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# European Television Crime Drama and Beyond

palgrave
macmillan

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Palgrave European Film and Media Studies
ISBN 978-3-319-96886-5 ISBN 978-3-319-96887-2 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-96887-2

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018954357



Cover illustration: PPAMPicture / Getty images
Cover design: Akihiro Nakayama

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

# Framing Nordic Noir

## From Film Noir to High-End Television Drama

*Audun Engelstad*

A few years after the term film noir, along with derivatives such as neo noir and indie noir, more or less vanished from the trade press and academic publishing—where it flourished during the 1990s and early 2000s—noir once again resurfaced as a qualifying term; this time as Nordic noir. The term Nordic noir and the attention it is given creates a peculiar feeling that history is repeating itself. Attempts to capture the essence of Nordic noir appear to follow the same path that efforts to define film noir once took. Some 60 years after film noir was given its first full-length scholarly treatment, in Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton's seminal *Panorama du film noir américain, 1941–1953*, published in France in 1955, Nordic noir seems equally slippery and as enigmatic as film noir once was. Just when the scholarship seemed to have covered every angle of film noir, including everything that extends from film noir, Nordic noir comes along as if nothing has happened and raises the same kind of questions its predecessor prompted.

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K. Toft Hansen et al. (eds.), *European Television Crime Drama and Beyond*, Palgrave European Film and Media Studies,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-96887-2_2

The scholarly writing on film noir is vast, and more than a single person can track. One of the challenging—and indeed captivating—things about noir (aside from the films, naturally) is that it avoids any clear-cut definitions and explanations. Noir has been studied from multiple angles and contexts—aesthetic, historic, societal, psychoanalytic are among the most prominent. The flexibility of the term has opened up some very rich discussions of theoretical breadth and analytical depth. Yet even after decades of attention to noir, one is left with the (somewhat frustrating) notion that it is impossible to *really get* what noir is, once and for all. What we are left to do is to suggest certain understandings of the term, or rather, the concept. Given that noir has gone through so many phases, and that as a discursive construct the term has been put to work in so many ways, the idea that there is such a thing as a Nordic noir is by no means strange—even though in their 1955 study, Borde and Chaumeton ruled out the possibility.

> On the Scandinavian front, the cinema is, finally, traditionally split between mysticism, the theme of prostitution, old-style melodrama, implicit psychoanalysis, and visual research: as of now, it's hard to see how the inspiration that concerns us [i.e., film noir] could have installed itself there. (Borde and Chaumeton 2002, 125)

What kind of noir do we refer to when we talk about Nordic noir? At least three different positions can be identified.

1. Is Nordic noir derived from film noir—that is, is it a new breed of noir? After the classic period of film noir, neo noir and indie noir emerged. Now, noir has moved into its next phase, as Nordic noir. This position attempts to understand Nordic noir within the framework of film noir and to draw on the scholarship within this field.
2. Or, should Nordic noir be seen as a synonym for Scandinavian crime fiction, formerly known as Scandi crime? At least a decade before Nordic noir was invented as a term, Scandi crime was a hot item in Northern Europe and the US, thanks to the work of Henning Mankell (in particular), Liza Marklund, Karin Fossum, Anne Holt, and Peter Høeg. Then, with the enormous success of Stieg Larsson and Jo Nesbø, Scandi crime became a phenomenon of global proportions. Others on the list of internationally bestselling Scandi crime authors include Jussi Adler-Olsen, Håkan Nesser, Leif

G.W. Persson, Camilla Läckberg, Arnaldur Indriðason, Unni Lindell, and Gunnar Staalesen, to name just a few. Is Nordic noir merely a rebranding of an existing term, adopted by critics, readers, and sales agents because it sounds more interesting and more sophisticated than Scandi crime?

