depicted as one of

capitalist consumer society's downsides, and is a major theme under critical scrutiny in some of the individual novels. In *Terroristerna* (1975) [*The Terrorists* 1976], the final novel, one of three plotlines constituting the narrative is that of a millionaire pornographer, Walter Petrus, who entices teenagers into the industry by promising them instant careers as stars, subsequently adding amphetamines and heroin as a means of persuasion. Early in the novel, Petrus is found murdered in his lover's house; however, the subsequent investigation centres more on the disentanglement of his own criminal activities in the porn industry than on the unmasking of the culprit. The abysmal discrepancy between the visual imagery on Planète's early French edition of the novels and the actual content of the novels is also a testimony to the fact that the French publishing industry at the time was not interested in, or perhaps not aware of, the radicalism and the agenda of protestation present in the novels. They were marketed disguised in *jaquettes* that classified them visually as extreme low-brow pulp with a marketing strategy that paid no attention to the social and political critique embedded in the narratives.

French journalistic reviews dating from the early 1970s make no mention of the political dimension in the novels either. Instead, articles stress the literary kinship between the Swedish and Francophone specimens of the genre and exploit presumed feelings of recognition and *hommage*; Martin Beck is thus referred to as 'le cousin scandinave de Maigret' ['Maigret's Scandinavian cousin'] or as 'une sorte de Maigret suédois' [a sort of Swedish Maigret].[1]

In the 1980s a new edition of *The Story of a Crime* appeared. Translator and literary critic Philippe Bouquet approached the Union Générale d'Éditions with a proposition to re-launch the cycle. This initiative resulted in re-edited versions of the first six novels with the addition of Bouquet's French translations of the final four novels, this time based on the original Swedish texts. These were published between 1985 and 1987 in the collection 10/18 with front covers that — in comparison with the previous edition (and perhaps as a commentary on these) — are remarkably neutral, with cover photographs generally showing a single object (a ladder, a water tap, a fire extinguisher or an electrical cord) on a simple monochrome background.

Bouquet embodies a certain French political approach to the *noir nordique*, which is noticeable in his initial advocacy of the genre and has an affiliation with his broader analysis of internal cultural and societal conditions within France and how these express themselves through the ways in which the country imports foreign literatures. Bouquet argues (1993, p. 401) that Swedish-French literary transfer in the 20th century is 'l'histoire [...] d'une longue suite d'occasions manquées' ['the story of a long succession of missed opportunities'], where Scandinavian literature has continuously been rejected by publishing and critical establishments in France. In his analysis of

why Scandinavian literature has had difficulty breaking the French market, Bouquet introspectively finds the explanation in the French cultural self-image:

Notre culture latine, traditionnellement livresque, abstraite, élitiste, aurait pourtant trouvé là de quoi se régénérer, regagner le sens du pratique et de l'action, s'apercevoir que le monde des arts et des lettres a un rôle à jouer dans l'évolution sociale d'un pays et non seulement dans la formation de ses beaux esprits (Bouquet 1993, p. 406).

[Our Latin culture, traditionally book-centred, abstract, elitist, would yet have found in this something from which to regenerate itself, regain its sense of practicality and action, and to notice that the world of arts and letters has a role to play in the social development of a country and not just in the training of its finest minds.]

The quotation refers directly to the lack of French translations of Swedish 'proletarian' literature from the interwar period[2]. The notion, however, of an uninterrupted French resistance to Swedish literature over time is in Bouquet's discussion contained within resistance to a non-intellectual, non-bourgeois foreign literature that cannot be properly digested within French culture more generally. Oppression, when it comes to letting alternative voices be heard, is a cultural characteristic of France:

Notre pays n'aime décidément pas que 'la voix du peuple' se fasse trop entendre. Cela pourrait bien sûr changer trop de choses dans une nation qui s'apprête à momifier dans la rhétorique, les flonflons et les banquets, le souvenir de 89. Il ferait beau voir que la littérature du peuple soit prise au sérieux au pays de Voltaire! (Bouquet 1988, p. 7)

[Our country definitely does not like the 'voice of the people' to be heard too much. This could obviously change too many things in a nation preparing to mummify the memory of 1789 in rhetoric, oompah bands and banquets. It would be nice to see the people's literature taken seriously in Voltaire's homeland!]

