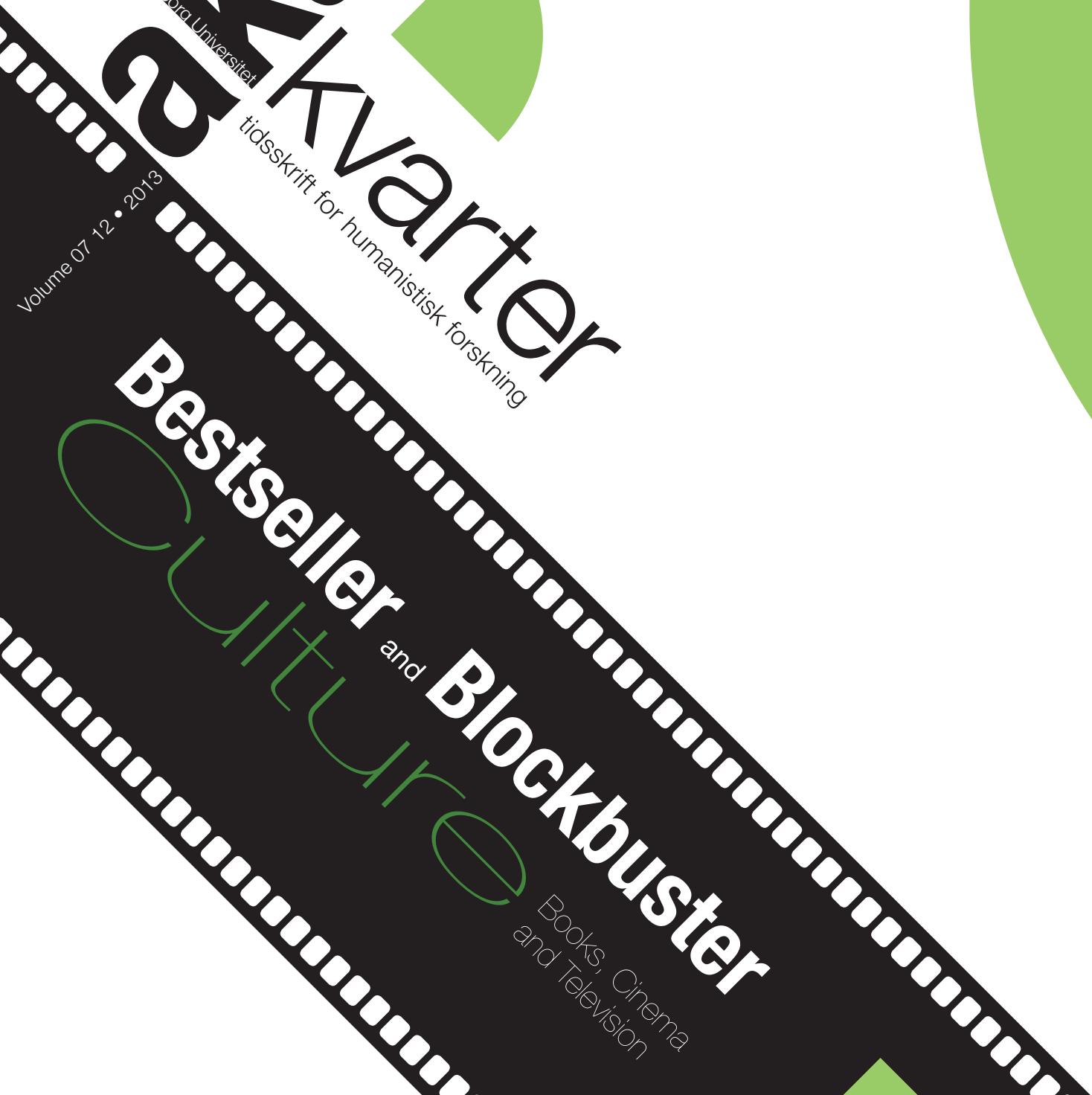


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# Bestseller and Blockbuster Culture

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*Hans Jørn Nielsen and*

*Anne Marit Waade*

## Introduction

The realm of bestseller and blockbuster culture serves as a steady provider of startling phenomena. With origins as fan fiction published on the web, *Fifty Shades of Grey* grew into three books that have sold millions of copies. *Harry Potter* regenerated children's reading culture. The film adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* caused a major boost for tourism in New Zealand. Thanks to Guy Ritchie, Robert Doherty, and Mark Gattiss and Steven Moffat, *Sherlock Holmes* has recently undergone three rejuvenating remakes: the films *Sherlock Holmes* (2009) and *A Game of Shadows* (2011), the British television series *Sherlock* (2010-) and the American television series *Elementary* (2012-).

Bestseller and blockbuster culture includes new ways of producing, distributing and experiencing media. Bestseller and blockbuster productions encompass production values in which a new type of pragmatic cooperation with external partners takes place (Waade, 2013). Films and television series are produced as platform productions for different media (cinema, television, mobile media) in combination with merchandise, franchising and destination tourism. To an increasing degree, books are published as e-books,

thus contributing to changes in the culture of reading. Books such as *Twilight* and *Game of Thrones* are combined with fan culture on the internet. Various agents and platforms contribute to new distributive modes of bestseller and blockbuster productions: publishers, bookshops, libraries, the DVD-market, online television channels and international cooperation agents. Book fairs and literary and cultural festivals attract the attention of large audiences supported by local authorities, tourist agencies and various sponsors (Sjöholm, 2011; Reijnders, 2011); and many of these events, in turn, are covered in the media.

In cultural communication, the bestseller concept has become a ubiquitous factor – often unnoticed, but ever present. In local supermarkets, bestsellers are on exclusive display. In bookshops, screens and posters promote the weekly bestsellers. Websites rank contributions according to numbers of users. Top 10 lists and television ratings provide a barometer of the shifting issues and attitudes of society. Despite a built-in need for new candidates, certain genres continually assert themselves: crime fiction, thrillers, biographies, biopics, historical fiction, and family novels and television series.

The corresponding concept in feature films is the blockbuster. Generally, blockbusters are characterised by archetypal stories performed by famous stars in impressive productions. In the wake of Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975), the blockbuster concept assumed a new strategic importance for Hollywood, which targeted international audiences by means of huge promotion budgets (Elsaesser, 2001). During the 2000s, the term spread to television fiction. Here, 'blockbuster TV' refers to quality television addressing international audiences and offering high production values and advanced aesthetics (Nielsen, 2011). The demand for bestsellers adapted for television is urgent; film and television adaptations often form the beginning of television spin-offs (Agger, 2011 b). Remediation and adaptations between media is an old phenomenon, but the conversation about them in cultural journalism and its wider public understanding has not remained the same: today, adaptations are more acknowledged than formerly with corresponding effects on the definition of a blockbuster, which has changed over the years. Besides, one blockbuster rarely stands alone. It is often remade, starting a whole blockbuster initiated cycle, as we have witnessed in the wake of *Jaws*.

Since the 1990s, mergers between publishing houses and other media production companies have created huge media conglomerates (Shiffrin, 2000). At the same time, the digitalization of books and book selling has radically changed the consumer market for books. Correspondingly, digitalization has changed market conditions for the blockbuster. According to Bondebjerg and Redvall “Cinema is no longer the key element in a film’s life” (2011, p. 12), and this carries certain repercussions. Television on demand, file sharing on the internet and streaming technologies have emerged, facilitating the production of the same stories on every possible platform. At all levels, the impact of franchising and merchandising should not be underestimated.

For decades, the divide between high and low cultures was a central issue in cultural discourses. However, cultural tastes have changed in the direction of a blending of tastes and a blurring of hierarchies. The cross media phenomenon has been followed by other crossings: the crossing of audiences (books and films for both tweens and adults), and the crossing of high and low cultures (for example, popular film adaptations of Austen and Forster classics, or the cultural recognition of mass culture stories such as the Batman films). Consequently, Collins (2010) notes a new US ‘in-between-culture’ combining cultivated taste with a popular bestseller culture.

Today, the literary experience often includes a cross media experience. For many audiences, the film adaptation and digital version of the book enjoy equal status. Adaptation equations between media are shifting, particularly in regard to the cultural value of seriality; the concepts of origin and the ‘national identity’ of narrative fiction have changed over years. The meaning of literacy has changed correspondingly (Mackey, 2007). Instead of the ‘death of the book’, we see popular culture invading other platforms. The blockbuster concept affects the choice of themes and structure: to enable the diversification of the cinematic product, ‘blockbusters tend towards open-ended, inter-textual narratives which can be easily reformulated in other media’ (Mazdon, 2000, p. 22). Numerous film adaptations, remakes, novelised prequels or sequels, spin-offs and online fan fiction highlight this tendency, expanding media stories across borders and audiences.

## Background and structure of the present issue

In 2012, a team of researchers from different departments at the universities of Aalborg and Aarhus and The Royal School of Library and Information Science agreed on a joint venture to promote the study of bestseller and blockbuster culture. The first step was to organise a conference with the theme *Bestseller and Blockbuster Culture – Books, Cinema and Television*. The organisers were Gunhild Agger, Rasmus Grøn, Hans Jørn Nielsen and Anne Marit Waade. The idea was supported by the organisers' departments and the Faculty of the Humanities at Aalborg University. Their funding was supplied by a generous grant from the Obel Family Foundation, and this made the conference possible. A Nordic network was organised to support subsequent research. The conference took place 21-22 March 2013 in Aalborg. The keynote speakers were Jim Collins, Margaret Mackey, Constantine Verevis, Ingolf Gabold and Lothar Mikos. Sixty researchers from different countries attended, most of them with papers. The next step was a subsequent publication in cooperation with *Academic Quarter* – and here it is.