3. Finally, does Nordic noir in fact have little to do with crime stories, and little (if any) connection to what we otherwise know as noir? This position pushes the boundaries of the term beyond traditional generic distinctions and focuses on what can be identified as distinctively Nordic, such as atmosphere, landscape, mindset, political system, or the seasonal changes of light. A brief internet search, for example, shows Nordic noir has been used to describe the work of critically acclaimed authors such as Per Petterson and Karl Ove Knausgård—authors that might be in line for a Nobel Prize, yet noir scholarship will fall short in shedding light on their work

This chapter will pursue the first position and examine Nordic noir within the context of film noir scholarship. While the second position has been dealt with in volumes by Nestingen and Arvas (2011), Bergman (2014), and Forshaw (2013), and the third position has been adopted by Jensen and Waade (2013) and Agger (2011), surprisingly little attention has been directed to Nordic noir as a descendent of film noir (although touched upon by Solum 2016, and by Hill and Turnbull 2017). A re-examination of film noir might shed light on what is meant by the term Nordic noir—and so help answer whether this new noir is closely connected to film noir, a variant of that noir, or a completely different noir all together. Put another way, is it merely a coincidence that Scandinavian crime fiction, film, and TV drama are often classified as Nordic noir, or does the term have roots in film noir itself?

## The Inception of Film Noir and Nordic Noir

Film noir—that is, the American studio films from the mid-1940s to the 1950s that today are regarded as film noir—was first identified as such in France, in 1946. After World War II had ended, when European film production grappled with financial and artistic crises, American films were released in abundance. Upon seeing several crime films, more or less en masse, French critics such as Nino Frank (enthusiastically) and Jean-Pierre Chartier (rather disapprovingly) concluded they were witnessing a new

kind of crime drama, termed film noir (in Silver and Ursini 2002). While earlier crime films were largely whodunits with straightforward narratives, the new films noirs depicted sinister characters with ambiguous morals and had complex narrative patterns. It was often difficult to untangle the story's enigma of who did what to whom, and why and when. The films *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *Murder, My Sweet* (1944) were in particular discussed, as well as *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), and perhaps more oddly, *Laura* (1944) and *The Lost Weekend* (1945) were based on novels by hard-boiled American crime writers such as Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, and Dashiell Hammett, known to a wide French readership in translation through series published as *serie noire*, or were otherwise closely linked to this literature in style and tone. Film noir has come to be seen as closely related to the hard-boiled writing that emerged during the 1930s and 1940s, a connection Frank mentioned in his review article.

The emergence of the term Nordic noir also parallels the history of film noir. The lineage from the literature of Scandi crime to Nordic noir film and television drama is underscored by the fact that novels by a large number of popular Nordic crime writers have been adapted as either films or television dramas. Since its emergence, Nordic noir has covered literature, television drama, and film. The term was first put to use by foreign critics. It seems that few—if any—Nordic authors, film-makers, or TV drama creators make explicit reference to the term in their own work. Nordic noir, as was the case in many respects with film noir, is by and large a critic's concept.

Precisely when the shift from Scandi crime to Nordic noir took place is difficult to pinpoint, but apparently it happened between 2009 and 2011. In 2009, the three novels in Stieg Larsson's Millennium trilogy were released as theatrical movies, followed by a reedited (with added material) six-part television series in 2010 based on the adapted films. In 2011, the film adaptation of Jo Nesbø's *Hodejegerne/ Headhunters* was one of the most successful European films both at the box office and among critics. And in 2011, the Danish crime series *Forbrydelsen/ The Killing* (2007–2012) was aired by the BBC, accompanied by a dedicated *The Killing* blog in *The Guardian*. Finally, 2011 was also the year of the Swedish-Danish co-production *Bron/ The Bridge* (2011–2018). Indicative of the success of these titles are the multiple remakes of *The Killing*, *The Bridge*, and David Fincher's adaptation of Larson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011), as well as BAFTA nominations for *Headhunters*.

Nordic noir emerged as a term, it seems, more or less in conjunction with the attention drawn to its screen versions.