From a similar perspective, Bouquet argues that the Scandinavian *collective novel* as narrative form has never exerted serious influence on French literary culture:

Personne en France ne s'est mis à écrire des 'romans collectifs' [...] pour la bonne raison qu'on aurait été bien en peine de dire de quoi il s'agissait. Nos grandes fresques sociales sont toutes bourgeoises [...] et intellectuelles (Bouquet 1993, p. 409).

[No one in France has started writing ‘collective novels’ for the reason that they would have had a hard time saying what they were about. All our grand social frescoes are bourgeois and intellectual]

The only way to challenge the mummification of social action in France seems to be to impose an impetus from the outside. It is in this context that Bouquet, later in the same article, introduces Sjöwall and Wahlöö as part of a Scandinavian movement of engaged literature, which has something to offer French crime writers:

[Sjöwall et Wahlöö] leur ont prouvé que le roman policier pouvait fort bien [...] être le véhicule d’une critique sociale, politique et même historique interdite dans le cadre de la fiction ‘respectable’ (Bouquet 1993, p. 418).

[[Sjöwall and Wahlöö] proved to them that the crime novel could very well [...] be the vehicle of a social, political, and even historical, critique, prohibited within the framework of ‘respectable’ fiction]

Bouquet’s mid-1980s translations of *The Story of a Crime* thus constitute a way of contesting the French cultural establishment both as literary expressions of ‘the people’s voice’, and as exemplars of a genre that is not constrained by the oppressive norms of French bourgeois literature in general. When Bouquet later ‘discovers’ Henning Mankell and introduces the latter’s first novel to the French readership in translation (*Meurtriers sans visage* 1994)[3], it similarly relates to this broader cultural and political project, aiming to challenge received notions in France that literature is detached from social responsibility, and to counter in-built social and cultural stratification.

The latest edition of the Martin Beck series — introduced by Rivages after the international wave of Nordic crime novels following the commercial success of Stieg Larsson and Henning Mankell — privileges the recent high profile and success of Scandinavian crime fiction with a red *bandeau* hailing Sjöwall and Wahlöö as ‘les fondateurs du roman policier suédois’ [‘the founders of the Swedish crime novel’]. This is by contrast with the first translations of their work from the early 1970s, which lacked the same focus on the construction of a supposed idea of Nordic identity as emphasised in the reception and presentation of Nordic crime fiction today.

Sjöwall and Wahlöö’s very immediate political agenda of showing the corruption of the Swedish state meets with different fortunes in successive French editions of *The Story of a Crime*. Marketing strategies are motivated by commercial considerations grounded contingently in localised tastes and concerns. Accordingly, a political agenda is downplayed in one edition and foregrounded in another. National identity, too, can be seen to be a malleable concept. Correspondingly, in an early edition of a work,

Swedishness can be associated trivially or flippantly with pornography, whereas it later comes to denote a morose seriousness, linked with sober stock-taking of the successes and failures of a social model. That it is Swedishness that is in question is secondary to a status of Other in relation to a French norm dictated by local considerations.

In this light, images of Swedish (or other) national character are as much a surviving construct of the French gaze as they are a product of crime narratives written in the Nordic countries, where an imagined national identity is, by contrast, treated with scepticism and sometimes irony, contesting the very idea of a stable national identity. If the role of the engaged crime writer is to observe, describe and critique issues within the contemporary polity, the surrounding participants in the publishing, distribution and consumer industry seem to act in a way that contravenes the literary narrative expressions thereby restricting the possibility of debating the social and political issues with which the literature itself engages.

