

Nordic noir in the UK: the allure of accessible difference

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Abstract

This article takes a closer look at the recent success of Nordic noir in the United Kingdom considering especially the ways in which this particular aesthetic or popular cultural form has come to function as a medium for intercultural communication wherein the perceived Nordicness of the genre plays a central role in negotiating social and cultural desires and challenges pertaining mostly to the receiving culture. Nordic noir, I argue, is not merely a fleeting fashion but a publishing and media phenomenon that tells us something about particular patterns of cultural consumption in the first decades of the twenty-first century United Kingdom.



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In the twenty-first century, Scandinavian crime fiction or “Nordic noir,” as it has become labelled in the United Kingdom, has become a local as well as a global obsession described as forming a recognisable international brand. Books and TV series have spread like a wave from the Nordic epicentres to the mainstream European markets and beyond. Several crime series have been translated into more than thirty languages and authors such as the Swedes Henning Mankell, Stieg Larsson and Liza Marklund, the Norwegian Jo Nesbø and the Dane Jussi Adler-Olsen are selling millions of copies of their crime novels outside of Scandinavia.¹

The Danish TV crime series *Forbrydelsen* (*The Killing*, DR1, 2007–2012) has been exported to more than a hundred countries and territories on all continents and was awarded an Emmy for best international drama in 2010 and the International BAFTA in 2011.² As such, Nordic noir is currently the most prominent and telling example of a seemingly global obsession that has made crime fiction a “top-ranking literary genre.”³

The international success of Nordic crime fiction initiated with translations of Sjöwall and Wahlöö’s police procedurals in the early 1970s and reached a wider Anglo-American readership in the

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early 1990s with translations of Peter Høeg's post-colonial crime thriller *Frøken Smillas fornemmelse for sne* (1992; *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow*, 1993). Henning Mankell's Wallander novels reignited the popularity of Swedish police novels in the same decade, and in the twenty-first century Stieg Larsson's *Millennium* trilogy (*The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, 2005 [2008], *The Girl Who Played with Fire*, 2006 [2009] and *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornets' Nest*, 2007 [2009]) became a global publishing phenomenon. Together, these examples of international bestsellers, originating in the European semi-periphery of Scandinavia, exemplify Franco Moretti's general theory about the historic spread of novelistic genres. Emanating from the literary and cultural centres of the twentieth century, predominantly Anglo-American crime writing spread to the linguistic peripheries through translations, adaptations and mimicry, eventually resulting in original local variants that would add to and innovate the global form of the genre itself.⁴ In an age of globalisation, the Nordic noir phenomenon demonstrates that crime fiction is a particularly mobile and adaptable genre able to spread and take root throughout the world by adapting internationally recognisable literary forms to local circumstances, languages and traditions.

Arguably, over the recent decades Scandinavian crime fiction has played a central role in opening up the doors for crime writers around the world to the global and much coveted yet notoriously impermeable Anglo-American markets. According to an article in *The Wall Street Journal* about "Fiction's Global Crime Wave," published at the height of the Stieg Larsson craze: "Detective novels from Japan, Nigeria, Germany and Korea are pouring into the U.S. as publishers hunt for the next 'Girl with the Dragon Tattoo.'"⁵ This "global crime wave" however needs to be seen in the context of an Anglophone publishing market, such as the British, where translated fiction represents only about 4% of all published titles.⁶

This article will take a closer look at the recent success of Nordic noir in the United Kingdom considering especially the ways in which this particular aesthetic or popular cultural form has come to function as a medium for intercultural communication wherein the perceived Nordicness of the genre plays a central role in negotiating social and cultural desires and challenges pertaining

mostly to the receiving culture. Nordic noir, I shall argue, is not merely a fleeting fashion but a publishing and media phenomenon that tells us something about particular patterns of cultural consumption in the first decades of the twenty-first century United Kingdom—a period marked by growing social inequalities, unequal globalisation, financial crises and austerity.⁷

NORDIC NOIR—THE NEW EXOTIC

Local crime writing in the European semi-periphery of the Nordic countries arose out of the generic forms originating, for the most part, in Anglo-American traditions.⁸ In the post-War period, Scandinavian crime writers absorbed and imitated the American hardboiled detective novel and the British clue-puzzle, notable examples being the Swedish queen of the "whodunit," Maria Lang, the Swede Stieg Trenter, the Dane Else Fischer and the Norwegian Gerd Nyquist.⁹ Since the early 1970s, Scandinavian crime fiction has become more than bland adaptations of their Anglo-American predecessors, even if notable representatives of the genre are self-consciously writing from within established subgenres or on the shoulders of their predecessors: Sjöwall and Wahlöö made the American police procedural, as shaped by Ed McBain, the predominant "Scandinavian" subgenre in their ground-breaking "Novel of a Crime" series (1965–1975); in the late 1970s, the Norwegian Gunnar Staalesen initiated a still ongoing series of hardboiled detective novels with the Bergen-based former social worker Varg Veum as a Scandinavian Philip Marlow; and in Denmark, the popular breakthrough of the crime novel came in 1968 with Anders Bodelsen's *Think of a Number*, which is more clearly related to Simenon's psychological *romans-durs* or tough crime novels.¹⁰ With such writers Scandinavian crime fiction began to find its own particular local expression in the 1970s where, apart from gloomy Scandinavian settings and the detectives' strange-sounding names, the "social work" of the crime genre became acted out, mediated and consumed on the stages of the Scandinavian welfare states, which in that decade witnessed dramatic social and cultural change, financial depression and the beginning to the end of the optimism and utopian belief in social and economic progress that had

saturated the “golden age of the welfare state” in the 1950s and 60s. Since then, Nordic noir (now including examples of translated crime novels and TV series from all the Nordic countries including Iceland and Finland) has become a dramatic form that both adopt traits of the international crime genre while seeking to present content and forms specific to local social realities and traditions.