Although the cinematic versions of Nordic noir date back to the breakthrough of Scandi crime, with Erik Skjoldbjaerg's *Insomnia* from 1997, it is within television drama series that the phenomenon has flourished. Today, the TV series *The Killing* (DR, three seasons, 2007–2012), *The Bridge* (SVT/DR, four seasons, 2011–2018), and *Mammon* (NRK, two seasons, 2014–) are regarded as quintessential Nordic noirs. (As is, by the way, the political drama series *Borgen*, [DR, 2010–2013].) To this list we might add the Danish series *Norskov* (TV2, 2015–2017), the Norwegian *Øyevitne/ Witness* (NRK, 2014), the Icelandic *Ófærð/ Trapped* (RÚV, 2015), and the Swedish *Jordskott* (SVT, 2015–), among others. None of these are adaptations of novels, but rather have been developed from original screenplays and produced by the national public broadcasters in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Iceland. Nonetheless, each series has much in common with qualities that characterise Scandinavian crime fiction. The main characters often struggle to keep their personal lives together, and the crimes they are involved in (as investigators or victims) throw a grim light on flaws in society that extend beyond the crime itself. In a Scandinavian setting, what is novel about these series is the combination of a crime drama coupled with the markers of quality TV drama. By the late 2000s and early 2010s, Nordic television drama, with the respective public broadcasters taking the front seat, experienced a substantial reorientation (in terms of budgets, artistic ambitions, and scheduled screen time) towards high-end TV series. At the forefront of this new strategy was the production of crime dramas.

In summary, just like film noir, the term Nordic noir was identified—and coined—by foreign critics and coincides with the international release of a number of critically acclaimed TV series and films (evidently in 2010 in the US and the UK [Solum 2016]). Nordic noir on screen is intimately

**Table 1** Comparison of film noir and Nordic noir

| *Film noir* | *Nordic noir* |
|---|---|
| Introduced in France, 1946 | Introduced in the US and UK, 2010 |
| Strong literary heritage (hard-boiled crime fiction) | Strong literary heritage (Scandi crime) |
| A new kind of crime film | A new kind of TV drama |
| Foremost a critic's concept (at first) | Foremost a critic's concept (at first) |

related to a literary strand of noir. And Nordic noir, at least within television drama, represents a new breed of crime stories. As Table 1 indicates the emergence of Nordic noir certainly gives the impression we are revisiting historical ground.

## The Genre Issue

Film noir has been described as a genre, a cycle, a movement, a certain style, a distinct mood, a mode of American film practice, and an indigenous American film form—to name just the most common characterisations. So, which one of these categories fits Nordic noir? Is it a genre? Perhaps, depending on which titles are included, and if genre is treated as a discursive construct. Is it a cycle? Right now, it is treated that way, if one looks at the numerous articles written on Nordic noir in publications like *The Guardian*, *The New Yorker*, and so forth. A recent newspaper article even claimed Nordic noir as dead (Lawson 2017). Is it a movement? Not likely. Dogma 95 was a movement, as were New American cinema and nouvelle vague, with their manifestos of what cinema was supposed to do and be. The closest we get to a manifesto for Nordic noir is DR's overt commitment to so-called 'double storytelling' (Redvall 2013). The gist of this commitment is, by the way, embedded in the charters of all the Nordic PSB channels. Does it have a certain style? To some extent, yes. The colour saturation tends to be on the darker side, with a preference for blues, browns, and greys. The exterior shots often depict a grey and overcast setting, or take place in the late evening, while interiors are dimly lit (Jensen and Waade 2013). Does it evoke a distinct mood? A definite yes on that. There is a sense of sadness and hopelessness that go along with the slowly evolving tragedy of the plot (Waade 2017). The melancholic mood is further underscored by the musical themes that accompany the series (Creeber 2015). Does it represent a mode of Nordic practice of production? One could very well say so, given that the Nordic public broadcasting model is behind most of the Nordic noir series (Eichner and Mikos 2016). Is it an indigenous Nordic form? It is at least often described that way. Distinctly Nordic phenomena such as the introverted temperament of the population, a social welfare system with apparent cracks, and the seasonal changes of light are regarded as main ingredients of Nordic noir (Agger 2011).