Polars polaires: Current French Cultural Representations of Nordic Crime Fiction

Within the field of crime fiction studies, it is a truism that '[c]rime fiction moves easily from one culture to the next' (Platten 2012, p. 29). The increasing amount of crime novels translated and retranslated from the Nordic languages and the current popularity of Nordic films and series — both in France and internationally — bears witness to this. An ensuing argument that is easy to make would be that crime fiction functions as a social and communicative platform for intercultural exchange and dialogue between the world and the Nordic countries. Since it is a characteristic of *noirs nordique* that the foreign culture is not only illustrated, but also investigated, it is logical to assume that they provide French readers with insights into the cultures of the Nordic countries that go beyond national stereotypes and generalisations. However, while Nordic crime narratives have moved into France's cultural sphere of reference, it is clear, from the analysis of the reception of Sjöwall and Wahlöö in France in a historical perspective, that this is not necessarily the same as assuming that the ideas, aims and background understanding of the texts are instantaneous travel companions. In current media coverage of *noir nordique*, in which a common reference point is precisely the works of Sjöwall and Wahlöö, a new set of more or less constructed ideas of the North again finds its expression. Rather than promoting intercultural understanding, it seems, contrarily, to be a case of transfer, where:

le fait que les textes circulent sans leur contexte, qu'ils n'emportent pas avec eux le champ de production [...] dont ils sont le produit et que les récepteurs, étant eux-mêmes insérés dans un champ de production différent, les réinterprètent en fonction de la structure du champ de réception, est générateur de formidables malentendus. (Bourdieu 2002, p. 4)

[the fact that texts circulate without their context, that they do not bring with them the field of production [...] of which they are a product, and that the receivers, themselves integrated within a different field of production, reinterpret them according to the structure of the field of reception, causes unbelievable misunderstandings]

The fact that there are many different actors involved in the production and promotion of the publishing and media phenomenon of the *noir nordique*, has the result that multiple — and potentially conflicting — imperatives will inevitably be in play.

The *noir nordique* or variations of the term (*polar*[4] *nordique*, *polar scandinave*) function as an easy recognisable marketing brand used to cover literature and TV series from the Nordic region. In French bookshops, Nordic non-crime-fiction authors are categorised and displayed under the signs of these categories. The translations of Swedish novelist Björn Larsson's works are thus marketed and reviewed as 'polars' even though his novels have a questionable relationship with the genre. Even the works of French crime writers who have some affiliation with the Nordic countries (like Olivier Truc, correspondent for *Le Monde* in Stockholm) are branded as *noir nordique*. Tapping into this success, the 'genre' also extends into other literary domains exploiting the associated inventory of Nordic crime writing as revealed in the title and suggestive design of the cookbook, *Crimes glacés: 50 recettes inspirées des polars scandinaves* ['Ice Crimes: 50 Recipes Inspired by Scandinavian Crime Fiction'] (Martinetti and Lebeau 2013).

If there is a *noir nordique* template in media and critical discussions, there are a number of typical features that it could be said to include. The first of these is an almost obligatory reference to Sjöwall and Wahlöö as founders of the genre. Another important feature is reference to the Nordic welfare model, linked in turn to fundamental and universal problematics of the development of Western societies treated in the novels, such as globalisation, corruption, immigration, neoliberalism, and so on and so forth. This feature is frequently discussed in terms of a civic fall from grace, as in the following example from *France Culture*'s introduction to an hour-long emission debating both the mass shootings carried out by Anders Breivik on the Norwegian island of Utøya, and Stieg Larsson's *Millennium* trilogy:

Ce pays nordique [la Norvège] était hier perçu comme idyllique par nombre de Français, admiratifs et peut-être un peu jaloux du fameux 'modèle scandinave', mélange heureux — pensait-on — de démocratie sociale et de dynamisme économique. (Le Côté obscur du modèle scandinave 2011)

[This country [Norway] was yesterday perceived as idyllic by any number of French people, who admired and perhaps were a bit jealous of the famous

‘Scandinavian model’, a joyful mix — it was thought — of social democracy and economic dynamism.]