Curiously, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, this peripheral Nordic variant has become a new centre from where translated novels, dubbed or subtitled TV drama have spread to the rest of the world. Scandinavian and Anglo-American film and TV adaptations of novels by Henning Mankell (*Wallander* starring Kenneth Branagh; Left Bank Pictures/Yellow Bird, 2008–2016), Stieg Larsson (*The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*; David Fincher 2011) and Jo Nesbø (*Headhunters*; Morten Tyldum 2011) demonstrate the importance of cross-media fertilisation to the growing success of Scandinavian crime fiction. Original TV series such as *The Killing* and the Danish–Swedish co-production *The Bridge* have been remade to serve other local contexts: *The Bridge* was relocated from the Öresund Bridge between Sweden and Denmark to the tunnel connecting the United Kingdom and France in *The Tunnel* (2013, 2016) and the Bridge of the Americas between Mexico and the US in FX’s *The Bridge* (2013–2014). Nordic noir TV drama has influenced series such as the Welsh and bi-lingual *Y Gwyll/Hinterland* (S4C/BBC One Wales, 2013/2014) and Nordic noir has been taken up by UK-based crime writers such as Torquil MacLeod with his Malmö Mysteries and in Quentin Bates’s Gunnhildur series, as well as in Simon Donald’s TV crime thriller *Fortitude* (Sky Atlantic, 2015) set in Arctic Norway. These recent examples demonstrate that Nordic noir, while still mostly set in a Nordic country, preferably in cold, snowy landscapes, does not necessarily need to be written in a Nordic language. Itself an imitation or a new accent of popular forms originating in the Anglo-American global centres, Nordic noir has given rise to new accents at home and further afield. However, as Agnes Broomé has demonstrated, what unifies the genre is not traditional textual or formal aspects but its dependence on extra-textual branding and “a narrow range of motifs drawing on the snowy emptiness of the

imagined Scandinavian landscape” as seen, for instance, in the ubiquitous gloomy cover designs.¹¹

The local or regional expressions associated with Nordic noir have, for these reasons, resulted in a highly mobile subgenre, and can productively be discussed from a perspective conceptualised by Stephen Greenblatt in his “mobility studies manifesto”: as a significant transnational example with which we can “identify and analyse the ‘contact zones’ where cultural goods are exchanged.”¹² Considering such mobility as always being dependent upon time-bound and local conditions, and the pre-disposition, even (or especially) in our globalised world, for thinking about cultural expressions as thoroughly localised phenomena.¹³ The case of Nordic noir and its reception in the United Kingdom is, furthermore, a good example of what Greenblatt describes as “the allure (and, on occasion, the entrapment) of the firmly rooted,” which we should not ignore when considering the mobility of cultures even if the geographical and cultural distance, as the one between Britain and the Nordic countries, appears insignificant.

As Slavoj Žižek has written in a review of one of Henning Mankell’s novels: “The main effect of globalisation on detective fiction is discernible in its dialectical counterpart: the specific locale, a particular provincial environment as the story’s setting.”¹⁴ Localisation or “rootedness” appears inevitably entangled with the crime novels transnational mobility, and the allure of the “Swedishness,” “Nordicness,” the cold, snowy landscapes of the far north may slip from an appreciation of diversity and the foreign into “banal transnationalism”¹⁵ or “exoticism.” The translation studies scholar, Lawrence Venuti, found the latter to characterise the translations into English of Mankell’s crime novels (and foreign crime fiction more generally).¹⁶

When Nordic crime fiction travels abroad, it is consumed as a globalised cultural good, desirable precisely for its blend of recognisable generic forms and its somewhat exotic local anchoring. Such a safe “exotification,” as Venuti would have it, or a “Nordientalism”¹⁷ may describe the allure of Nordic noir in the British reception, where all-things Nordic have come to represent an imagined desirable elsewhere, sampling everything from Nordic social values, sustainable life styles and well-designed consumer products, which can be accessed *en bloc* through the consumption of Nordic noir. In this sense, the consumption, reading

and viewing of Nordic noir in Britain forms part of “the tourist’s world,” characterised by Zygmunt Bauman as a world in which “the strange is tame, domesticated, and no longer frightens; shocks come in a package deal with safety.”¹⁸

Paradoxically, the globalisation of Nordic crime fiction in the twenty-first century can be seen to illustrate Henning Mankell’s Chief Inspector Kurt Wallander’s anxious observations about the uncanny, immoral and turbulent place and time in which he is forced to operate as a police detective in *The Fifth Woman* (2000; *Den femte kvinnan*, 1996): “There were few tourist attractions that could compete with the scene of a crime.”¹⁹ Wallander’s despairing view of a rise in violent crime and the public fascination with crime scenes²⁰ (if not crime fiction itself), which have been reduced to entertaining spectacles for tourists, ultimately resulting in a devaluation of human life, fits in with his general feeling of homelessness, loss and anxiety confronted, as he is throughout the series, with a deterritorialised welfare state. His is an unrecognisable Sweden of a more violent, complex and globalised present that has relegated him to playing the part of a depressed anachronism.