As with film noir, Nordic noir can, therefore, be understood in a number of ways. As for now, genre and genre development will form the point of interest. Today, noir is treated as a well-established genre, by critics, by

the industry, and by audiences. Yet film noir was allegedly never conceived as a genre at its time of origin. This is an oft-repeated truism, advocated by scholars such as R. Barton Palmer (1994). Accordingly, film noir did not exist as a generic category in the same way that western, comedy, or musical did. Directors did not set out to make a film noir, and producers did not commission a film noir; they were unaware of film noir as a concept. Likewise, the films were not advertised as film noir, and critics did not treat them as film noir. Finally, audiences did not seek out a film noir in the same way they chose to watch a western or a comedy or a musical. Film noir as a category and concept in the production of the films, in their distribution and marketing, and in their reception did not exist, the argument goes.

However, there are, in fact, ample reasons to claim that film noir was indeed understood as a genre in the US at the end of the 1940s, although the films were—naturally—called something else, like tough movies or crime melodramas (Engelstad 2010). In many respects, in the early years, film noir was treated as a film cycle. A film cycle can be understood as a series of films, produced within a limited time span, that shares certain distinct traits related to character, theme, and setting. A cycle may cut across genres (a character type or a theme is treated within several genre stories), or the cycle may sustain and develop into a genre in its own right. When a cycle becomes a genre, certain elements are usually identified as belonging to its core, while other elements are regarded as more flexible and interchangeable.

Genres, as Rick Altman (1999) has argued convincingly, are always constructed in retrospect. The early films of a genre might very well be associated with films that, at a later point, seem to belong to a completely different generic category. Genres are established when a new film appears to repeat a set of traits and patterns from preceding films, and this is recognised. The previous films are then folded into the new genre. Once a genre is recognised, new films can be added to its corpus by repeating the genre's basic traits. When a genre is established, filmmakers, audience, and critics will share approximately the same understanding of what constitutes the genre. In the words of Rick Altman, a genre can be seen as a label and a contract, guaranteeing that the content is as can be expected.

Whether or not film noir can be seen as a genre, growing out of a cycle at the time of its origin, is a question of debate. There are fair reasons to claim that tough movies (the equivalent contemporary term for film noir) were treated as a genre, while at the same time acknowledging that as a

term film noir has been filled with more significance than can be accounted for at the time of origin (Naremore 2008, 5–6). However, with the advent of neo noir, and later indie noir, the issue of genre becomes unquestionable. As Steve Neale (2000) has argued extensively, neo noir is perceived as a genre in a way film noir never was. At the heart of Neale's argument is the observation that film noir re-emerged as a critical concept that gained attention and popularity outside a specialised academic discourse, and that the neo noir films consciously modelled themselves on a set of traits distilled from the treatment film noir was given. More than anything else, neo noir films correspond to the idea of film noir more than they relate to certain films.

The noir genre is constituted by a set of recognisable traits, some of which relate to narrative patterns, character attributes, mood and/or style. Not all of the traits need to be present in order to be a noir. At some point nearly every neo noir featured a sultry damsel in distress with a deceitful agenda. But a femme fatale, although common in many a noir film, is not an absolute given for the genre. To provide a complete list of elements that make a noir, either individually or occurring in particular combinations, is quite futile. It is obvious, though, that the neo noir and indie noir films are consciously modelled on classic film noir. In some cases, the story is even set in the 1930s or 1940s and reproduces with great care the iconicity of classic noir. More important than replicating a specific period, however, is the combination of characters (often cynical and desolate), theme (moral ambiguity and reckless fatalism), and narrative tension (a crime scheme gone awry). The creators of the neo noir films of the 1970s and 1980s and the indie noir films of the 1990s and 2000s knew exactly how noir was identified, and adopted those features in a recognisable way.