The natural counterpart to the lost idyll of the ‘Scandinavian model’ is the frequently cited ‘côté obscur’ [the dark side] of the Nordic societies. This is particularly accentuated in the Swedish context by the idyllic background of *Folkhemmat* [‘the People’s home’]. It is linked in turn to the pervasive significance attributed to the Nordic climate, the typical coldness and darkness of which connote similar qualities in the moral sphere, not least in relation to the typically melancholic investigative protagonist. There are also other typical ‘Scandinavians’ (tall, blond...), in whom a supposed personality type conforms to a constructed body. In this respect, as in others, the *noir nordique* genre is one that is characterised as highlighting discrepancies between a stereotypical ideal and a less satisfactory reality. The novels thus describe a society that Prolongeau (2006: 64) situates ‘à cent lieues de l’image idyllique faite de blondes sculpturales, de richesses industrielles et de paix sociale, qui s’attache encore aux capitales du Nord’ [‘a hundred miles from the idyllic image made up by sculptured blondes, industrial wealth and social peace, which is still associated with the capitals of the North’]. Such characterisations are no less based on such clichés to begin with. Frequently, the ‘genre’ is pigeon-holed by a negative definition and explicitly considered in the light of the absence rather than the presence of characteristic features. The enumeration of clichéd features — albeit recurrently presented with a certain ironic self-distancing from the stigmatising French perspective of the North — retains the reception of Nordic crime fiction in an iterative mode, eliding serious discussion of the actual issues debated in the works themselves.

There is an unusual contradiction in the fact that one of the reasons for the genre’s critical and commercial appeal in France is its unremitting attention to the minutiae of daily life, placed in a context exoticised by the filter of cultural transfer so that features of the everyday become ineffably Other in French critical discussion. This otherness extends to characters’ and authors’ names, including emblematically those of Sjöwall and Wahlöö: ‘Pareils noms les exposaient à des attentats phonétiques et orthographiques de la part des peuples “cultivés” du monde’ [‘Such names expose them to phonetic and orthographic attacks from the world’s “cultured” peoples’] (Bouquet 1994, p. 93). This kind of paradox is understood more generally by Graham Huggan (2002, p. 13) in the following terms:

The exotic is not, as is often supposed, an inherent *quality* to be found ‘in’ certain people, distinctive objects, or specific places; exoticism describes, rather, a particular mode of aesthetic *perception* — one which renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them [...] Exoticism, in this context, might be described as a kind of semiotic circuit that oscillates between the opposite poles of strangeness and familiarity.

French characterisations of the North in discussions of *noir nordique* can be said to operate within such a circuit. We might term *borealism* the hybrid of the realist depiction of the everyday and the exotically *nordique* that appeals to French critical sensibilities.

Geography is another key feature linked closely to climatic otherness. The covers of crime novels from the Nordic countries showing desolate and gloomy snow-covered landscapes form part of the ‘marque nordique’, which make them easily recognisable for a bookshop browser on the lookout for an exemplar of the genre. This uniform marketing template also confirms an imaginary of spatial marginality, which explicitly establishes a spatial organisation based on notions of the exotically cold and thus on otherness in relation to France. These repetitive covers apply a symbolic distance through the conventional imagery of cold, barren landscapes, repeated in titles of reviews dealing with Nordic crime fiction where climatic stereotypes serve an equally epitomising function: typical examples are ‘Les Grandes brumes du Nord’ [‘The Great Northern Mists’] or ‘La Dérferlante venue du froid’ [‘The Wave that Came in from the Cold’]. A frequent denominator in the titles is the use of the adjective *froid* [‘cold’] to create an ambiguous metaphorical constellation alluding both to the Nordic climate and to emotional expressions relating to either the coldness of a murderer’s actions or the chilling experience of the thrill that comes with reading about them. There are numerous variations on this theme: ‘Sueurs froides en Suède’ [‘Cold Sweats in Sweden’], ‘Le polar scandinave: il fait froid dans le dos’ [‘the Scandinavian *polar*: Spine-chilling’] or ‘Meurtres à froid’ [‘Cold-blooded Murder’].^[5] Titles like ‘Frissons Nordiques’ [‘Nordic Shivers’] and ‘Polars polaires: ils sont passés maîtres dans l’art de vous glacer le sang’ [‘Polar *polars*: Past Masters in the Art of Making Your Blood Freeze’] similarly employ climatic and emotional terminology to frame the specificity of the genre.