Exotification, as well as racism, marginalisation and othering, are certainly dominant themes in much Scandinavian crime fiction, as well as, paradoxically, relevant perspectives on the “foreign” appropriation, domestication and reception of Nordic noir. The consumption of Nordic crime fiction in the United Kingdom takes place within a wider dynamic of global capitalism, understood as “a new regime of difference” that “works through specificity,”²¹ or localisation, whose market imperative, according to Maribel Blasco, “means that even cultures that appear very unexotic to us—say the Swedish, the German, the Dutch—must have their differences, however slight, exposed, managed and exploited.”²²

CONSUMING NORDIC NOIR

It would be fair to say that Nordic crime fiction only became a recognisable genre or subgenre as novels and TV series became widely translated, subtitled and adapted into foreign languages and markets. Nordic noir is arguably only understood as a distinct regional genre as a consequence of its international success—otherwise, Scandinavians

would happily have continued to refer to their local specimens as simply “krimi” (in Denmark), “krim” (in Norway) and “deckare” (in Sweden) without regional or national epithets. Nordic crime fiction, in other words, is perhaps only really “Nordic” when viewed or read from abroad—when published, marketed and sold in bookshops, book fairs or at broadcasting trade fairs, where the branding of national peculiarities is essential for attracting the attention of potential funders, publishers and book buyers in a crowded, globalised field.

However, as Claire Squires has suggested by way of Tzvetan Todorov, genre is not merely a practical way of categorisation, but “an agency in the publishing field” through which “art interacts with society.”²³ Nordic crime fiction has undoubtedly become an exotic international brand, but it also suggests certain ways in which local Nordic societies and receiving cultures choose to codify particular fictions in correspondence with less explicated ideologies, needs and expectations.

Crime fiction on the global market as well as in the Nordic countries has become, according to Karl Berglund, the new “normal literature.” Bibliometric research has shown that two and a half times more new crime titles have been published in Sweden in the first decade of the new millennium compared to the 1980s: “During just a few years (mainly 1998–2001), [well before the Stieg Larsson phenomenon] the major publishers in Sweden doubled their number of titles of crime fiction, and they have maintained this high rate ever since.”²⁴ The ubiquity of home-grown crime fiction in the Nordic countries over the past couple of decades now also including a host of TV crime series suggest that the genre, in its particular local expressions, fulfils a new need in the market with a wide segment of readers, tied to a specific point in time, presenting particular localised interests and concerns. While the viewing of locally produced TV drama in the Nordic countries appears to amount to a national obsession, as Sunday prime-time viewer numbers in the case of Denmark suggest that almost half the population viewed the final episode of *Forbrydelsen*, in Britain as in other “proximate countries” Nordic TV drama, as Pia Majbritt Jensen points out, is mostly consumed by a “cosmopolitan” elite (on the niche channel BBC FOUR). This is identified as a segment with a “hunger for intelligent TV

fiction,” a cosmopolitan “elite” that may also identify politically and culturally with a nostalgia for Scandinavian modernism and welfarist ideals. Therefore, the phenomenon of Nordic crime fiction arguably fulfils diverse needs and is invested with different values for different audiences at home and abroad.

However, despite the persistent interest in just about anything remotely Nordic, it is presumably still difficult for many to tell the Scandinavian or Nordic countries apart. As noted in an article in *Vanity Fair* when the “Nordic craze” was at its height:

Scandinavia is [a] collection of countries we can't tell apart, whose flags are color variations of the same pattern. They've got interchangeable Lego royal families, and all their names end in “-son.” Scandinavia has long been held up as the paragon of a decent, evolved society [...] in every survey of enviable smugness, Scandinavia comes first.²⁵

In British newspapers, commentators periodically wonder about this strange infatuation: “Why,” asked an article in *The Telegraph*, “do we love Scandinavian culture?”²⁶ The British “nation-crush” on Denmark was in *The New Yorker* compared to French Japonism in the nineteenth century: “When people ask what’s going on in London these days, I answer, Copenhagen”; yet, the British obsession with all-things Danish appear “somewhat perplexing.”²⁷ Again, in the logic of global capitalism, even the most unexotic of countries must have their differences exposed, managed and exploited.

ACCESSIBLY DIFFERENT

As argued above, the closer crime fiction stays to the home, to its particular local reality, the further it might travel; to be truly global, crime fiction necessarily has to be provincial, as suggested by Žižek; to be translated, crime fiction needs to be, in a sense, untranslatable, distinctive, manageably exotic. On the other hand, crime fiction, as other examples of genre fiction, are commonly perceived to be the most easily translated; firstly, because the genre has fairly strict formal rules that apply across cultures and secondly, while thriving on the complications of plot lines, crime fiction writers presumably rarely obsess about linguistic or figurative intricacies. It is especially

this recognisability and the popular appeal of the genre that made Venuti insist that translations of crime fiction predominantly cater for readers who, like arm-chair tourists, merely desire the allure of the foreign and not the more challenging strangeness of other cultures.

A blog post on *The Guardian* about *The Killing II*, which considers “what’s been lost in translation” and proceeds to help the readers and viewers “make sense of all the translated Danish phrases” and to “digest the colloquialisms and cultural references,” describes the continuing allure of Scandinavian TV crime drama as “the joy of watching foreigners speaking foreign tongues [...], part of the charm of Scandinavian crime dramas is that they are accessibly different. OK,” the article goes on, “so a few cultural references will fall on deaf ears, but watching subtitled dramas on Saturday evenings makes us all understand our neighbours across the North Sea a little more, doesn’t it? And, anyway, the language doesn’t seem too difficult either.”²⁸ The experience of reading subtitles while listening to the foreign language makes Scandinavian TV drama, with an interesting phrase, feel “accessibly different”: “some cultural references will fall on deaf ears,” it is suggested, such as the historical significance of the location of Ryvangen in Copenhagen—the setting wherein a dead body is found—and the ubiquitous use of swear words in Danish, which has apparently been toned down in the English subtitles.