As for Nordic noir, the deliberate remodelling of an established genre is less obvious. Take the term itself—Nordic noir—where noir features as a label. Unlike examples of, say, western noir (or noir western), where 'western' points to the designated genre and 'noir' is used as an attributive qualifier, in Nordic noir, 'noir' is the object modified by the qualities inherent in the concept 'Nordic'—the 'noir' of Nordic noir refers to the generic elements associated with the term. This would indicate that Nordic noir is the new offshoot in the trajectory following from classic film noir to neo noir and indie noir. In this context, Nordic noir would be seen as appropriating and remodelling a set of noir elements, resulting in a new, yet familiar, version of the genre. However, it is not obvious that this, in fact, is the case. Rather, the proposed trajectory represents a fallacy within

genre transformation. A brief excursion will hopefully help to illustrate the argument.

As Andrew Spicer's edited collection on European film noir demonstrates, there is a tradition—or rather, various nationally confined traditions—of film noir within European cinemas (2007). The Nordic countries are not covered in his volume, but have been elsewhere (Nestingen 2014; Engelstad 2011). Within Scandinavian cinema, we find from the mid-1980s onward films that consciously demonstrate their use of a noir style and mood—sultry femmes fatales, grim investigators in trench coats, wise-cracking characters, murdered bodies in rundown warehouses, wet pavements lit by neon lighting, flashbacks accompanied with fatalistic voice overs—the whole shebang. These films emerged more or less at the same time as film noir and neo noir gained wide critical attention not just within academia, but in the trade press as well. In other words, Scandinavian filmmakers jumped on the bandwagon of an ongoing trend. A more recent example within television drama is the Danish miniseries *Edderkoppen/The Spider* (DR, 2000). The story is set in post-war Copenhagen and centres on an investigative reporter about to uncover a vast criminal conspiracy involving politicians, highly successful businessmen and war profiteers that might also incriminate his shady brother. Add to the list that the reporter is in love with the beautiful daughter of a business tycoon who is probably the criminal mastermind, the enormous display of fedora hats, suspenders, and chic dresses, large camera light bulbs that seem to go off at every possible occasion, and a recognisable jazz score. *The Spider* is clearly an homage to American film noir—or perhaps more aptly described as a smorgasbord of every conceivable noir cliché. For some reason, *The Spider* is never brought up when Nordic noir is discussed.

The point of this is that what we commonly today refer to as Nordic noir is nothing like *The Spider* or the neo noir films of the 1980s. There is little to suggest that the creators of *The Killing* or *The Bridge* deliberately worked with the tropes of noir in order to evoke the genre the way *The Spider* did. When *The Killing* was produced and screened, the noir label, or distinctive qualities associated with it, was not front-and-centre in the public discourse (official webpage at DR, interviews with creatives, reviews). The same goes for the first season of *The Bridge*.

Thus, the 'noir' of Nordic noir does not point to a reconfiguration of an established genre, the way Neale describes the emergence of neo noir—which goes to demonstrate some of the pitfalls of genre theory, especially when genres moves across territories. In this sense, we could imagine any

other generic term given, such as Scandi crime (which was already put to use), or Northern police drama, or social crime drama, or something else. Yet, noir is still a relevant term; we just need to look elsewhere to explain the concept.

Over the decades of film noir scholarship, 'noir' has changed from being used as an adjective (designating certain qualities inherent in a group of films) to become a noun (identifying a certain kind of films, a genre). Just as with melodrama (another slippery genre), noir has also been used as a metaphor, or in the words of James Naremore, a 'discursive construct' (2008, 6). Noir in this context is used to discuss a certain *Weltanschauung*, a philosophical mindset, or a social/ political experience. It is virtually impossible to draw a clear-cut line between these three versions of the term (adjective, noun, metaphor), and Nordic noir has, sometimes interchangeably, referred to all three. Nordic noir as an adjective refers to the origin of the production and the setting of the story, in the same way that we have British noir, Italian noir or Asian noir. As a metaphor, Nordic noir relates to narratives that bring forward a distinctly Nordic sense of life in the twenty-first century, at the same time rooted in a historical mindset, such as the push and pull between social belonging and social disintegration, leading to a strong sense of melancholy and alienation. As a noun, Nordic noir is a genre on its own terms, yet a genre that inherits the qualities related to the adjective and the metaphor.

