

Book Review: *Geopolitics, Northern Europe, and Nordic Noir: What Television Series Tell Us About World Politics*

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ROBERT A. SAUNDERS: *Geopolitics, Northern Europe, and Nordic Noir: What Television Series Tell Us About World Politics*. London & New York: Routledge, 2021, 216 pp. £120 (hardback), ISBN 9781138368347; £36.99 (paperback), ISBN 9780367565985, published August 1, 2022.

On a cursory count, there are more than 40 Nordic television series available to watch on various streaming channels in the UK today. It is hard to imagine, but it was not always so. The dramatic rise of (what quickly became known as) Nordic noir took off with the UK release of the Danish television crime drama *The Killing* (orig. 2007–12) in 2011, at a time where in the UK you would have very little access to subtitled television. Following the launch of Netflix in the UK in 2012, the first actual Netflix Original to start streaming was also a Nordic noir series, *Lilyhammer* (2012–14), co-produced with Norwegian NRK. Today's global reach of Nordic noir television productions, with series such as *The Killing* and *The Bridge* (2011–18) having been sold to more than 100 territories and in some cases remade, is to a large extent dependent upon this still relatively new transnational production and distribution network. With series such as *Blue Eyes* (2014–15), *Fortitude* (2015–18), *Bordertown* (2016), *Midnight Sun* (2016) and *Occupied* (2015–20) a global television audience is now able to cross cultural borders through their screens and access a wide range of popular narratives set in the Nordic countries. However, as Robert Saunders persuasively argues in his study of *Geopolitics, Northern Europe, and Nordic Noir: What Television Series Tell Us About World Politics*, these television series are not merely exotic local narratives set in a snowy North: their 'attentiveness to the power, vulnerability, and the perpetual presence of borders is manifesting in ways that have important ramifications for our everyday geopolitical visions, codes, and orders. This is particularly true in a world where popular culture is increasingly imbricated in international politics.'

Written from the disciplinary perspective of contemporary geopolitics and International Relations, Saunders and others are increasingly drawn to television productions to explore our changing and growing interest in and concern with world politics and politically-sensitive international topics, from climate change and migration to war, espionage, transnational crime, and border control, observing

that 'geopolitics is increasingly on our minds and our screens.' A consideration of the ubiquity of transnational television drama series as representing 'a new field of power in International Relations, as the images depicted, stories told, and landscapes screened help shape reality, and thus play a part in determining world politics in the twenty-first century', appears both a timely and significant study.

Saunders helpfully defines 'geopolitical television as fictional, dramatic video content in serial form that (1) engages international themes via imaginary scenarios; (2) builds 'worlds' based on situated social, geographical, and political understandings; and (3) interrogates questions of domestic versus foreign identities via narratives. Fitting examples from the past decade of Nordic television productions are numerous, and a real strength of Saunders's study is his generous selection of series from across the Nordic region and beyond. The choice to focus on Nordic crime dramas is not only explained by the fact that television studies scholars increasingly recognise Nordic noir as a paragon of high-quality television with an enormous global reach, but also because 'the North' and particularly the Arctic 'is increasingly prevalent in the global geopolitical imagination', especially when it comes to concerns about climate change. According to Saunders, '[i]n these series' grim, grey representations of detection across borders (state, cultural, and social), it is possible to gain a better understanding of how the world actually works.'

Another strength of the book is that throughout its seven chapters, Saunders achieves a balance between providing fresh analyses and discussions of television series to satisfy readers with a background in Nordic, television or popular culture studies while also providing needed background information, context and explanations of central concepts and historical facts for those with less knowledge about the region, its history and societies. Such information is helpfully provided in a range of valuable 'concept-based textboxes'.

Saunders's approach to teasing out the political work done in and by geopolitical television drama is to focus not only on what the series say or show, but more significantly on 'what they do, particularly with their planting of somatic markers', constituting a geopolitics of emotions. Following a few introductory chapters that insert the present study within a broader discussion of Nordic noir, Scandinavian geopolitical history, the region's perceived and imagined Northernness, its 'remoteness and peripherality', and the series' representation of the darker sides of the modern, utopian welfare states including the challenges brought on by neoliberalism, migration, climate change, financial cracks, etc., chapters four to six

present chapter-length case studies. While studies of Nordic crime fiction and the welfare states are standard, it is Saunders' attention to somatic markers in his case studies that sets his study apart. Chapter four's discussion of dead bodies in Arctic noir, including the Icelandic series *Trapped* and the British *Fortitude*, featuring a particularly excellent analysis of *Midnight Sun*, is a case in point. Here several of Saunders' lines of inquiry converge in a peripheral, pristine Northern landscape littered with corpses, including crime scenes investigated by local and a foreign detective, whose minds and bodies deteriorate under the Arctic midnight sun, with themes such as internal colonialism, the exploitation of natural resources, and gendered violence resonating in the guilty landscapes.

Chapters five and six turn to other kinds of borderscapes in Nordic crime dramas in which transnational identities are constructed and negotiated through novel forms of geographical and affective screening. A particularly timely contribution is the discussion of landscapes, state terrorism, and energy crises as depicted in the Norwegian series *Occupied*, wherein Norway finds its geo-politicised Northern borders overrun by the Russians, suggesting less the return of a Cold-War fear of the neighbour to the East than an overflow of Norwegian petro-guilt and global insecurities. A final discussion of the book concerns how representations of geopolitical realities change as the series move around the globe, how the style and landscapes of Nordic noir change when their geopolitical situatedness change. While focusing his discussion on international adaptations of *The Bridge* and the Swedish/British co-creation *Marcella*, Saunders is interested in the now widespread mimicry of the Nordic noir style in different contexts, from continental series such as *The Border* (Poland), *Pagan Peak* (Austria-Germany), and *The Frozen Dead* (France); Australian series like *Secret City*, *Mystery Road*, and *Deep Water*; the so-called Celtic noir of *Dublin Murders*, *Shetland*, and *Hinterland*; and Netflix's growing suite of geopolitical noir series such as *The Rain*, *Young Wallander*, and *1983*, among others.

Geopolitics, Northern Europe, and Nordic Noir is one of those rare books that transcends disciplines to leave a seminal mark on several. Not only does the book provide an eloquent and forcefully argued discussion of the relevance of television series to our understanding of contemporary geopolitics and International Relations. It provides a hitherto unexamined argument for attending particularly to Nordic televisual crime narratives to investigate a current geopolitical moment marked by Anthropogenic climate change and cultural polarisations that transcend the Nordic region. Saunders's book will have a major

impact on how we approach the global phenomenon of Nordic noir television series. Through detailed close analyses of a wide range of television series from across the entire region, attending particularly to representations of emotions, gendered and racialised bodies, and always placed forcefully within relevant local and global political conditions and debates, Saunders demonstrates the importance of taking television series seriously for the ways in which the screen shapes our geopolitical imaginations and discourses. As our geopolitical imaginations to a large extent determine how we may respond to major global challenges such as climate change and transnational threats to security, Saunders's *Geopolitics, Northern Europe, and Nordic Noir* is a significant book for understanding and evaluating contemporary popular culture.