An article in *The Economist* also pointed to the foreign, if not exotic, language as central to the allure of Nordic noir. The attractive foreignness of the language is complemented with a stereotypical view of the fate of the Nordic welfare societies as represented in crime fiction: “The countries that the Nordic detectives call home are prosperous and organised [...] But the protection offered by a cradle-to-grave welfare system hides a dark underside.”²⁹ Parallel to the British interest in Nordic noir over the past decade there has been much attention afforded the “Nordic model” and especially the phenomenon of the “happy Danes,” which has coincided with a widespread sense of a domestic dissolution of welfare and social justice in the wake of neoliberal policies, global financial crises and following austerity measures. A number of TV programmes, events and books have appeared in the United Kingdom that have portrayed the Nordic countries as mostly

utopian societies. More recently, Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, known from the TV series *River Cottage*, has hosted three episodes on Channel 4 (2014) about Nordic food and life styles with the title *Scandimania*. His tour of Scandinavia presented a veritable “nation-crush,” a “scandimania” for Nordic wellness, institutionalised egalitarianism, a dedication to sustainability, a strong sense of community and quality of life.

In such TV programmes, Scandinavia comes neatly packaged and presented so that all recognisable elements—history, art, culture, food and consumer trends—appear mutually dependent, causal and, importantly, essentially local or regional. Everything begins with specific landscapes and end with the formation of idiosyncratic welfare states wherein everyone is imagined to be exceedingly trusting and happy individuals belonging to a Social-Democratic middle class. Scandinavians surround themselves with designer furniture and spend the dark winter days in candlelight and with “hygge” (perceived as untranslatable, but often rendered as “cosiness,” this term is incidentally the subject of several life-style books under publication in the UK),³⁰ as one imagines they must have done since the dawn of time without foreign influences. In such programmes, Nordic social realities are treated as alluring, homogeneous, exotic tourist destinations, where their difference to a proximate yet imagined more complex British, globalised reality are managed to conform to an essentialising view of culture one would be more cautious of applying to the United Kingdom.

The journalist Michael Booth has attempted to “correct the imbalance” of the recent utopian idealisation of the Nordic countries in the British media³¹ in his book *The Almost Nearly Perfect People: The Truth About the Nordic Miracle* (2014). His “revelations” of the rot eating away at the Nordic welfare societies, his humorous yet acerbic portrayal of conformist Swedes, jingoistic Danes on anti-depressants, lethargic Norwegians drunk on oil wealth, and gun-toting, binge-drinking Finns, however, do more to cement the image of the Nordic region as an exotic elsewhere than do the blindly idealising popular ethnographic travelogues. Arguably, *The Almost Nearly Perfect People* does more to validate the currency of this Nordic proximate other in the negotiation of identity and belonging within the social and cultural elite of

the receiving culture. A more balanced account by *The Guardian* journalist Patrick Kingsley, whose experiences of being embedded with the Danes for a month resulted in the book *How to be Danish: From Lego to Lund. A short introduction to the State of Denmark* (2012), nevertheless continues this publishing trend and cultural obsession with the allure of these strange lands across the pond wherein the welfare state, TV drama and Nordic cuisine are un-problematically imagined as expressions of a homogeneous national identity. Although, as the author writes in his introduction, this is of course not “a serious tutorial on how, actually, to be Danish,” it is nevertheless an attempt to make Denmark less “impenetrable to outsiders,” to make the different accessible, and to find out “what we really know about the Danes” apart from wearing their knitwear and watching Danish crime series on TV. Helen Russell is another British journalist who has exploited the obsession with all-things Danish and published a book about her life in Denmark, whereto she had relocated with her family. *The Year of Living Danishly: Uncovering the Secrets of the World’s Happiest Country* (2015) is an actual tongue-in-cheek manual to life in Denmark. The record of her encounter with these slightly mysterious Danes portrays them as sticklers to tradition, patriotic, obsessed with rules, aesthetically and environmentally conscious, a family oriented, tax loving, trusting and playful people.

This trend in popular ethnography provides less in terms of real insights into the complex and changing Danish or Nordic social realities, of what it actually means to be Danish in a post-welfare, multicultural, globalised world, than it does about trends in the receiving culture: the desires and dreams of a segment of the UK population, who find their own values challenged by the socio-political climate of an imagined more complex, wayward nation. The flood of journalistic and popular ethnographic explorations of the Nordic region in the UK is an expression, perhaps, of a search for a lost sense of identity, a nostalgic longing for an imagined past society more in tune with pre-Thatcherite welfarist values, by way of consuming, appropriating and exoticising proximate cultural identities such as the now much hyped Danish or Nordic utopias.