This climatic exoticism can already be found in mid-1980s reviews of Sjöwall and Wahlöö’s novels. Bertrand Audusse’s 1987 review in *Le Monde* of *Le Flic ricanant* [*The Laughing Policeman*] appears under the title ‘Le Policier qui venait du froid’ [‘The Policeman Who Came in from the Cold’] and contains many of the ingredients that have become emblematic in journalistic engagement with the genre in France. It becomes clear and particularly curious in this context that the reviewer exploits a generalised expectation on behalf of his readers, which manipulates the novels’ fictional framework. While *The Laughing Policeman* does take place during the winter months, Sjöwall and Wahlöö’s series mostly uses the Swedish summer as the scenic background for the narratives, and this particular narrative frequently comments on foreigners’ perception of Sweden as covered in snow and ice irrespective of the season. The predominant outdoor images instead feature people going on their summer holidays, girls in bikinis, blooming trees, and chief investigator Martin Beck and his colleagues frequently suffer from the heat in their offices at the police station.

Intentionally or not, the expression ‘...qui venait du froid’ — which has become a staple of French commentary on Nordic crime writing — echoes John Le Carré’s 1963 novel *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*. Evoking the polarity between the East and the West during the Cold War, the re-situation of the expression contains a sense of (re-)intrusion and of outsiderdom. While alluding climatically to the supposedly mono-seasonal USSR, the new polarity between the North and the South replaces old opposites.

The Nordic countries are regularly referred to and epitomised as one uniform entity, not taking into account national distinctiveness, and all under the umbrella concept of ‘cold exoticism’, emphatically coined in the expression *polar polaire*. This is a notion bizarre to most Danes, Norwegians and Swedes, who live as far away from the polar circle as from Paris; or as the narrator states at the opening of the sixth Martin Beck novel, *Murder at the Savoy*: ‘Malmö is closer to Rome than to the midnight sun’. In the novel this statement continues into a correcting crystal-ball response to future stigmatising characterisations of Sweden found in the outside world: ‘[a]nd even if many winters are slushy and windblown, summers are just as often long and warm, filled with the song of the nightingale and scents from the lush vegetation of the expansive parks’ (Sjöwall and Wahlöö 2007, p. 1).

In the representation of the North, climatic elements — such as snow and ice — comprise more than an immediate semantic understanding; their symbolic connotations expand into the ‘idea of the North’. This conceptual exoticism implies a notion of forced marginality, where the collective characteristics of what we might term the ‘geo-genre’ (a genre notion defined by its authors’ geographical position rather than the individual — and varied — literary specificities of their writing) is artificially pushed towards an invented arctic imagery. Hyperbolic manipulation of the sense of latitude towards the North Pole, as the point farthest away from a (normative) centre in France, nurtures a *polarised* vision of ‘nordicité’, as opposed to ‘latinité’.