Rick Altman (1995) has famously argued that genres consist of two aspects, semantic elements and syntactic organisation. The former corresponds to identifying surface traits (setting and obligatory elements), while the latter is related to the intrinsic meanings of the narrative entities (what the genre communicates). It is tempting to maintain that the adjective version of Nordic noir relates to the semantic approach, with its emphasis on elements such as seasonal weather and non-communicative characters, and that Nordic noir perceived as metaphor is reminiscent of the syntactic approach, with its accentuation of the burdens of social disintegration. Yet, in order to regard Nordic noir as a genre, we need to identify its principal narrative features—what we can expect to encounter when we watch a Nordic noir. However, as pointed out above, these features are not identical (although some may be shared) as those held by neo noir and indie noir. So, what then are the noir features of Nordic noir?

## Noir Realism

The (nearly) impossible task of capturing the essence of film noir was first undertaken in Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton's *A Panorama of American Film Noir*. It is to this date one of the most enlightening books on the subject, with its broad scope dealing with film aesthetics, social history, philosophical ideas, and psychoanalysis. And although not a genre study per se, the book nevertheless treated film noir as a genre in its attempt to identify its governing traits. In many respects, Borde and Chaumeton treat film noir as demonstrating a modernist sensibility, where a modernist aesthetics (such as surrealism, ambiguity of characters, incoherent plot) clashes with Hollywood's crime formula in its depiction of the underbelly of modernity (crime, alienation, moral corruption). Running through their analysis is a keen attention to how realism operates in tandem with a sense of strangeness (thus something else than documentary realism). Strangeness here holds much of the same meaning as Freud's notion of the uncanny, where the familiar carries a threatening doubleness, as events and characters suddenly can reverse in the course of action. Realism, on the other hand, in part has to do with the films' ringing true to life (in a way most Hollywood films do not, according to Borde and Chaumetion), as well as with an interest in social and political deterioration and an affinity for depicting brutal violence.

In 1979, Borde and Chaumeton added a 'Postface' chapter to the new edition of *Panorama*. Here they discuss the re-emergence of noir and its changes (it should be noted, this was before neo noir had been established as a critical term). Gone are the abrupt changes of the plot and the overly vamped women (which, by the way, later resurfaced, in pastiche versions, in neo noir and indie noir), both of which helped fashion the dream-like qualities of the early noir films, but later turned into stale mannerism. The investment in realism and a sense of disorientation is still present in the revived noir. Yet in this new phase, everything has hardened. Instead of the freewheeling detective who could seamlessly move across social milieus, providing the audience with a kind of moral touchstone, we get the fatigued cop tired of fighting crime in a fractured society where a corrupt justice system is yet another obstacle. As Borde and Chaumeton conclude, 'the noir series has, over the years, linked up with the anguish of a society that no longer knows where it's headed' (2002, 160). Borde and Chaumeton do not mention Stuart Rosenberg's adaptation of Sjöwall and Wahlöo's *The Laughing Policeman* (1973), but the film certainly fits the description.

Borde and Chaumeton's treatment of film noir and its development resonate with the features of much of Nordic noir. Here too is a deep investment in realism, in its (often meticulous) depiction of social institutions (school, politics, media, and so forth), of family life (two-career marriage, divorce, attention-craving partners and kids), and of the underprivileged as well as the affluent class. In this environment, we often find the cop or investigative reporter—tired, worn-out, but still hard-working—struggling to balance personal life and career ambitions. And not least, we see how crime burdens those affected by it, how it tears families apart and destroys social relations, as well as affecting the investigators on a personal level. In addition, there is a grotesque cruelty to the crimes performed—bodies are mutilated, and the victims are often underage. These murders testify to killers who are desperate, deeply disturbed, filled with strong rage, or extremely cold-blooded. As many articles have noted, there is a disturbing contrast between the beautiful, peaceful, and open-minded Nordic societies and the crimes that take place. In television drama series, the plots often lead to temporarily dead ends or sudden changes of course, revealing the ambiguousness of characters and events, and giving way to what Borde and Chaumeton termed 'an ambiguity to the suspense' (2002, 142).