SARAH LUND'S JUMPER

The values associated with Nordicness and Nordic noir are distilled in the British infatuation with the Danish TV crime series *The Killing* and detective Sarah Lund's knitted Faroese jumper, and these values may explain why such an unfashionable Danish counter-culture icon from the 1970s has become associated in the United Kingdom with "Nordic Cool." Nordicness has become associated with at times seemingly contradictory terms such as local, modern, rational, minimalist, natural and sustainable, authentic, traditional and handmade judging from language used to describe everything from high-street fashion (H&M, Tiger), interior design (IKEA and Modernist design), food (NOMA and new Danish cuisine) and crime fiction, Nordic life styles (cycling, "hygge" and wellbeing) and welfare societies (the Nordic model). Lund's iconic jumper weaves such values together as it represents its wearer's authenticity: Sarah Lund's unwavering reliance on her own values, her individuality and refusal to conform to social forms and conventions even when they are likely to get her suspended. The jumper looks truly local, a protective shell guarding against the cold climate, and it spells Nordicness like nothing else: it is handmade, natural and simple and suggests a nostalgic longing for simpler times, an affront to the competitive society and the still ubiquitous sexist representation of women in the media. These are the values that are projected, at times in a nostalgic hue, onto Nordic noir independent of the actual narratives presented therein.

The pressure felt everywhere, but perhaps particularly in Britain, from what Eric Hobsbawm has called "a new era of decomposition, uncertainty and crisis" or what Zygmunt Bauman has labelled our "liquid modernity," the turbulent uprooting of certainties, geographies, individuals and social bonds, must necessarily produce new kinds of screen heroes and heroines.³² Sarah Lund is such a heroine, who at one and the same time is firmly placed in the midst of these radical social changes (the disease of distrust spreading from political institutions to the nuclear family in season 1, the violent society arising from engagements in wars overseas in season 2 and the social and human consequences of global capital in season 3), who is,

to some extent, the victim of such global processes (Lund's inability to find a home for herself), but she is also a detective who embodies a sense of hope through her manic, self-destructive dedication to the preservation of a perhaps bygone and certainly idealised socially responsible state.³³

ABSOLUTELY FABULOUS

A British investment in these "accessibly different" values and the current desire for watching foreigners speaking in foreign tongues expresses a longing for a domesticated Nordic authenticity and idealism that a segment of British consumers may feel have been lost sometime in the 1990s. This seems to be at the heart of Sarah Lund's (Sofie Gråbøl) guest appearance in a Christmas special of the 1990s cult comedy show *Absolutely Fabulous*, which aired on BBC in 2011. Edina Monsoon has fallen asleep after watching back-to-back episodes of the by then much talked about subtitled Danish TV drama ("it is something foreign"), which originally aired on BBC Four. Edina's last words as she falls asleep are: "clear, logical, Danish thinking." In her dream, she awakes to find Sarah Lund investigating her bedroom as if it was a crime scene. She gabbles to Lund in a made-up Danish language, and then the following exchange occurs in English: Sarah Lund: "Sorry, I don't know what you are saying." Eddy: "I am speaking Danish." Sarah Lund: "No, you are not."

As a (failed) connoisseur of the always fashionable, it is only natural that Edina should be obsessing about Sarah Lund, her incomprehensible language and surprisingly fashionable Faroese jumper. Obviously, the clear and logical "Danish" thinking embodied in Lund is opposite to Edina's character and the superficial, hedonistic consumer culture she represents. Nordic characteristics or stereotypes such as those invested in Sarah Lund are here presented as yet another tantalising, exotic fashion and consumer trend that Edina may fall victim to, "the joy of watching foreigners speaking foreign tongues," the false assumption that the foreign can be made "accessible" through binge watching Danish TV series ("I am speaking Danish. No, you're not"), but in the context of the series' critique of a self-indulgent British hedonistic consumer culture, Sarah Lund's "foreign body" remains a cipher for a lost sense of what could be

called “appropriate consumption” embodied in Lund’s cool rationality.

WHITE NOSTALGIA

It is possibly clearer from abroad the extent to which Nordic crime fiction has become a particularly desirable global consumer item in the twenty-first century. In the British and American media, in book stores and elsewhere in the public spaces, Nordic crime fiction is just one item on a lengthy list of middle-class desirables representing a certain way in which the Nordic is currently being consumed abroad: from the affordable high-street fashions of H&M and Tiger to the restaurant Noma’s famed foraged Nordic cuisine, functionalist 1950s style designer furniture, LEGO, Welfare Services and TV drama series: *Scandimania* and *Scandinavian cool*.

The British sociologist Ben Pitcher summarises in his book, *Consuming Race* (2014), how the Nordic is consumed in the UK with reference to imagined intrinsic Nordic ideals such as egalitarian social values, functionality, affordability or accessibility, sustainability and cool rationality, which form a Nordic brand based on a local cultural heritage, a Nordic soul connected to a specific landscape, and, according to Pitcher, “this corporate model of Nordic ethnicity is [...] precisely what has given Nordic style such a strong purchase in a contemporary British context.”³⁴ A large segment of British consumers, particularly the predominantly white middle-class *Guardian* readers and BBC Four viewers, have become serial consumers of Nordic crime fiction because, Pitcher suggests, it allows for an “ethnically appropriate form” of “consuming whiteness” in contrast to inappropriate or excessive cosmopolitan consumption (exactly the kind of consumption Edina Monsoon represents): “the Nordic model of whiteness is articulated to ideas about ecologically sustainable production, and to notions of consuming in a modest and appropriate manner,” Pitcher explains.