The categorisation and classification of the ‘*polars polaires*’ generate an oppositional difference between France and the North, a discursive space in which it is possible to both idealise and criticise the Other in a movement of self-reflection. When the reception deals with images of ‘le modèle nordique’, the Nordic model of the welfare state is often represented equally in terms of idealisation and self-reflection. Aurélien Masson, current editor of Gallimard’s Série Noire, thus claims that the success of Scandinavian crime fiction comes down to the fact that ‘ils [les polars venus du froid] évoquent une social-démocratie assez proche de la nôtre’ [‘they conjure up a social democracy rather close to ours’] (Leménager and Reymond 2010, p. 32). Benjamin Guérif, responsible for the Scandinavian division at Rivages, states that the genre’s popularity can be attributed to the fact that ‘beaucoup de lecteurs français se reconnaissent dans cette dénonciation du puritanisme et de l’autosatisfaction arrogante

des hommes politiques’ [‘many French readers recognise themselves in this denunciation of puritanism and of the arrogant self-satisfaction of politicians’] (Leménager and Reymond 2010, p. 32). The process thus contains bi-directional forces both drawing attention to exotic aspects of Nordic crime fiction and emphasising similarities between the French Republic and the Nordic welfare model.

What Bourdieu (2002, p. 4) refers to as ‘malentendus’ [‘misunderstandings’] generated by mechanisms in the reception field, often find their way to the French public. Journalistic reviews like the following from *Le Figaro* not only conform to a *quasi*-uniform formula, which here presents Søren Sveistrup’s television series, *Forbrydelsen* [*The Killing*], to the French audience by highlighting the dull and rough weather (and likewise characters) in conjunction with the negation of the myth of the perfect welfare state, they also transfer certain misinterpretations:

Bienvenue dans la sombre et pluvieuse Copenhague. Dans cette série policière, le commissaire est une femme sans grâce qui boit sa bière au goulot, emmaillottée dans son pull tricoté par les Inuits du Groenland. [...] Sarah Lund [...] a tout faux au pays des familles modèles: mère célibataire, elle s’occupe peu de son fils. En face de ce caractère rude comme l’hiver, toutes les bassesses humaines qui se dissimulent derrière le puritanisme d’une société impeccable. (Luteau and Duponchelle 2012)

[Welcome to dark and rainy Copenhagen. In this crime series, the detective is a charmless woman who drinks her beer from the bottle, wrapped in her sweater knitted by Inuits from Greenland. [...] Sarah Lund incarnates everything wrong in the land of the model family: she is a single mother and does not take much care of her son. Confronted with this character as rough as winter, we find all the downsides of humanity hiding behind the puritanism of an impeccable society.]

Sarah Lund’s now iconic sweater was designed and created for the series from traditional Faroese knitting patterns. In the review, however, it is geographically relocated to Greenland, reinforcing the construct of the far-away polar North as signifier for all parts of the Nordic region. This supposedly also fits with a certain *idée reçue* of Denmark’s postcolonial relationship with Greenland — by association perhaps with Peter Høeg’s success in France with the crime novel *Smilla et l’amour de la neige* (1995) [*Frøken Smillas fornemmelse for sne*, 1992].^[6] This misinterpretation runs counter to the immediate connotations of the sweater for a Danish audience, for whom Sarah Lund’s outfit alludes to the 1970s and the origins of politically engaged crime fiction. With reference to a childhood in a hippy milieu in Copenhagen in the 1970s, Sofie Gråbøl, the actress playing Inspector Sarah Lund, explains the symbolic meaning of the jumper to the international audience: ‘I wore this sweater and so did my parents. That sweater was a sign of believing in togetherness [...]. To me it says that

she's wanting to sit around a fire with a guitar; it gives a great opposite to her line of work and behaviour' (Frost 2011). Further into the French review from *Le Figaro*, its authors give a parenthetical explanation to the meaning of the main character's name stating that the surname Lund refers to 'marécage' ['swamp'] in Danish. The meaning of *en lund* is, in fact, 'a grove', precisely the place where one could imagine a group of friends sitting around a campfire. Instead, the faulty French translation fits into the elementary *noir nordique* template by pointing to the sombre and wet conditions associated with a swamp.