Some contributions are conference papers converted into articles, whereas others are new responses to *Academic Quarter's* post-conference call for papers. Jim Collins has kindly given us his permission to print his keynote speech. All other articles have passed through the process of peer review. Linguistically, the editors have accepted contributions in British English as well as American.

The prevalent merging of bestseller and blockbuster phenomena on different platforms is mirrored in the structure of the present issue of *Academic Quarter*. We could have chosen to map the area in terms of media. That would have represented an easy and user-orientated solution. However, this would not have reflected the complexity and the interrelations we want to highlight. On that background, we have chosen to arrange the articles in four sections under the following headlines:

- 1 The industry of bestsellers and blockbusters: Cultural and aesthetic values
- 2 Bestseller and blockbuster genres
- 3 Adaptations and remakes across media and cultures
- 4 Bestsellers and blockbusters reflecting societal and cultural challenges.

## 1. The Industry of bestsellers and blockbusters: Cultural and aesthetic values

The combination of the six articles of the first section is in accordance with a general point of view in this issue: Today, scholars of popular culture are more or less obliged to combine research across media. At the same time, however, systematic studies demand a focus on one medium at a time. The six articles in this section highlight different media: printed books, e-books, cultural journalism, and television series, but the last four articles also address the question of judgment and assessment across popular media cultures.

Rasmus Grøn's article: 'The Bestseller List and its (Dis)contents. The Construction of "the Bestseller"', concentrates on bestsellers of the classic medium: the printed book. "What is a bestseller?" Grøn asks. In spite of numerous studies over the years, a viable definition has not been reached. A lack of valid data concerning book sales has made studies of bestsellers difficult. Grøn's study is based on one of the few valid Danish data sets: the statistics of Danish bookstores 2008-2011 by Nielsen Bookscan. The construction of a top 40 list leads Grøn to general considerations about making bestseller lists. These considerations involve an ongoing dialogue with central research in the field.

The remediation of printed books into e-books is a new factor in the book market. Will the digital culture finally entail the death of printed books? In 'Digital Books on the Point of Take-off? The Ebook in Denmark Anno 2013', Rasmus Helles and Stig Hjarvard present a new Danish survey comparing e-book reading to paper book reading. They conclude that the reading of e-books in a Danish context is about to reach a 'critical mass'. What kinds of e-books, then? Some might expect the reading of e-books on digital devices to contribute to the bestseller effect, but a striking tendency is that a remarkably large proportion of the readers of e-books have used publicly and freely available collections, such as public libraries. This will probably change with a growing Danish market for e-books.

From the analysis of statistics and the analysis of dissemination of bestsellers and e-books, we move to the critical judgment and assessment of bestsellers and blockbusters. In the article 'Blockbusters as Vehicles for Cultural Debate in Cultural Journalism', Nete Nørgaard Kristensen and Unni From illustrate a steady common interest in cultural journalism and movie industry. Danish reviews

of three blockbusters from 1959, 1995 and 2008 display the importance of cultural journalism for marketing and promotion in the co-creation of blockbusters. The different historical contexts, however, show a change in attitudes to blockbuster culture and its assessment, from a critique of the 'Americanization' of culture to cultural journalism with a more approving attitude to blockbusters.

The assessment of popular culture is a key issue in the last three articles of this section. If it is not possible to grasp the 'essential' concepts of bestseller and blockbuster, sociological or reader-response approaches might represent a viable alternative. In his article 'Fieldwork. Paul Auster as a Popular Postmodern Fiction Writer', Bent Sørensen is inspired by Pierre Bourdieu in his discussion of Paul Auster's fiction in relation to 'position taking' in the literary field. Auster's work is interesting because some of his novels may be classified as popular fiction (for example, detective novels), and at the same time as 'autonomous' quality literature. Auster's 'position taking' represents a complex question of negotiations between reviewers, publishers, and readers.

The ambition of Birgit Eriksson's 'Pure and Public, Popular and Personal – and the Inclusiveness of *Borgen* as a Public Service Blockbuster' is to draw attention to the 'blind spots' of the long critical traditions from Kant to Adorno and Habermas. Eriksson aims to 'reevaluate the social and communicative potentials' of bestsellers and blockbusters, with the Danish television serial *Borgen* as an example.

In the last article of the section, 'Frye and the *Opposition* between Popular Literature and Bestsellers', Brian Graham points to Northrop Frye as a source that might illuminate our efforts to find valid standards for the critical judgment of bestsellers. Graham suggests that Frye's distinction between different types of popular literature might overcome the common dichotomy between high, serious culture, on the one hand, and low popular culture, on the other.

## 2. Bestseller and blockbuster genres

The headline of this section may at first hand appear tautological as bestsellers and blockbusters traditionally are strongly correlated with the genre concept. The field of genres however, is a highly dynamic one, and the section's eight articles all provide new insights into the ways in which current genre developments, mutations,

hybridizations and re-interpretations in various ways relate to best-sellers and blockbusters.

In her article 'Genre-Hybridization – A Key to Hyper-Bestsellers?', Kerstin Bergman analyses how the majority of recent 'hyper-bestsellers' are characterised by a functional mixture of popular genre elements. Uncovering various genre traits in Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* and Stieg Larsson's *Millennium*-trilogy, Bergman argues that this hybridization should be seen as a key to the global impact of the two works, as it enables them to attract a larger and broader audience.

The topic of Maria Nilson's 'From *The Flame and the Flower* to *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Sex, Power and Desire in the Romance Novel' is genre-internal hybridizations. In light of a critical study of the historical development and reception of the Romance genre, Nilson characterises James's (in)famous bestseller as a mesh between romance, chick-lit and 'bodice ripper' genres. This mixture has proven commercially successful, but it also represents a regression to an old-fashioned perspective on heterosexual romance.

Anker Gemzøe's article 'The Family Saga as Bestseller Strategy' focuses on the large number of critically acclaimed and highly popular family saga novels that have been published in Denmark during the last decades. Apart from a number of cultural factors, Gemzøe explains the success of the genre by its 'biographically oriented bestseller strategy, aiming at a fusion of literary quality and a broad appeal to the readers'. This strategy illustrates the current loosening of the boundaries between genre literature and 'literary' literature in 'the culture of bestsellerism', but it might also suggest a recurrent 'bestseller determinant' in modern literary history.

In Steen Christiansen's 'Hyper Attention Blockbusters', Christopher Nolan's *Batman* trilogy is seen as a current example of the spectacle as an integrated part of the Hollywood blockbuster. But Christiansen extends the scope by analysing how Nolan's spectacle generates affect and apprehension in its audience in ways that are closely related to a reconfiguration of our senses in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century media environment. Christiansen thus points to a connection between the blockbusters' aesthetics of the spectacle and a more general cultural condition inscribed within a (hyper)attention economy.

In 'Tonally Teen?', Anders Lysne examines the concept of cinematic *tone*. Defined as the way in which the movie presents its emo-

tional orientation towards its characters and subject, tone is a key in explaining the divergences in the ways movies target and appeal to their audiences. Lysne explores his thesis in a close comparative analysis of two Danish youth film, one commercially successful and the other unsuccessful. His analysis reveals that the latter movie contains a complex and ambiguous tonality that undermines the spectator's emotional involvement and essentially targets an adult audience instead of teenagers.

Based on interviews with filmmakers, Kim Toft Hansen's 'Blockbuster Genres in Danish Independent Film' provides a survey and a characterisation of a hitherto neglected area – Danish independent cinema and its approach to genre movies. The article reveals a striking paradox: the Danish independent cinema environment as a field of production demarcates itself from mainstream Danish cinema largely by delving into 'mainstream' US based genres usually pertaining to blockbuster movies (horror and gangster drama, among others), inasmuch as these genres are allegedly neglected by the establishment of Danish cinema.

In 'Nordic Noir Production Values. *The Killing* and *The Bridge*', Anne Marit Waade and Pia Majbritt Jensen concentrate on the widespread success that Scandinavian crime series have enjoyed during the last decade, with renowned television series like *The Killing* and *The Bridge* rising to international cult status. According to the authors, this success should largely be ascribed to the regionally oriented production mode, where the aesthetic elaboration of place creates a specific 'Nordic noir' genre in which 'the exoticism of the Danish settings, landscapes, light, climate and language become deliberate promotional tools'.

Bestseller studies are mostly dedicated to research into works of fiction, but in 'Character and Topical Diversity. A Trend in the Nonfiction Bestseller', Rune Eriksson undertakes a heuristic study of common traits in nonfiction bestsellers. To serve this purpose, Eriksson reads two bestselling nonfiction titles through the lenses of Jørgen Dines Johansen's theory of literary motifs. Both works are shown to possess significant 'literary' qualities, as they use most of the essential motifs integral to literary fiction, first and foremost by letting their factual topics be perceived by 'round' and trustworthy characters with whom audiences easily identify.

### 3. Adaptations and remakes across media and cultures

Bestseller and blockbuster culture inevitably invites adaptations and remakes. Tie-in phenomena in and across media are widespread, and success in one medium may lead to subsequent success in other media, just as popularity in one country may lead to remakes in another cultural context. In which ways do these mechanisms work? How can we analyse them? These questions constitute the focus of this section.