A good example of how this “appropriate consumer” trend has found its way into cultural production or more precisely cultural appropriation is the BBC Wallander series and in particular its set design.³⁵ The home of Wallander and the police station in Ystad are consciously styled in the fashion of 1950s Scandinavian modern design

giving them an air of functionalist welfare aesthetics, the mono-ethnic, coolly rational, socially engineered society, which is presumably disintegrating in the Sweden of Mankell’s 1990s and has become a desirable nostalgic fantasy with contemporary “white” British viewers. According to the production designer, she “wanted to symbolise the Swedish utopia of the 1950s and 1960s by choosing Scandinavian interior design and architecture from this period.”³⁶ Several scholars have also noted the retro design as a central aspect of the national and symbolic localisation of the British Wallander adaptation, its exotification or “banal nationalism.” Ingrid Stigsdotter remarks that “the ubiquity of classic wooden desks, lampshades and decorative furnishing [...] stand out as being at once a little too stylish and a little too old-fashioned to be quite real.”³⁷ In her view, the translation of Swedish culture in the British adaptation sees Sweden predominantly through a touristic lens. However, in Pitcher’s perspective, the particular nostalgic Nordicism encoded into the location and the set of the Wallander series, may also point to a present crisis of white identity in the multicultural receiving culture, where claiming white ethnic British roots has become suspect of racism, recalling historical imperialism and exhibiting banal nationalism. In this context, Nordic noir has come to function as a proxy for a more appropriate white cosmopolitan desire to imagine rooted identities in an age of globalisation steeped in complex identity politics. This nostalgic or romantic fantasy of Nordic whiteness, the allure of the firmly rooted, is, of course, not unproblematic, and is, I would argue, continuously critically examined in Nordic crime fiction itself, such as in Mankell’s *Faceless Killers* and in Høeg’s *Miss Smilla’s Feeling for Snow*.³⁸

The consumption of Nordic noir as a cultural appropriation of the “accessibly different,” as rooting ethnic identities in the UK by way of exotification and Nordicism, was satirised by the comedian, actor and social campaigner of Jamaican descent, Lenny Henry, in his *The One Lenny Henry Show*, which aired on BBC One in 2011 only days after Sarah Lund’s cameo on *Absolutely Fabulous*. Here, one of Henry’s flamboyant alter-egos is introduced to the set of an imaginary, though stereotypical, scene from a Swedish crime drama. A by now recognisable

Swedish “Polis” car, as seen in the British Wallander series, is parked outside a small wooden cabin in a snow-covered dark forest. The words “Somewhere in Sweden” appear on the screen, and in the next scene we find two Swedish-speaking detectives arguing about the assignment of one Lenny Henry to the investigation while a body resembling the Goth-look of Lisbeth Salander is lying on the floor. The joke being of course that Lenny Henry, impersonating one of his well-known stereotypical rambunctious black-British characters, is the very opposite of what the male detective in the scene describes as conforming to the nature of Swedish crime drama: “This is a quiet and moody Swedish drama.” Eventually, he bursts through the wall and ruins not only the mood but also, one could suggest, the very possibility of imagining “somewhere in Sweden” being relevant to a British here-and-now where racial differences are constantly under construction and destabilisation—a negotiation Lenny Henry has been involved in throughout his career.

Not only does the sketch count on the audience’s ability to recognise and decode the local Swedish colour—the cold weather, a gloomy landscape, a Swedish police car and stereotypical moody Swedish cops—but also the fact that they will recognise that there appears to be little room for diversity and ethnic others in this construction and celebration of subdued whiteness represented by Nordic noir and Nordientalism in a British “touristic lense.” In Lenny Henry’s take on British “scandimania,” its cultural appropriation is exposed as exotifying and maintaining banal nationalism; by inserting a local yet continuously marginalised “foreign” black-British body into the “whiteness” of a caricatured Nordic noir TV drama, Henry suggests, as this article has been arguing, that the domestication of foreign cultural forms such as Nordic crime fiction, the allure of the (imagined) firmly rooted whiteness of Nordic cultures, if we follow Greenblatt, runs the risk of entrapping not only proximate yet still foreign cultures in essentialist and nationalist misapprehensions but also runs the risk of appropriating some foreign forms uncritically and only for a select group of readers, viewers and consumers. In a globalised publishing and media market where crime fiction has become the dominant vessel for intercultural knowledge and experiences, there

is a clear risk in the market imperative to exploit cultural differences as firmly rooted in an alluring, idealised national or ethnic elsewhere rather than taking for granted that foreign literature and TV may offer experiences that destabilise the very notion of painless rootedness in a globalised world.

Notes

1. Andrew Nestingen and Paula Arvas, “Introduction: Contemporary Scandinavian Crime Fiction,” in *Scandinavian Crime Fiction*, eds. Andrew Nestingen and Paula Arvas (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), 1–20; Barry Forshaw, *Death in a Cold Climate: A Guide to Scandinavian Crime Fiction* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
2. Pia Majbritt Jensen, “Global Impact of Danish Drama Series: A Peripheral, Non-commercial Creative Counter-flow,” *Kosmorama* 263 (2016), www.kosmorama.org.
3. Eva Erdmann, “Nationality International: Detective Fiction in the Latte Twentieth Century,” in *Investigating Identities: Questions of Identity in Contemporary International Crime Fiction*, eds. Marieke Krajenbrink and Kate M. Quinn (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 11–26.
4. Franco Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature,” *New Left Review* 1 (2000): 54–68.
5. Alexandra Alter, “Fiction’s Global Crime Wave,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 1, July 2013. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703426004575338763878488670> (accessed September 28, 2016).
6. See report from Literature Across Frontiers; Alexandra Büchler and Giulia Trentacosti, *Publishing Translated Literature in the United Kingdom and Ireland 1990–2012 Statistical Report*, 2015, <http://www.lit-across-frontiers.org/> (accessed September 28, 2016).
7. As I will later argue, seen from an Anglo-American perspective the Nordic countries of Denmark, Faroe Islands, Iceland, Finland, Norway and Sweden still tend to blend together in an indistinguishable and homogeneous Nordic region and culture. Popular introductions to Nordic crime fiction such as Barry Forshaw’s *Nordic Noir: The Pocket Essential Guide to Scandinavian Crime Fiction, Film & TV* (2013), the BBC documentary *Nordic Noir: The Story of Scandinavian Crime Fiction* (2010) along with numerous newspaper articles and blogs have, of course, led to increased knowledge of the separate histories, social and political idiosyncrasies of the Nordic nations as reflected in their crime fiction. However, while inherent differences, including the different meanings of “Nordic” and “Scandinavian” (the latter referring to Denmark, Norway and Sweden), may seem clearer and more important within the Nordic nations, in the United Kingdom these terms