The above example shows that interpretation of fictional national symbolism finds different considerations in the new context, which leads to stigmatisation and misreading. There has, however, been a development in the media's treatment of Nordic crime fiction in France, which operates against the uniform template and tones down the exoticism. Elisabeth Tegelberg, having studied the representation of Swedish crime fiction in French journalistic reviews in the first half of the 2000s, identifies a tendency towards a more nuanced treatment of the genre in which the discussion is 'less influenced by *horizons d'attente* than previously and where one has a feeling that literary reviewers are treating Nordic literature in French translation with greater respect' (Tegelberg 2007, p. 431, my translation). While Tegelberg merely highlights this, the change can be interpreted in the light of the increased number of academics with a background in Nordic or Scandinavian studies (from universities in Lille, Paris, Caen, Lyon and Strasbourg) employed in the publishing business. These increasingly and frequently contest the clichés surrounding the 'genre' in the media as in this interview with Marc de Gouvenain[7], who ridicules the French construct of the imagined North:

C'est tout de même paradoxal: chaque fois qu'on évoque les Scandinaves, il faut qu'on ajoute des rennes! Effectivement, dans cette trilogie [*Millénium*], on trouve des ordinateurs, des motos, des loubards dans le métro et des iPods, mais... pas de rennes. (Ferniot 2009)

[It's rather ironic: every time you mention Scandinavians, you have to add reindeer to the mix! In this trilogy [*Millennium*], you effectively find computers, motorbikes, louts in the metro and iPods, but... no reindeer.]

However, while the more serious exceptions to the French media's general treatment of the *noir nordique* also engage with the social critique present in this imported literature — or, as we have seen in Bouquet's case, attempt to use the imported literature as a vehicle to contest the French literary establishment's concerns — it seems as if they are having a hard time breaking into the dominant template. Commercial imperatives govern the French reception of crime fiction from the Nordic countries to the extent that it might even now be possible to talk about the geo-genre's demise. Ironically,

however — as Bouquet puts it — ‘le coupable ne fait aucun doute: c’est le succès’ [‘there can be no doubt as to who the culprit is: it is success’] (2010, p. 107).

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Notes:

[1] Unattributed newspaper review of Sjöwall and Wahlöö, *Elles N'iront Plus Au Bois* (Planète 1970) [*Mannen På Balkongen*, Norstedt, 1967], 31 May 1970, Bibliothèque Des Littératures Policières, Paris, Archive 'Le Polar Scandinave'; unattributed newspaper review of Sjöwall and Wahlöö, *L'Homme Qui Partit En Fumée* (Planète 1971) [*Mannen Som Gick Upp I Rök*, Norstedt, 1966] 16 February 1971, Bibliothèque Des Littératures Policières, Paris, Archive 'Le Polar Scandinave'.

[2] The Swedish proletarian novel is the topic of Bouquet's doctoral thesis, *L'individu Et La Société Dans Les Ouvres Des Romanciers Proletariens Suédois, 1910-1960* ['Individual and Society in the Works of Swedish Proletarian Novelists 1910-1960'], successfully defended at the University of Lille III in 1980.

[3] Bouquet has translated more than 200 novels from Danish, Norwegian and (especially) Swedish. The selection of Nordic crime novelists he has translated (including Mankell, Staffan Westerlund, Fredrik Ekelund, Kjell Eriksson and Leif G. W. Persson) points to a preoccupation with the engaged spectrum of Nordic crime fiction.

[4] Informal abbreviation for (*roman*) *pol(icier)*.

[5] *Sueurs Froides* is the French title of Hitchcock's *Vertigo*.

[6] In the UK, Sarah Lund's sweater is often referred to as the 'Fair Isle jumper', which stresses a different re-appropriation of symbolic value to suit the local flavours of this host country.

[7] Marc de Gouvenain is a translator from Swedish and the editor for Actes Sud responsible for bringing Stieg Larsson to France long before the *Millennium* trilogy had been discovered in the Anglophone world.

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