In her article 'Finding the Next Book to Read in a Universe of Best-sellers, Blockbusters, and Spin-Offs', Margaret Mackey borrows a term from Peter Lunenfeld to point out that contemporary culture is characterised by the aesthetics of 'unfinish'. Often it is hard to tell where a phenomenon begins and where its ramifications end. The case of *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* proves the extent to which media tie-ins thrive: 'It's not a diary, it's a movie', but it is also a website and a computer game. *Fifty Shades of Gray* appeared as a self-published e-book but resulted in a long list of spin-offs including sex toys and a CD soundtrack of classical highlights. Today's media environment, including the bestseller lists and all the repetitions and adaptations surrounding them, represents a challenge to the reader's attention: When confronted with so many options and distractions, how do readers choose what to read?

This intriguing question is further pursued by Thessa Jensen and Peter Vistisen in their article 'Tent-Poles of the Bestseller'. The article examines how the passive audience of a media event is turned into 'active stakeholders', and it investigates the degree to which a fan-audience can assume the role of co-creators. Further, the article offers a theoretical framework and two models for understanding the stages in the transition from a traditional audience to a dedicated, co-creative audience.

The fantasy genre as it was conceived by J.R.R. Tolkien is the basis of many bestsellers and blockbusters. Moreover, it is also at the core of most online role-playing computer games. In his article 'It's such a wonderful world to inhabit', Claus Toft-Nielsen takes his point of departure in empirical data from a very dedicated audience – a group of *World of Warcraft*-gamers. Via focus group interviews, he explores what the fantasy genre *does*. Part of the answer is that it creates a 'believable fantasy world' permitting emotional immersion as well as rational reflection. Consequently, one of the reasons for the

vast appeal of *World of Warcraft* is its ability to unite 'lived space' with the notion of place – an experience, according to Toft-Nielsen, that the game shares with the surrounding fantasy matrix.

In his article 'Blockbuster Remakes', Constantine Verevis focuses on remakes in one medium – the film. Steven Spielberg's blockbuster *Jaws* (based on Peter Benchley's best-selling novel) established a blockbuster prototype – but what preceded it, and what happened later? The prevalent media environment encourages a constant revising, re-inhabiting and re-modeling of existing material. With references to a large number of blockbusters, Verevis pursues the prequels and the sequels of *Jaws*, demonstrating its impact on the whole disaster cycle, including films such as *Grizzly* (1976), *Tentacles* (1976), *Orca* (1977), *Piranha* (1978) and *Deep Blue Sea* (1999).

Lynge Agger Gemzøe's article 'Brødre vs. Brothers – the Transatlantic Remake as Cultural Adaptation' scrutinises an American remake of a Danish film from a cross-cultural point of view. Drawing on Verevis's theoretical framework and the cinematic traditions of war or occupation films in the USA and Denmark respectively, Gemzøe presents Susanne Bier's *Brødre* (2004) as a film with inherent genre features that can be traced to both contexts. In many ways, the American remake adopts the Danish take on the war, but the setting has changed substantially, as has the relationship to previous wars. In *Brothers*, the Vietnam War is pointed out as the immediate parallel to the war in Afghanistan, making the role of the son duplicate that of his father. Consequently, local (Danish) detail has been replaced by an interaction with the American cultural and historical environment.

#### **4. Bestsellers and blockbusters reflecting societal and cultural challenges**

Besides being part of a highly market-oriented transnational cultural industry, bestsellers and blockbusters are also a significant part of everyday culture. Bestsellers are usually accounted for in terms of their striking ability to be 'snapshots of the age' (Sutherland, 2007, p. 3). They reflect basic cultural, ethical and social challenges in the lives of individuals as well as of nations, and they express political, economic and global challenges in institutions. For instance, crime fiction is a typical bestselling genre that tends to deal with basic ethical and existential issues, such as law and order, right and wrong,

and life and death (Hansen, 2012). Horror typically reflects gender and erotic conflicts, while political thrillers tend to express power conflicts; melodrama, another significant blockbuster and bestseller genre, typically deals with moral dilemmas within families and close relationships (Agger, 2011 a; Grodal, 2003). The articles in this section illustrate a series of societal and cultural issues or dilemmas that play a role in contemporary bestseller and blockbuster culture.

Gunhild Agger's article 'The Role of History in Bestseller and Blockbuster Culture' focuses on the relationship between history and popular culture and on how history is reflected, understood and created in popular film and television drama series. The author proposes a methodological distinction between three levels: 1) a historiographical level, 2) a user-oriented level focusing on the functions of history in film and television drama series, and finally 3) a genre-oriented approach to historical films and television drama series. The bestselling biography of the Danish artist Marie Krøyer and Bille August's film about the same life are used as analytical examples.

In her article 'When the Ocean Strikes Back', Mirjam Gebauer focuses on the eco-thriller as a contemporary bestseller and blockbuster phenomenon, using Frank Schätzing's voluminous page-turner *Der Schwarm / The Swarm* (2004/2006) as an example. The disaster scenario is a general bestseller and blockbuster feature, which is also significant in the eco-thriller, along with science fiction elements. However, Schätzing combines explaining and telling, transforming geophysics and microbiology into mainstream knowledge. Schätzing challenges the privileged position of humankind over nature. Finally, Gebauer draws attention to the way in which the notion of 'alierness' in *The Swarm* differs from other representations of the same phenomenon in popular disaster culture.

Mikkel Fugl Eskjær's contribution 'The Climate Catastrophe as Blockbuster' includes a more general discussion of the relationship between ecology, popular media culture and a disaster scenario. Focusing on the relationship between popular culture and political communication in the news media, he shows that news is structurally orientated towards the actual sphere whereas popular culture is orientated towards the virtual sphere. Disaster reporting in a global context is a stable feature of most news media, just as films imagining global catastrophes abound. A common denominator is

spectacular events and settings, recognizable patterns of identification and heroic deeds. Eskjær shows how blockbuster disaster films can be considered as the inversion of news: where news coverage generally provides fragmented scientific facts, disaster films offer coherent narratives.

Finally, Anna Estera Mrozewicz's article 'Porous Borders – Crossing the Boundaries to "Eastern Europe" in Scandinavian Crime Fiction' focuses on cultural and political conflicts and the alienation of 'Eastern Europe' in Scandinavian crime fiction. Referring to Henning Mankell's *The Dogs of Riga* (1989) and Leif Davidsen's *The Russian Singer* (1991), the author argues that two basic perspectives on Eastern Europe prevail: firstly, a traditional way of understanding national borders and cultural distinctions (Davidsen), and, secondly, a global perspective on boundaries involving a dynamic view of the relationship between the neighbors across the Baltic (Mankell).

It seems appropriate to end this section with Jim Collins's keynote lecture 'Fifty Shades of Seriality and E-Reader Games' focusing on serial narratives and e-readers and consequently all the changes caused by the ways in which audiences engage in cultural communication.

### The End?

The articles in this volume reflect a common ambition to better understand prevalent tendencies in current culture. We believe that this entails taking into account the ever expanding domain of best-seller and blockbuster culture with its innovations and ramifications in seemingly endless recreations and rearrangements, and its intertextual and cross-media dialogues.

Print culture may be replaced by e-books, and cross-media phenomena have certainly changed the role of every single medium. However, this does not necessarily mean the death of the book, the film or the television series. Cross-media development is opposed by another tendency – the 'long tail' (Chris Anderson, 2004). The growth of internet trading provides access to a larger choice of specialised books, films and other products, promoting cultural diversity. The research area is abundant with similar apparent contradictions calling for conceptual and empirical clarification.

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The image shows the front cover of a book. The title "Bestseller and Blockbuster" is written in large, bold, white letters. The word "and" is in a smaller, italicized white font. Below the title, the subtitle "Cultural Clichés and the Art of Storytelling" is written in a smaller, italicized white font. The word "Cultural" is partially cut off on the right edge. The background of the cover is black. There is a white film strip graphic running diagonally across the cover, with several frames visible. The word "CULTURE" is written in a green, stylized, blocky font across the film strip. The author's name, "Michael H. Hart", is written in a small, white, sans-serif font at the bottom right of the cover.

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# The Bestseller List and its (Dis)contents

The construction of 'the bestseller'

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## Abstract

'Bestseller' is a pivotal and highly influential concept in the current literary market, where a title's presence on a bestseller list also serves to reinforce the title's bestseller status. In spite hereof, there is a lack of exact knowledge of bestselling patterns on the Danish book market, as well as a conceptual vagueness regarding the distinction between 'the best and the rest': how to define a bestseller and differentiate it from the remaining titles on the market? These two issues are addressed in the following article. Firstly, a Top 40 list of the bestselling fiction books from Danish book stores in the period of 2008-11 is presented, and its contents are analysed in terms of genre, nationality, and thematic qualities. Hereafter, the bestselling list serves as a point of departure for a discussion of the divergent and contingent criteria underlying possible definitions of bestsellers and their inclusion on bestseller lists, thereby developing a more faceted picture of the bestseller concept. Lastly, Robert Escarpit's temporal distinction between fastsellers, steadysellers and bestsellers is related to the article's empirical data in order to discuss a widespread assumption of the volatility of the bestseller.

**Keywords** Bestseller concept, Bestseller lists, Literature Sociology, Book Market, Book Statistics.

## Introduction

'Bestseller' is a pivotal concept in the current literary market, where publishing houses are increasingly concentrating their editorial and promotional efforts on the publication of potential bestsellers (Thompson, 2010; Todd, 2006; Schiffrin, 2000). And apart from large sales figures, appointed 'bestsellers' typically attract a disproportionate amount of public attention (Berglund, 2012), while the 'bestseller' status is widely exposed as a promotional paratextual 'brand', for example, in advertisements and on book covers.