are often used indistinguishably and similarities between the nations and their crime writing appear more dominant. This Anglo-American perception has impacted the ways in which Nordic crime writing and TV are being marketed and advertised as “Nordic” or “Nordic noir” by both Nordic and UK agents and publishers. In popular culture, “Nordicness,” as also referred to in this article, covers a conglomeration of national, cultural and social traits imagined to characterize a shared regional identity. As Sweden is still the most dominant exporter of popular culture within the Nordic region followed by Norway and Denmark with Faroe Islands, Iceland and Finland less exposed, also in terms of translated fiction (a pattern that could be seen to repeat and confirm historical power structures between the Nordic countries), a perceived “Nordicness” is arguably dominated by Swedish and Scandinavian examples and traits. However, Icelandic crime fiction has enjoyed much attention in the UK with Arnaldur Indriðason and Yrsa Sigurðardóttir’s crime novels and the more recent TV series *Trapped* (2016; Baltasar Kormákur, *Ófærð* 2015), shown on BBC Four, which may suggest that in the market for popular cultural exports, at least, long held hierarchies between regional centers and peripheries do not necessarily apply as the most peripheral may be perceived to exhibit the most authentically “Nordic.” The present article mostly refers to examples of crime fiction from the “Scandinavian” countries but the central preoccupation with Nordicness refers to a much less well-defined and inclusive sense of regional traits as viewed from the outside.

8. According to Ib Bondebjerg and Eva Novdrup Redvall, this dynamic is also found in the recent development of TV drama in Denmark: “The production culture behind the Danish crime series indicates a meeting of national and international traditions, and draws on inspiration from international formats and production cultures for the creation of new, national content.” See Ib Bondebjerg and Eva Novrup Redvall, “Breaking Borders: The International Success of Danish Television Drama,” in *European Cinema and Television: Cultural Policy and Everyday Life*, eds. Ib Bondebjerg, Eva Novrup Redvall and Andrew Higson (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 214–38.
9. Lars Wendelius, *Rationalitet och kaos: Nedslag i svensk kriminalfiktio n efter 1965* (Hedemora: Gidlund, 1999), 46; Sara Krrholm, *Konsten at lägga pussel: Deckaren och besvärjandet av ondskan i folkhemmet* (Stockholm: Brutus Östlings Bokförlag, 2005); Frank Egholm Andersen, *Den danske krimi: Nedslag i den danske krimi gennem de sidste 50 år* (Frederiksberg: Her & Nu, 2010); Hans Skei, *Blodig alvor: Om Kriminallitteraturen* (Oslo: Pocketforlaget, 2008), 79.
10. See my forthcoming book *Scandinavian Crime Fiction* (London: Bloomsbury) for studies of these crime writers from the 1960s and 1970s.
11. Agnes Broomé, “Swedish Literature on the British Market 1998–2013: A Systemic Approach” (PhD diss., UCL, 2014).
12. Stephen Greenblatt, *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 251.
13. *Ibid.*, 252.
14. Slavoj Žižek, “Parallax,” *London Review of Books* 25/22, November 20, 2003, 24.
15. See Jensen, “Global Impact of Danish Drama Series,” 263.
16. Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2008), 160.
17. Nordientalism is a term coined by Hans Hauge in his book *Post-Danmark: Politik og æstetik hinsides det nationale* (Copenhagen: Lindhardt og Ringhof, 2003).
18. Zygmunt Bauman, “From Pilgrim to Tourist—Or a Short History of Identity,” in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, eds. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (London: Sage, 1996), 18–36. A tourism perspective on Scandinavian crime fiction has become a sub-field of research in its own right; see, for instance, Anne Marit Waade, *Wallanderland: Medieturisme og skandinavisk tv-krimi* (Aalborg: Aalborg Universitetsforlag, 2013); and Stijn Reijnders, “Watching the Detectives: Inside the Guilty Landscapes of Inspector Morse, Baantjer and Wallander,” *European Journal of Communication* 24, no. 2 (2009): 165–81. See also Iris Rittenhofer on crime fiction and tourism: “Writers such as Swedish Henning Mankell, Norwegian Anne Holt or Danish Jussi Adler-Olsen best-sell under the label ‘Scandinavian crime fiction’ in many countries both within and outside of Europe. They serve as appetizers for interested and affluent readers to engage in city tourism” (“Rethink/Gentæk: Negotiating Danishness across borders,” in *Exporting Culture: Which role for Europe in a Global World?* eds. Raphaela Henze and Garnot Wolfram (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2014), 137–48). Notable tours organised by local tourism organisations include The Millennium Tour of Stieg Larsson’s Stockholm (<http://www.visitsweden.com/sweden/regions--cities/stockholm/culture-in-stockholm/the-millennium-tour/>), Nordic Noir Tours to locations used in *The Killing* and *The Bridge* (<http://nordicnoirtours.com/tours/killing-bridge/>) and Ystad municipality’s In the Footsteps of Wallander digital tourist guide to the town and surroundings of Ystad in Southern Sweden (<http://www.wallander.ystad.se/en>).
19. Henning Mankell, *The Fifth Woman* (London: Vintage, 2009), 352.
20. Wallander’s concerns chime with Mark Seltzer’s exploration of what he diagnoses as a contemporary “wound culture: the public fascination with torn and open bodies and torn and open persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound.”