What distinguishes Nordic noir from its classic forerunner is its treatment of society and socio-political system. Classic film noir picked up cues from the hard-boiled stories of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler and their depiction of the experience of the mean streets of urban modernity, executed in a realist form that also recuperates modernist themes and techniques (Thompson 1993, 134). In a sense, the hard-boiled writings of the late 1920s through the 1940s were a continuation of the myth of the western. The West was conquered; it was now time to build a society based on recognisable and agreed-upon social and political institutions. In the world of classic film noir, the underbelly of society is revealed. Gangsters operate as businessmen and rule whole cities with their influence, politicians and law-makers are either corrupt or stripped of power, and every man stands alone. In short, there is something rotten in the state of California.

This is not the case in the Nordic countries, which are governed by the idea of a social contract in which everyone participates in order to enhance collective prosperity, where there is a tradition of solidarity for the sake of the next of kin, and strong support for governing institutions. This is the foundation on which the Nordic welfare system is built. Society is not

rotten in the world of Nordic noir. However, noir narratives nonetheless throw light on the ruptures in Nordic society, highlighting where the system is at risk of failing. The success of the welfare system has led to complacency, and the risk of losing sight of the founding values society rests upon is real. Big corporations trample over small enterprises, politicians cater to their own interests or give favours to friends, and the police hold the lower class and immigrants in low esteem. From this stems distrust, a sense that the little person is being pushed aside and the wealthy's belief that they own the world.

This is not to say that Nordic noir lacks psychopathic killers, or accidental murders committed in blind fury, or spectacular heists, or crimes that are meant to conceal other criminal matters. The crimes in Nordic noir are not necessarily a direct response to a weakness within the welfare state. But the shock that results from these crimes demonstrates the anomalies of these affairs. And the depiction of the pain and burdens the victims and the communities are left with in the aftermath of crime testify to a social commitment typical of Nordic noir and Scandi crime in general. The protagonists of 1970s noir are fatigued by a malfunctioning justice system and a saturation of criminal action, somehow confirming that criminality is an operating norm of society (Leitch 2002). The characters in Nordic noir, on the other hand, are deeply disturbed by the crimes that take place and the consequences that follow from them. Criminality is not the norm; instead, every crime represents a tragic breach in society at large, and something the community as a whole must reconcile.

## Noir in the Shape of Serialised TV Drama

The second feature that distinguishes Nordic noir from its classic predecessor is that it has moved into the realm of high-end television drama. This observation, about two different audio-visual media platforms, might sound banal. However, one needs to take into consideration the significant differences narrative storytelling entails within the two. A narrative form, like a genre story, does not cross over from one media platform to another without altering (moderately or radically) the structuring principles it rests upon (Ryan 2014). Most pointedly, the move from film to high-end drama affects how the enigma of the plot is handled, as well as the notion of character development, and how the setting—or more precisely, the milieu—adds extra tension to the challenges and dilemmas the characters face.

Telling a story in a serialised, episodic form stretched out over several consecutive weeks calls for a different kind of story structure than does the two hours of a feature film. In fact, telling a crime story in a serialised form is quite demanding in terms of maintaining the audience's interest in the mystery throughout the span of episodes. Film narrative works quite differently in this respect.