Thus, the naming of 'Bestsellers' is not merely a descriptive utterance about consumption of literary texts; it is also a *performative utterance* that stimulates attention. This self-perpetuating, promotional quality of the concept relies heavily on *bestseller lists* that authoritatively communicate the bestseller status of certain literary works:

The bestseller list is as much ahead of the event as behind it, and exists to *create* as much as to record them. It is dynamic not passive; an engine, not a catalogue. It belongs to the publicity rather than the accounting department of the trade. (Sutherland, 2007, p. 34, original emphasis)

But in spite of its cultural impact, the status of the bestseller currently remains unclear in especially two respects. Firstly, there is a lack of exact knowledge on current bestselling patterns of the Danish book market. Secondly, there is a need for critical perspectives on the definition *and delimitation of the bestseller*. Studies on specific bestsellers generally deal with 'spectacular megahits' (Hall, 2012, p. xvii) and 'hyper bestsellers' (Berglund, 2012); a narrow elite of undisputed bestsellers (mostly of a global range), leaving the question of how to actually define a bestseller, and differentiate it from the remaining titles on the market largely untouched.

In the following pages, these two issues will be explored in a heuristic study on *adult fiction bestsellers*. The data material for the study consists of statistical reports on the sales of Danish book stores made by Nielsen Bookscan (hereafter NB) in cooperation with the

Danish Book Trade Association ('Boghandlerforeningen') during the period of 2008-11 (until week 40).

This study claims to gain new territory as the topic scarcely has been researched in a Danish context<sup>1</sup>, partly because systematic bestseller studies historically has been impeded by an absence of sufficiently valid and detailed data (Handesten, 2010). The available material of recent years consists mainly of broad statistics on book sales (Forlæggerforeningen, 2013) and consumption (Boghandlerforeningen and Forlæggerforeningen, 2012; Kulturministeriet, 2012) - not providing any information on the specific books in question - and weekly bestseller lists published by the major book store chains (Bog & Idé, Arnold Busck og Gad) which are not fully reliable due to inconsistent registration and divergent criteria (Handesten, 2010; Wichmann, 2008).<sup>2</sup>

In light of this 'extraordinary lack of evidence' (Bloom, 2002, p. 6), which is far from being merely a Danish phenomenon,<sup>3</sup> NB's reports represent the first reliable, detailed accounts of book circulation on the Danish market. In the following study, the reports will be analysed in order to fulfil this article's twofold ambition:

Firstly, a Top 40 list of the bestselling fiction books in the period of 2008-11 is presented and its contents are briefly analysed. The objective is not to discern the 'DNA of the bestseller' (a task that, if possible at all, would require more ample space than is permitted for this article), but to provide a broad overview: which traits in terms of genre, nationality, and thematic qualities are prevalent among the bestselling titles in Danish book stores in the period of 2008-11?

Secondly, the bestselling list will serve as a point of departure for a discussion of the divergent and contingent criteria underlying possible definitions of bestsellers, thereby hopefully developing a more faceted picture of the bestseller concept.

Apart from the Bookscan reports, the article will draw on supplementary statistics from the Danish book market (for example, Forlæggerforeningen, 2013; Boghandlerforeningen, 2011) as well as a number of theoretical and historical studies on the bestseller phenomenon (for example, Handesten, 2010; Sutherland, 2007; Bloom, 2002; Sutherland, 1981).

Lastly, it should be emphasised that the scope of NB's reports are limited to book store sales and therefore only provide a partial picture (approximately 45%) of the total circulation of fiction lit-

erature in Denmark, excluding book clubs, sales in drugstores and supermarkets, internet sales, and library acquisitions.<sup>4</sup> This limitation will be briefly addressed in the concluding remarks.

### **The bestselling books – the list and its content**

Appended to this article, Table 1 shows the Top 40 list of the bestselling fiction titles in Danish book stores in the period of 2008 – October 2011, extracted from the NB's reports. However, as the reports are organised to serve as a management tool for the book industry, the data had to be revised for the occasion. That implied first and foremost a *condensation* of NB's data (that are organised on the level of editions) in order to provide information on the full status of the given titles. In addition, the data layout has been *simplified*, leaving only those categories that are relevant for the present study.<sup>5</sup> Concerning the length, 40 was considered a sound compromise between depth and clarity, but should be regarded as contingent and purely instrumental (more on this below).

Moreover, the production of the list was faced with a question of *inclusion*. Like all key players in the literary system, NB's reports use the age of the target group as a dividing principle, differentiating (in accordance with Dewey's classification system) between children, adolescents and adults. These distinctions, however, are complicated by the fact that some of history's bestselling authors have managed to appeal to readers across age boundaries (Bloom, 2002), among them J.K. Rowling and Stephenie Meyer, who also are among the period's bestselling authors (see Table 2). But in NB's reports, the editions of their books are categorised alternately under all three age categories, making them a curious borderline phenomenon for this study. However, as their books are predominantly consumed by a young, but not necessarily under age audience, they have been included on the list.

In terms of *genre*, NB (again following Dewey) only distinguishes between *Crime Novel* ('Krimi og Spænding'), *Poems* ('Digte'), *Humor* (covering mostly satirical magazines), and the diffuse category of *General Fiction* ('Skønlitteratur'). But the list nonetheless blatantly confirms the huge popularity of the Nordic crime novel.<sup>6</sup> Half of the titles on list belong to this regional subgenre, and its dominance is even more overt at the top of list, where 11 out of the first 15 titles, including rank 1 to 6, are Nordic crime novels. This is reflected in the

*national* distribution on the list, which has a strong domestic representation (15 out of 40 titles), and where Scandinavian authors account for 70 % (28 out of 40) of the titles. In 1995, more than half of the most popular novels in Denmark were written by British and American authors (Secher, 2000, pp. 13ff.), but the otherwise profound Anglo-Saxon impact on Danish cultural life appears to have been declining on the book market, as only eight of the titles on the list are of Anglo-Saxon origin. But compared to 1995, there are also recurring traits, for example, the weak quantitative impact of the literature of continental Europe (only one title on the list), and the presence of a few, globally popular 'ethnic' titles. Whereas these titles in 1995 belonged to South American movement of magical realism, the literary preferences seems to have shifted with the political focus towards the Arab and Muslim world (K. Hosseini (no. 9 and 11) and A. Aswany (no. 36).

In his study of the publishing business, John P. Thompson emphasises the author's previous sales record and the manuscript's comparability to other, bestselling texts, as the two foremost parameters used in determining a book's market potential (Thompson, 2010, pp. 198ff.). In that light, it comes as no surprise that most of the titles on the list are either part of a series of books and / or written by 'brand authors' (Bloom, 2002, pp. 75ff.), whose established popularity make them rather safe investments for the publishers. The 40 titles are written by 20 authors, the first 11 titles by five authors, and the six most selling titles by only two authors, Jussi Adler-Olsen and Stieg Larsson. Therefore, it is fair to speak of a group of *bestselling authors* (see Table 2), whose (almost always serial) novels are guaranteed success because of a large, faithful audience. A tendency that is also indicated by the strikingly similar sales figures for some authors (see, for example, Läckberg [no. 26 and 27], Marklund [no. 32 and 33] and Ragde [no. 34 and 35]).

The serial phenomenon is virtually omnipresent among the crime novels where the use of recurrent protagonists and environments has become a main feature of the genre. But it also applies broadly to the remaining titles. For example, Ken Follett's two most selling titles (no. 7 and 8) are related parts in an epic story set in medieval England; H. V. Holst's *Dronningeofret* is the final part in a trilogy about gender, power, and politics; and the contributions of Jane Aamund and A. B. Ragde represent episodes in ongoing family sagas.

And there seems to be a broad public preference for family sagas and historical novels, as nine of the titles on the list can be placed under one – or both – of these genre labels. This also applies for two of the most ‘high literary’ works on the list by Carsten Jensen and J.S. Sørensen. Moreover, the stories of these novels are poignantly placed in certain provincial locations, making the novels part of a current wave of ‘province realism’ in Danish fiction that highlights the life conditions and developments in peripheral areas of Danish society.

In the above I have briefly outlined some main characteristics of the best selling fiction titles of the period in question. But how many of the titles on our lists are to be regarded as bestsellers, and according to which criteria?

### **The construction of the bestseller (list)**

A bestseller study is at the outset confronted with the challenge of defining the bestseller concept. Clive Bloom gives the following suggestion: “How then might we define a bestseller? In theory the answer is simple: the work of fiction sold in most units (books in a given price range) to the most people over a set period of time” (Bloom, 2002, p. 6). But the definition is only simple ‘in theory’, as Bloom’s response also raises a number of questions. Firstly, Bloom’s notion of ‘price range’ points to the need to discern between the amounts of *sold copies* and *the revenue of the title* as bestseller criteria. The two parameters are presented on the list as respectively ‘Volume’ (column D) and ‘Value’ (column E), and as can be seen, the titles’ respective locations on the two rankings (column A and F) are far from identical, as the list includes all formats, ranging from price heavy hardbacks to considerably cheaper paperbacks.<sup>7</sup>

Here, we have followed the main tendency to give primacy to the parameter of sold copies, as it most directly reflects the dissemination and impact of the given titles. However, the revenue parameter should not be shrugged off as merely an economic issue: The extended willingness to pay for a given title also poses interesting sociological questions about (conceptions of) the novelty and cultural value of the title as well as the social patterns of reception. Here, it should be noticed that the total share of paperbacks in the Danish book market is higher than represented in the present study, as the super market chains almost exclusively sell these cheaper editions

(Boghandlerforeningen, 2010). And due to its partial scope, our study is presumably culturally biased, as book stores are primarily attended by the cultural upper and middle class (Handesten, 2010, p. 118).