- Mark Seltzer, *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture* (New York: Routledge), 1.
21. Anthony King, "Introduction: Spaces of Culture, Spaces of Knowledge," in *Culture, Globalization and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, ed. Anthony King (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 1–18.
 22. Maribel Blasco, "Stranger to Us Than Birds in Our Garden? Reflections on Hermeneutics, Intercultural Understanding and the Management of Difference," in *Intercultural Alternatives: Critical Perspectives on Intercultural Encounters in Theory and Practice*, eds. Maribel Blasco and Jan Gustafsson (Copenhagen: Copenhagen Business School Press, 2004), 19–48.
 23. Claire Squires, *Marketing Literature: The Making of Contemporary Writing in Britain* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2009), 72.
 24. Karl Berglund, "Detectives in the Literary Market: Statistical Perspectives on the Boom in Swedish Crime Fiction," in *Nordic Publishing and Book History*, eds. Elettra Carbone and Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen, special issue of *Scandinavica* 51 (2012) 38–57.
 25. Adrian A. Gill, "Nordic Exposure," *Vanity Fair*, (July 2012), <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2012/08/scandinavian-culture-aa-gill> (accessed September 28, 2016).
 26. Judith Woods, "Why do we love Scandinavian Culture?," *The Telegraph*, April, 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/lifestyle/9221267/Why-do-we-love-Scandinavian-culture.html> (accessed September 28, 2016).
 27. Lauren Collins, "Danish Postmodern: Why Are So Many People Fans of Scandinavian TV?," *The New Yorker*, January, 2013, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/01/07/danish-postmodern> (accessed September 28, 2016).
 28. Emma Lundin, "The Killing 2: What's Been Lost in Translation?," *The Guardian*, TV and radio blog, December 1, 2011, <https://s.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2011/dec/01/the-killing-2-translation> (accessed September 28, 2016).
 29. "Inspector Norse: Why Are Nordic Detective Novels So Successful?" *The Economist*, March 11, 2010, <http://www.economist.com/node/15660846> (accessed September 28, 2016).
 30. See Alison Flood, "Hygge—The Danish Art of Living Cosily—On Its Way to UK Bookshops," *The Guardian*, June 11, 2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jun/11/hygge-the-danish-art-of-living-cosily-on-its-way-to-uk-bookshops> (accessed September 28, 2016). The article documents the British obsession with the perceived untranslatable Danish term "hygge" (cosiness), which is the subject of several forthcoming books such as Meik Wiking's *The Little Book of Hygge: The Danish Way to Live Well* (London: Penguin, 2016); Jonny Jackson and Elias Larsen, *The Art of Hygge: How to Bring Danish Cosiness Into Your Life* (Chichester: Summersdale, 2016).
 31. See for instance articles in *National Geographic*, "The Sweet Danish Life. Copenhagen: Cool, Creative, Carefree" (2006), in *The Economist*, "The Nordic Countries: The Next Supermodel" (2013) and in *The Guardian*, "Copenhagen really is wonderful, for so many reasons" (2012).
 32. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes 1914–1991* (London: Abacus, 1995), 6; and Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012).
 33. See Bruce Robbins, "The Detective Is Suspended: Nordic Noir and the Welfare State," *Post-45 Contemporaries*, (2015), <http://post45.research.yale.edu/2015/05/the-detective-is-suspended-nordic-noir-and-the-welfare-state/> (accessed September 28, 2016).
 34. David Pitcher, *Consuming Race* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), Kindle book.
 35. The first three-episode series, produced by Yellow Bird and Left Bank Pictures with Kenneth Branagh as Kurt Wallander, was broadcast on BBC One from November to December 2008. The first novel to be adapted was originally Mankell's fifth Wallander novel *Sidetracked*, published in 1995 and translated into English by Steven Murray in 1999. So far, four series with a total of 12 episodes (the latest in 2016) have been broadcast on BBC One, including adaptations of nine of Mankell's original novels, with a steady audience in the UK of between 5 and 7 million viewers—the second Swedish series starring Krister Henriksson, which aired on BBC Four between 2008 and 2010 had in comparison a share of consistently less than 800,000 viewers including reruns.
 36. See Anne Marit Waade, "Crime Scenes: Conceptualizing Ystad as Location in the Swedish and the British Wallander TV Crime Series," *Northern Lights* 9 (2011): 9–25.
 37. Ingrid Stigsdotter, "Crime Scene Skåne: Guilty Landscapes and Cracks in the Functionalist Façade in *Sidetracked*, *Firewall* and *One Step Behind*," in *Regional Aesthetics: Locating Swedish Media*, eds. Erik Hedling, Olof Hedling and Mats Jönsson (Stockholm: Mediehistoriskt Arkiv, 2010), 243–62.
 38. See the chapters on Henning Mankell and Peter Høeg in my forthcoming book *Scandinavian Crime Fiction* (London: Bloomsbury).