Serial television drama has developed a complexity in its narrative form that Robin Nelson (1997) has called flexi-narrative. Flexi-narrative refers to an expansion of the narrative universe by interweaving several plotlines that work to complicate, mirror, distract, and motivate each other. One of the major challenges of telling a crime story stretched out over several episodes is maintaining interest in the mystery. Most conventional crime stories work according to established principle: the crime committed in the opening of the story will be solved at the story's end. The implication of such a structure is that the opening evokes a desire for the ending, an urge to know the outcome. Thus, the audience will be perpetually engaged in making narrative forecasts, interpreting everything that takes place in the course of events as an anticipation of the ending. The challenge a serialised crime story faces is to make the audience care about the investigation for more than one episode. Not only is the story stretched out over several hours of screen time, but the progress of the plot is broken off at the end of each episode and not picked up again until a week later. As a consequence, the initial crime will gradually lose its grip on the audience's attention.

Noir in high-end television drama deals with this challenge in different ways. One strategy is to let the initiating criminal event lead to something bigger—a string of killings, abductions, heists, and violent threats (think of *The Bridge*). Another strategy is to let the investigation in the course of action circle in a number of suspects who are subsequently proven to be false leads, thus forcing the investigation back to point zero (as is the case of *The Killing*). In this way, the plot twists and turns through each episode, often quite suddenly and unpredictably, and the audience is constantly anticipating some kind of dangerous and catastrophic event. For the viewer, it might be challenging to reconstruct the line of events, at least in any causal manner (how did this lead to that, and why did s/he do that?), thus giving way to a sense of an incoherent/ dream-like plot reminiscent of the strangeness that characterised classic film noir.

The twists and turns of the plot will often lead to ambiguity about the characters who, it turns out, all carry deep secrets and have shifting motives

and double agendas. More importantly, the narrative scope of serialised high-end drama allows the characters to move to the centre of interest, sometimes at the expense of the events. The paradigm of classical film narration is to regard action as the armature of the story (Bordwell 1985, 13). In short, action lays the groundwork for more action in a causal chain of events. This effect is less prominent in high-end drama. Here, characters respond just as much to the pressures brought upon them from their social environment as they do to external events. With a reference to Raymond Williams and his work on Henrik Ibsen, Robin Nelson (1997) has convincingly described the principles of flexi-narrative as a constant shift between a private arena and a public sphere, where dynamics of one of these spaces, and events that take place within each, affects the other. Sarah Lund is under pressure from her boss, but she also has obligations towards her son and partner; Theis Birk Larsen is unable to grieve the loss of his daughter properly because his Lady Macbethian wife urges him to take affairs into his own hands; and Troels Hartman's political campaign runs into scandal when the skeletons in his closet are revealed during the investigation. This mix between public and private—where the social setting motivates a character's actions, revealing their behavioural patterns and personal traits—adds an extra flavour to the depictions of character in Nordic noir. The main characters of Nordic noir are flawed, sometimes showing their unpleasant sides, and often act irrationally. This ties them to a realist tradition (or rather, to a modernist reworking of realism). It is also what makes them engaging to follow.

By its very name, Nordic noir is inextricably related to the film noir and neo noir genre, regardless of how the term itself emerged or its initial context. Yet, the modifying prefix 'Nordic' indicates that its inherent qualities differ—to a certain extent—from those of its generic precursors. The aim of this article has been to consider Nordic noir as a genre by holding the concept up against film noir and noir scholarship, and by probing into the distinct features of Nordic noir.

The distinguishing traits of Nordic noir are deeply intertwined. Nordic noir's roots in realism are expressed in its investment in the interplay between social and private institutions and the individuals connected to these, and the personal and social impact of crime (this point is also addressed by Creeber 2015, 2004). In the context of the welfare state, these crimes are abnormal, pointing to possible fissures within the system. Nordic noir has transposed the noir narrative to high-end serialised drama, resulting in distinct strategies for handling the enigma of the plot. While

the stories are often action-filled, the centre of interest is shifted toward the social milieu and how characters navigate between conflicting interests of public and private matters. The depiction of character, then, is both a result of the logics of high-end drama, as well as a realist heritage. Taken together, these qualities form the lineage of the Nordic noir genre.

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