Secondly, Bloom's use of the singular form 'the work' (and 'bestseller') appears misleading, as the bestseller always appears in plural, as part of a bestseller list, and its bestselling status is usually defined *relatively* due to its position on this list. In this light, 'bestseller' can be defined tautologically as a title that appears on a bestseller list. The problem with this conception is that the bestseller status thereby depends on the contingent length of the bestseller list as it is highly unlikely that the in/out-dichotomy logic of the list reflects any significant differences in popularity. This problem is illustrated by our top 40 list, which reveals large differences between the included titles. Stieg Larsson's number one title has sold almost twice as many copies as no. 10 on the list – and more than four times as many as no. 40, whereas the differences between no. 10 and 11, and again between no. 20 and 21, the usual dividing lines of bestseller lists, are merely 2 and 6 %, respectively. More significant lines can be drawn between, say, Larsson's number one title and the rest or between the first eight titles and the remaining titles on the list. Moreover, there is little doubt concerning the bestseller status of a number of titles (for example, the works of Larsson, Follett, Hosseini, et al.), especially since the titles have already obtained this status due to their global popularity. But that does not change the fact that behind the 'logic of the list', the books' sales figures represent a continuum where it is very difficult to draw distinctive lines between the best and the rest.

The alternative approach is to define an *absolute* (national) criterion for a bestseller's sales figures. But apart from being dependant on information on a title's total sales, this absolute number is determined to be contingent and disputable. Should it be minimum 10-15,000 copies? (Handesten, 2010, p. 115). Or should it correspond to 1 % of the population, as suggested by a number of American studies (Sutherland, 1981, p. 6), thereby including all titles on the Danish market with sales of minimum 56,000 copies. Or should it be 29,000, as our list – accidentally – implies? And should the criterion be varied according to genre, since, say, 10,000 sold copies would be outstanding for a collection of poems but average for a crime novel?

Moreover, the relative as well as the absolute definition are relativised by the *temporal* dimension. For what does, thirdly, Bloom's 'set period of time' imply? Within what timeframe is it legitimate to measure a title's bestseller status? What is the *relationship between bestseller and time*? In terms of the relative definition, there is a lack of synchronicity between the publishing of bestseller lists and that of literary texts. While bestseller lists cover delimited time periods, the issuing of literary titles is happening in a flux across these periodical limits, thereby giving titles different 'life times' on the list. This is also noticeable in the Top 40 where titles published in the beginning of the measured period (see Column G) dominate the list, as they have had more time to accumulate sales. Therefore, a slight change in time period would presumably have given entirely different results.

Regarding the absolute definition, the time frame for measuring could in principle be extended infinitely. There is, however, a widespread inclination in bestseller theory to narrow this time frame significantly, as the bestseller is perceived as closely attached to its momentary context, and its popularity explained by its resonance with social themes and aesthetic conventions in contemporary society (Handesten, 2010; Bloom, 2002; Sutherland, 1981). This contextualising of the bestseller leads to an assertion about the *volatile* nature of the bestseller: Bestsellers live on the momentary lust for novelty rather than the long-standing curiosity. They sell quickly – and quickly stop selling because they fail to outlive their own opportunistic excitations.

These conceptions of the 'bestseller' term thus display an intermixture of quantitative and value-laden criteria, which largely adds to the ambiguity of the concept. Whereas 'bestseller' in a market context, as mentioned above, possesses positive anticipatory connotations, it is in academic works primarily used derogatively as a synonym for commercial opportunism, representing the 'dark side' of the classic dichotomy between masterpiece and mayfly. Although this appears as a too crude and reductionist approach, the question of the durability of bestsellers remains.

In an approach to this question, the French literature sociologist Robert Escarpit (1972) suggests a distinction between 'Fastsellers' (titles with large momentary sale, but steep downward sale curves – that is, the conception of the volatile bestseller above), 'Steadysellers'

(titles with relatively low but stable and long sales – typically associated with ‘classics’<sup>8</sup>) and ‘Bestsellers’ that is the small minority of titles that combines the two. A Bestseller is thus a Fastseller, which eventually turns into a Steadyseller (Escarpit, 1972). It would require a much larger temporal perspective to explore in depth concrete configurations of fast-, steady- , and bestsellers, but an impression might be obtained from Table 3 that illustrates the temporal distribution of sales (divided in semiannual sequences) for a selected group of the study’s titles published in or before 2008 (cf. ‘DOP’). The table reflects the rather brief life spans of the market: for seven of the titles more than half of the sales are concentrated in the span of one year and more than 80 % in span of two years, and titles published before 2008 tend to have very low figures towards the end of the period. This general pattern, however, conceals some large individual differences, with Leif Davidsens *På udkig efter Hemingway*, at one extreme, accumulating 80 % of its sales in only half a year, while the figures of Ildefonso Falcones’ *Cathedral of the Sea* are distributed almost evenly across the period. Moreover, the spans generally do not form a one-sided regression since most titles experience one or more revivals related to the issuing of new (mostly paperback) editions. These re-issuings are probably responses to demand (and, in some cases, connected to the release of movie adaptations), but also potentially contribute to this demand by enhancing the accessibility and visibility of the titles. On the face of it, the table appears to confirm the volatile existence of the bestseller, and none of the titles seemed destined to fulfil Escarpit’s exclusive definition of the bestseller. On the other hand, the table indicates, firstly, that the durability of a given literary work is to a large degree dependent on market decisions regarding its accessibility, and, secondly, that the ‘steadiness’ of Escarpit’s bestseller most likely will not reveal itself as a smooth temporal line of popularity, but rather as a winding, oscillating path of oblivions and revivals.

### Concluding remarks

On the basis of empirical data from Nielsen Book Scan, this article extracted and analysed a top 40 list of the best selling fiction works in Danish book stores in 2008-11. Thereafter, it discussed some of the contingencies involved in the construction of bestseller lists and, thereby, the denomination of bestsellers. In dealing exclusively with

book store sales, this article should be regarded as a preliminary domain-specific study hopefully paving the way for future, supplementary research. Still, there are good reasons to insist on the exemplary value of the study, especially since the problem of definition and delimiting the bestseller are of general relevance.

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A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
Rank	Title	Author	Volume	Value	Rank	1st publ.	Subj. Group	No Ed.
1	Pigen der legede med ilden/ The Girl who Played with Fire	Larsson, S.	125.191	17.090.243	3	Oct 13, 2006	Crime Novel	5
2	Kvinden i buret / Mercy	Adler-Olsen, J.	109.063	11.116.933	14	Sep 12, 2007	Crime Novel	6
3	Mænd der hader kvinder/ The Girl with the Dragon Tatoo;	Larsson, S.	108.382	15.018.137	5	Jun 15, 2006	Crime Novel	5
4	Fasandræberne / The Pheasant Killer	Adler-Olsen, J.	95.789	11.005.192	16	May 28, 2008	Crime Novel	6
5	Luftkastellet der blev sprængt / The Girl who Kicked..	Larsson, S.	93.110	17.987.375	2	Oct 8, 2007	Crime Novel	6
6	Flaskepost fra P/ Mess. in a Bottle	Adler-Olsen, J.	88.780	12.730.422	10	Dec 9, 2009	Crime Novel	6
7	Uendelige verden/ World w. Ends	Follett, K.	87.461	23.221.422	1	Mar 31, 2008	General Fiction	12
8	Jordens søjler/ Pillars of the Earth	Follett, K.	84.454	13.265.830	9	1991	General Fiction	28
9	Drageløberen/ The Kite Runner;	Hosseini K.	77.399	7.517.861	26	Jan 14, 2008	General Fiction	8
10	På udkig efter Hemingway	Davidsen, L.	72.171	14.136.001	7	Sep 23, 2008	Crime Novel	3
11	Under en strålende sol/ Spl. Suns	Hosseini, K.	70.949	9.870.997	21	Aug 14, 2008	General Fiction	8
12	Det forsvundne tegn/ Lost symbol	Brown, D.	66.651	13.502.907	8	Nov 16, 2009	Crime Novel	6
13	Hypnotisøren/The Hypnotist	Kepler, L.	64.057	15.298.108	4	Jan 15, 2010	Crime Novel	3
14	Journal 64	Adler-Olsen, J.	59.762	12.615.090	11	Nov 10, 2010	Crime Novel	7
15	Alfabethuset/ Alphabet House	Adler-Olsen, J.	59.472	4.745.261	34	Apr. 15, 2009	Crime Novel	4
16	Havets katedral/Cathedral of..	Falcones, I.	56.814	10.969.391	17	Mar 12, 2008	General Fiction	7
17	Dronningeofret	Holst, H. V.	55.478	12.505.263	12	Oct. 4, 2008	General Fiction	4
18	Ulykkesfuglen/The Stranger	Läckberg, C.	54.878	12.011.478	13	Mar 6, 2008	Crime Novel	7

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
Rank	Title	Author	Volume	Value	Rank	1st publ.	Subj. Group	No Ed.
19	Nymåne / New Moon	Meyer, S.	54.136	11.043.738	15	Mar 20, 2009	Various	16
20	Giganternes Fald / Fall of Giants	Follett, K.	51.365	14.367.704	6	Sep 28, 2010	General Fiction	12
21	Tusmørke / Twilight	Meyer, S.	48.294	7.230.586	27	Sep 30, 2005	Various	7
22	Berlinerpoplerne / Berlin Poplars	Ragde, A. B.	48.218	3.805.343	39	Apr 25, 2008	General Fiction	3
23	Prædikanten / The Preacher	Läckberg, C.	46.940	4.426.815	35	Aug 21, 2007	Crime Novel	6
24	H. Potter og dødsregalierne / ..Death Hallows	Rowling, J. K.	45.573	10.188.208	19	Jun 13, 2008	Various	13
25	Dinosaurens fjer / The Dinosaur Feather	Gazan, S-J.	43.724	7.840.660	23	Sep 5, 2008	Crime Novel	4
26	Isprinsessen / The Ice Princess	Läckberg, C.	43.559	4.237.309	38	May 3, 2007	Crime Novel	7
27	Stenhuggeren / The Stonecutter	Läckberg, C.	43.209	6.076.777	29	Mar 12, 2007	Crime Novel	5
28	De grønne skove	Aamund J.	42,931	10.884.805	18	Apr 28, 2008	General Fiction	2
29	Flagermusmanden / The Bat	Nesbø, J.	42.223	5.511.390	31	Mar 26, 2007	Crime Novel	4
30	Min broders vogter	Davidsen, L.	42.195	9.140.111	22	Mar 22, 2010	Crime Novel	2
31	Eksil / Exile	Ejersbo, J.	40,523	9.995.424	20	Apr 1, 2009	General Fiction	5
32	En plads i solen / Long Shadow	Marklund, L.	39.990	7.826.275	24	Nov 1, 2008	General Fiction	4
33	Livstid / Lifetime	Marklund, L.	39.863	5.094.882	32	Oct. 24, 2007	Crime Novel	4
34	Ligge i grønne enge	Ragde, A. B.	38.443	4.323.035	36	Sep 30, 2008	General Fiction	3
35	Eremitkrebsene	Ragde, A.B.	37.615	3.184.343	40	Oct 19, 2007	General Fiction	3
36	Yacoubians hus / The Y. Building	Aswany, A.	31.478	4.767.301	33	Oct 16, 2007	General Fiction	3
37	Mærkedage	Sørensen, J.S.	31.207	5.928.163	30	Mar 29, 2007	General Fiction	3
38	Havfruen / The Drowning	Läckberg, C.	29.311	6.350.453	28	Mar 22, 2010	Crime Novel	4
39	Vi, de druknede / We, the Drowned	Jensen, C.	29.150	4.314.097	37	Nov 10, 2006	General Fiction	3
40	Formørkelse / Eclipse	Meyer, S.	29.071	7.720.278	25	Aug 7, 2009	Various	4

Table 1: The Fiction Bestseller Top 40 from Danish Book Stores, 2008-11

Rank	Author	Volumes	Revenue	Titles		Eds.
1	Jussi Adler Olsen	475.395	57.330.517	7		21
2	Stieg Larsson	326.683	50.095.755	3		10
3	Ken Follett	279.496	56.991.150	8		11
4	Camilla Läckberg	269.172	41.187.978	8		39
5	Liza Marklund	253.951	29.127.462	11		26
6	Jo Nesbø	215.766	31.935.976	10		41
7	Stephenie Meyer	212.758	45.567.610	7		40
8	Leif Davidsen	157.916	29.179.224	14		40
9	J. K. Rowling	154.830	32.607.602	7		81
10	Khaled Hosseini	148.348	17.388.858	2		16

Table 2: Top 10 Bestselling fiction authors 2008-11

	Title	DOP	2008-1	2008-2	2009-1	2009-2	2010-1	2010-2	2011-1	2011-2	Total	
1	Pigen der legede med..	Oct 13 2006	42.225 35 %	29.437 25 %	18.236 15 %	23.354 20 %	1.350 1 %	3.572 3 %	876 0,7 %	387 0,3 %	<b>119.437</b>	
2	Kvinden i buret	Sep 12 2007	426 0,5 %	10.372 10 %	4.915 4,5 %	15.546 14 %	13.467 12 %	31.136 29 %	21.143 20 %	10.852 10 %	<b>107.857</b>	
3	Mænd der hader kvinder	Jun 15 2006	30.119 28 %	28.398 27 %	20.509 19 %	21.335 20 %	804 0,8 %	3.853 4 %	940 0,9 %	382 0,3 %	<b>106.340</b>	
4	Fasandræberne	May 28 2008	1.374 2 %	16.627 18 %	3.662 4 %	9.972 11 %	4.936 5 %	27.243 30 %	20.401 22 %	6.904 8 %	<b>91.119</b>	
5	Luftkastellet der blev..	Oct 8 2007	17.559 20 %	17.645 20 %	13.536 15,5 %	32.857 37 %	1.911 2 %	3.824 4 %	904 1 %	420 0,5 %	<b>88.656</b>	
7	Uendelige verden	Mar 31 2008	12.568 16 %	26.089 32,5 %	4.101 5 %	18.281 23 %	3.901 5 %	9.947 12 %	3.097 4 %	2.130 2,5 %	<b>80.114</b>	
8	Jordens søjler		1991	8.060 11 %	19.690 26 %	6.821 9 %	18.918 25 %	4.300 6 %	9.794 13 %	5.152 7 %	2.344 3 %	<b>75.079</b>
9	Drageløberen		Jan 14 2008	32.609 43 %	19.826 26 %	8.615 11 %	9.305 12 %	1.329 2 %	3.008 4 %	409 0,5 %	1.010 1,5 %	<b>76.111</b>
10	På udvik efter Hemingway	Sep 23 2008	X	56.277 80,5 %	3.493 5 %	8.541 12 %	509 1 %	766 1 %	X	410 0,5 %	<b>69.996</b>	
11	Under en strålende sol	Aug 14 2008	11.177 17 %	23.381 34 %	14.029 20 %	12.972 19 %	1.590 2 %	3.576 5 %	993 1,5 %	1.170 1,5 %	<b>68.888</b>	
16	Havets katedral	Mar 12 2008	6.292 11 %	14.142 25 %	3.133 6 %	9.248 16 %	2.767 5 %	11.156 20 %	5.961 10 %	4.115 7 %	<b>56.814</b>	
37	Mærkedage	Mar 29 2007	12.225 39 %	8.366 27 %	1.330 4 %	4.302 14 %	1.921 6 %	1.633 5 %	1.430 5 %	X	<b>31.207</b>	
39	Vi, de druknede	Nov 10 2006	2.909 10 %	10.798 37 %	3.025 10 %	4.478 15 %	1.627 6 %	4.543 16 %	727 2,5 %	1.043 3,5 %	<b>29.150</b>	

Table 3: Temporal distribution of sold copies

### Notes

- 1 There are of course exceptions to this rule. A recent example is Lars Handesten's article "The hitchhiker's guide to the bestseller galaxy" (Handesten, 2010), in which Handesten outlines a study of the history of the bestseller in a Danish context.
- 2 This is not a new condition, as bestseller lists have traditionally been actively influenced by publishers and book sellers on account of their promotional qualities (Sutherland, 2007).
- 3 The only major exception is USA, where *Publisher's Weekly* and *New York Times* since 1912 and 1930, respectively, have been publishing bestseller lists based on systematic extraction of data from the country's book stores (Sutherland, 2007).
- 4 Despite ambitions of a 100% coverage of the book market, Boghandlerforeningen never managed to persuade other stakeholders into partaking in the agreement with Nielsen Book Scan, which eventually lead to the abandonment of the project in 2011. This contrasts to the USA and the UK, where Nielsen Bookscan Reports have become a vital tool in publishing houses' strategies. See Thompson (2010).
- 5 Excluding, for example, data on publishers and edition-specific issues as Recommended Retail Price and Format. Moreover, English titles of the books are only mentioned if English versions of the books figure in the sales statistics.
- 6 For more on the subgenres and developments in this extensive genre, see Agger (2008), for example.
- 7 The four main formats are (ranged according to price): Sewn BB Hardback, BB Hardback - paper over boards, Sewn BC Paperback, and BC Paperback - paper over boards. In addition, there are a number of audio formats, but their market shares are too peripheral to influence the statistics significantly.
- 8 A famous example is Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), which has never appeared on any bestseller list, but is one of the most studied novels in American history (Sutherland, 2007, p. 12).

# Digital Books on the Point of Take-off?

The Ebook in Denmark Anno 2013

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## Abstract

In this article we consider the present state of the ebook's diffusion. On the empirical basis of a national survey among Danes in 2013, we consider the volume, usage patterns, and demographics of ebook reading compared to paper book reading. Informed by diffusion theory and mediatization theory, the article concludes that the reading of ebooks is about to reach a "critical mass;" this development has not least been stimulated by factors outside the traditional

stakeholders of the book (national publishers and bookstores). Ebook reading is becoming part of a converging digital culture in which global media companies like Amazon, Apple, and Google play a key role for the standards and emerging infrastructure. In addition, Danish public libraries have played an important role for the diffusion of ebooks. The ebook usage patterns reflect influences from the presence of both Anglo-American media companies and national libraries.

**Keywords** ebook, book market, ebook users, Denmark, diffusion, mediatization.

## Introduction

The digitalization of the book has for a long time been expected to revolutionize both the publishing industry and the culture of book reading. In particular, the emergence of dedicated ebook readers like the Kindle and Nook has been seen as an important catalyst for moving both publishers and readers into the digital age. In Denmark as well as in other Nordic and European countries, however, the spread of the ebook has been quite slow and has so far not evoked major changes in the publishing industry – at least not compared to the developments in USA and Britain where major media companies like Amazon, Apple, and Google have been highly successful in stimulating distribution and consumption of digital books (PricewaterCoopers, 2010). This ‘delayed’ adoption of ebooks compared to the Anglo-American world may have several reasons, including the size of national languages, public regulations of book markets, the type of dominant actors in the publishing field, and so forth (Rønning and Slaatta, 2012).

Due to a lack of both in-depth studies and detailed statistics about current developments in Denmark, it is difficult to decide the precise reasons for these differences, and even if – as this study suggests – the distribution of ebooks is about to reach “a critical mass” in a Danish context and may begin to ‘catch up’ with the Anglo-American diffusion, the factors behind the proliferation of the ebook may be somewhat different than the Anglo-American case. In this article, we will – on the basis of a nationwide survey of the use of ebooks in Denmark – examine the current proliferation of the ebook and consider some possible factors elucidating the present stage

of diffusion. The study is primarily descriptive and provides baseline data on ebook usage patterns in relation to a variety of demographic factors. Secondly, the study considers three specific questions concerning the use of ebooks:

- Does the reading of ebooks tend to substitute reading of paper books or is the reading of the two types of books mutually supportive practices?
- To what extent have dedicated ebook readers emerged as an independent platform for reading or does reading occur across a range of different digital platform, including general/multi-purpose computers and tablets?
- To what extent does the reading of ebooks encourage the reading of English language books?

### Diffusion and mediatization

Thompson (2005, 2010) has rightly pointed to the fact that the digitalization of the book cannot be reduced to the emergence of the ebook. Instead, the process of digitalization has to be considered within a larger institutional framework and a longer historical timeframe in which stakeholders (for example, publishing houses, authors, book sellers, and the readers) and the various steps in the book's life circle (for example, writing, editing, printing, distribution, and reading) step by step has become influenced by digital technologies. From this perspective, the digitalization of the book has been under way for more than three decades; the production of the book, that is, the authors' writing and the publishers' editing and printing of books, has already been subject to important changes due to digitalization. Today, digitalization is entering the last steps in the book's life circle: the distribution and reading of books.

In this article, we use two strands of theory as a context for discussing the digitalization of the book: diffusion theory and mediatization theory. Diffusion theory (Rogers, 2003) suggests that the diffusion of technological innovations, in our case the ebook as a media technology, follows a characteristic S-curve formed by the successive adoption of the technology among different segments of the population. These segments may be described in relation to their willingness to adopt the technology and Rogers distinguishes between five groups: the innovators, early adopters, early ma-

jority, late majority, and laggards. Diffusion theory has been criticized, modified and further developed since Rogers's contribution (cf. Vishwanath and Barnett, 2011), but in this predominantly descriptive analysis, we only make use of the general propositions of diffusion theory as a context for discussing ebook developments.

Important in our context is the notion of "critical mass." At the initial stages of the diffusion of a technology, the adoption by individuals and organizations must be supported from the outside and may require strong incentives like persuasion by opinion leaders, economic subsidy, or public regulation in order to continue. At a certain point, the diffusion may become self-sustainable because a sufficient amount of people have adopted the technology, which in itself makes it attractive to others. At the same time, this level of diffusion is typically accompanied by higher level of knowledge about the technology, lower prices, availability of content, and so on. The reasons for adopting a particular technology may be manifold and may as Shin (2011) and Gerlach and Buxmann (2013) have demonstrated in the case of the ebook include both cognitive and emotional factors. Thus, diffusion of the ebook will not only be dependent on information about the phenomenon obtained through social networks and media but also on perceptions about whether or not the ebook will offer pleasurable reading experiences and the extent to which the technology is perceived as consistent with the individual's existing values and needs. 'Critical mass' is typically achieved when both of the two first groups, innovators and early adopters, have embraced the technology. In the USA, the diffusion of the ebook has been supported by major media companies like Amazon, Apple, and Google, and they have certainly also influenced diffusion in a Danish context. There are, however, also other social actors that have influenced the diffusion process in Denmark; in particular the public libraries have played an important role for making the access to Danish ebooks more widespread.

Mediatization theory (Hjarvard, 2013) may help explain why a cultural artefact like the book is increasingly influenced by factors outside the domain of the publishing industry, the literary institution, and the educational system. Since the invention of the printing press (Eisenstein, 1979), the book as a medium has always been at least partly dependent on a commercial market and popular demands for information and entertainment. Nevertheless, the pro-

duction and reading of fiction and factual books have to some extent been influenced by the national literary institutions and educational systems. The book acquired a privileged position vis-à-vis other media, being considered a medium of both high cultural esteem (literary value) and enlightenment (scholarly value). The digitalization of the book brings it closer to a converging popular media culture at the same time as the very process of digitalization is promoted by social actors outside the traditional circuit of the book. Digital standards, financial models and cultural norms concerning usage are increasingly decided in a converging media market in which the book is only one medium among others to be consumed on various multi-purpose media platforms. In this way, the digitalization of the book also involves a mediatization of the book. One important consequence of this development is, as PricewaterCoopers (2010, p. 3) suggests, that "in the future, publishers will need to position themselves as content providers, and not just the suppliers of physical books. They will have to make content available on multiple media, in multiple formats, on multiple platforms."

### **Emerging markets for ebooks**

In the USA, the market for ebooks has increased significantly during the last few years: According to statistics from The Association of American Publishers, 457 million ebooks (general fiction and non-fiction for adults, youth and children) were sold in the trade book market in 2012 compared to 10 million ebooks sold in 2008. The market for ebooks grew 45% from 2011 to 2012 and constituted 20% of the overall trade market of books in 2012. Compared to earlier years, the growth rate of 45% is a bit more moderate, yet still profound (Association of American Publishers, 2013a; USA Today, 2013). The ebook sales not only grew inside USA but also on the global market for English language books. American publishers increased their net revenue from sales in non-USA markets with 7.2% to \$833,389 million from 2011 to 2012 (both paper books and ebooks). The relative growth in global sales was particularly high for ebooks: net revenue from American export of ebooks increased with 63% while print books only expanded with 1.3% in the same period. Europe is the leading foreign market for sales of American ebooks (Association of American Publishers, 2013b). The reading of ebooks increased from 16% of all Americans ages

16 and older in November 2011 to 23% in November 2012 (Rainie and Duggan, 2012).

Compared to the development in the USA, the ebook market in Denmark is still emerging, and no clear pattern of preferred distribution channels or reader technologies has yet been established. Likewise, the circulation of ebooks compared to that of ordinary books has so far remained modest. The sale of ebooks is, however, increasing in the Danish market, albeit at a slower pace. The annual statistics from the Danish Publishers Association (2013) demonstrates that the sale of digital materials (comprising ebooks, web portals and audiobooks, online as well as on dvd) rose from 2.6% of the total turnover in 2010, to 3% in 2011 and to 4.9% in 2012. The number of sold digital copies grew from 1,069,200 copies in 2011 to 1,910,700 copies in 2012; this should be compared to the total number of print copies sold in 2012 which was 20,838,800 copies. The total number of available Danish ebook titles is estimated to approx. 10,000 titles in 2012 (Danish Publishers Association, 2013). The internet is increasingly used for buying both paper books and ebooks. In 2000, less than 5% stated they had bought books on the internet but in 2012 this had increased to approx. 20% (Danish Association of Booksellers and Danish Publishers Association, 2012); these historical statistics do not allow a distinction between purchase of ebooks and paper books on the internet.

In Denmark, ebooks are not only circulated through commercial channels. The public libraries have also made substantial efforts to integrate the ebook in their repertoire, formulating different scenarios for the free, public lending of ebooks. These effort resulted in a highly popular service, eReolen ("The eBookshelf"), which allowed library users access to a relatively broad range of ebook versions of books by popular Danish authors. This service was changed considerably when several major Danish publishing houses withdrew their titles from the service in the Autumn of 2012 and went on to launch their own service, ebib.dk, from 2013. Both services allow users in municipalities whose public libraries subscribe to the service to read books in a web browser (through a streaming service), rather than allowing them to download copies of the whole ebook. The new ebib.dk service also employs a different, quota-based pricing structure for how libraries pay for user loans.

Due to the active effort by the public libraries, the download of ebooks from libraries has grown significantly in the period 2009-2012: 152,000 downloads in 2009, 187,000 in 2010, 293,000 in 2011 and 1,264,000 in 2012. (Statistics Denmark, 2013). In 2012, 17% of the Danes using the libraries' internet services state they use it for lending or downloading ebooks (Danish Ministry of Culture, 2012). The number of downloads of film and music (combined) was still higher than ebooks in 2012, but download of ebooks displays the most significant growth. While the download of digital materials from libraries has been growing for several years, the lending of physical materials displays a slow and steady decline (Danish Agency of Culture, 2012; Statistics Denmark, 2013). The number of available Danish ebook titles has, however, been restricted compared to the Danish language paper books available for lending. An estimate from September 2011 of the total number of available library books in print counts 447,621 books in Danish and 310,043 print books in foreign languages. In comparison there were only 2,141 available ebooks titles in Danish and 75,050 ebooks in foreign languages (Danish Agency of Culture, 2012, p. 9).

### **Methodology**

The empirical analysis reported below consists of a national, quantitative survey of ebook reading carried out in March 2013. The survey was conducted with a commercial provider, and the sample (N=1205) was drawn from the provider's online panel to be representative of the Danish Internet population, estimated according to the parameters of age, gender, and geographical location. Due to the nature of online panel research, the sample size was decided beforehand, and was chosen at N≈1200, to ensure reasonable levels of statistical uncertainty, also in cross-tabulations.

The statistical universe for the findings reported in this article is the Danish Internet population, which is the proportion of the entire population that has access to, and uses, the Internet. The Internet population currently covers about 92% of Danish households (Statistics Denmark, 2013). For the purposes of the present discussion, the Internet population represents the relevant universe to sample, since ebook use for all practical purposes requires the user to have Internet access; however, comparisons with readers of paper books does not take into account paper book readers with no

internet access. The study was financed by the research program *The Mediatization of Culture, The Challenge of New Media* at University of Copenhagen. It was carried out in cooperation with the research program *Meaning Across Media: Cross-Media Communication and Co-creation* and two companies *Netminers og Interfazes*. The Danish survey was part of a larger European survey covering general media use conducted by the EU COST Action program "Transforming audiences, transforming societies." In order to avoid terminological confusion, we will use the term "ebook" about the digital text to be read on a variety of media platforms (pc, tablets, mobile phones, and so on) and "ebook reader" about the dedicated hardware technologies which are exclusively designed for reading of books (like Amazon's Kindle, Barnes & Noble's Nook, and Sony's Reader).

### Basic ebook use patterns

Despite the undecided state of the market for ebooks, our survey shows that ebooks is no longer a non-existing phenomenon in terms of use: When asked if they used an ebook on the day before they completed the survey, about 6% of respondents said yes. It is noteworthy that when measured this way, the proportion of ebook users is about a fifth of the proportion of users of ordinary books, signalling that ebook use can no longer be considered rare or be seen purely as an activity reserved for early adopters (Rogers, 2003).

**Table 1**

*Use of different media for accessing book content*

Medium	Share that used this medium the day before
	%
Paper book	32.9% ( $\pm 2.7\%$ )
Ebook	6.1% ( $\pm 1.3\%$ )

N=1205, statistical uncertainty calculated at  $\alpha=.05$

### Preferred platform

A number of different ways of accessing ebooks exists. Dedicated readers, such as for example, Amazon's Kindle product line, allow

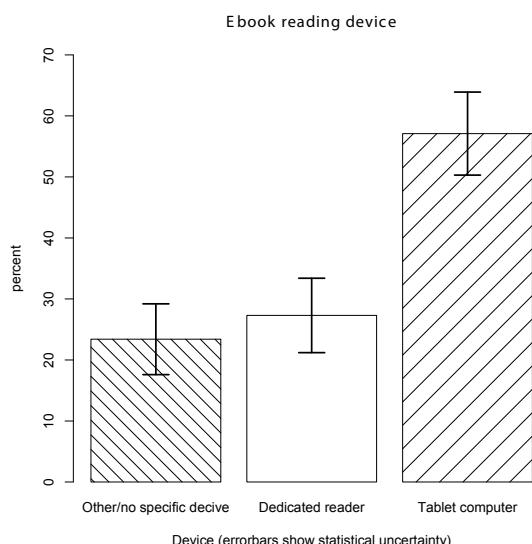
for a reading experience which closely resembles ordinary book reading in a number of important respects. Especially the use of passive screens ("e-Ink"), which are based on the reflection of ambient light for making screen content visible, closely matches the experience of reading ordinary book pages. In 2013, when data for this study was collected, several such dedicated devices were marketed and sold in Denmark. However, the Kindle was not marketed directly by Amazon in Denmark, but rather had to be purchased abroad and delivered by mail from the US or through a few online outlets.

The digital format of the ebook allows readers to access the books using other devices as well. Ebooks can also be distributed on ordinary, general-purpose computers, and not least tablet computers such as, for example, the Apple iPads, and also tablets running Google's operating system for mobile devices, Android, can present ebook content. Although the active, backlit screens of tablets offers a different reading experience from that of dedicated readers, tablets are already widely available in the population, with 19% of households owning a tablet in 2012 (Statistics Denmark, 2012, p. 7), which effectively means that

key elements in the infrastructure necessary for the distribution and use of ebooks is already in place, even before the market for ebooks has gained significant momentum.

The most striking observation from figure 1 is that tablet computers are clearly the dominant platform for reading ebooks. Despite the availability of several, e-Ink-based devices on the market, the various tablet devices represents a combined share of reading devices of about 57%, most likely reflecting the easy access to the device and the relative ease with which titles can be bought from online retailers or downloaded from repositories of free ebooks or ebooks made available online through the public library system. Although the Kindle was not marketed in Denmark at the time of the study, it is noteworthy that of the total 205 ebook users among the respondents, 18% use an Amazon Kindle to

**Figure 1**  
*Devices used for reading ebooks*



N=205. Percentages of ebook users

read ebook content. Despite not being easily available, it is presumably the close integration of the Kindle with Amazon's online delivery system that lies behind its comparatively wide distribution as reading device.

### Emerging markets

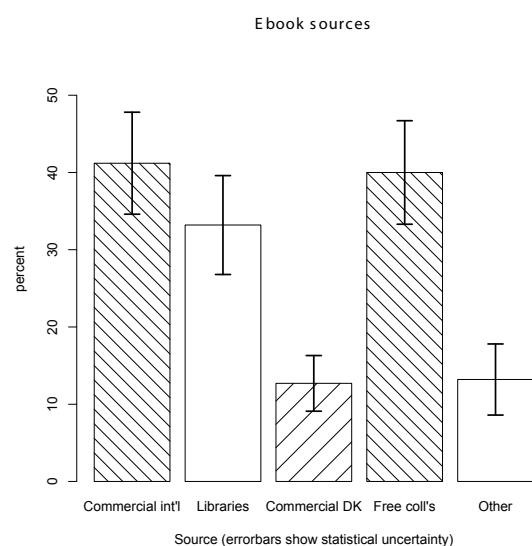
The availability of ebooks is of obvious importance to the ways in which people begin to use ebooks. At the time of the present study, the market for ebooks was clearly still in its infancy, with a relatively small selection of titles available in Danish, and with no clear market structure yet established. While users' willingness to pay for ebook content remains an open (and hotly debated) issue, the already existing user base has established preferences for gaining access to ebooks.

The trend of figure 2 is quite clear since combining the numbers for libraries and free collections show that three in four ebook users have used publicly available collections as a source for ebook content. This may in part reflect the absence of a coherent, easy-to-use commercial outlet for ebooks in the Danish market. It is also likely to reflect the importance of the public libraries' effort to integrate

the lending of ebooks into the services they offer. The high popularity of publicly available content displayed in figure 2 presumably reflects the consequences of the experiment with the eBookshelf, and indicates the importance of the experiment in instigating ebook use in Denmark. More broadly, the trend can also be seen as an indication of the importance of public libraries to Danish literary culture in a wider sense. The public libraries have for many years been a central source of books to the Danish population, and the high level of knowledge and use of the physical libraries may translate into high levels of awareness and use of the libraries' digital services. The fact that Amazon makes up about half of the 40% of users who have at some point acquired ebooks through an international, commercial outlet serves to underline the emerging nature of the Danish

**Figure 2**

*Primary sources for ebooks*



N=205. Percentages of ebook users in the survey

ebook market since Amazon at the time of the study did not carry Danish language ebooks.

### The ebook users

As noted above, a non-negligible proportion of the sample (about 6%) had used an ebook the day before. The use of ebooks is obviously more common than that, and our study shows that about 11% of the internet population uses ebooks at least once every month, and 17% have used ebooks at some point. This compares well with the analysis of the Danes' cultural habits in 2012 which found that 8% of all Danes (and not only of the internet population) read ebooks (Danish Ministry of Culture, 2012, p. 95).

**Table 2**

*Use frequency of different book media*

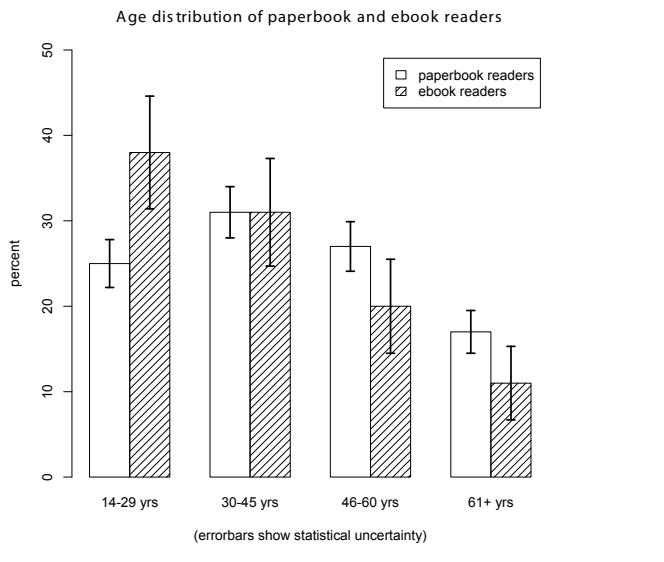
Use frequency	Paper books	Ebooks
At least once per month	56.9% ( $\pm 2.8\%$ )	10.6% ( $\pm 1.7\%$ )
At least once per year	74.6% ( $\pm 2.5\%$ )	17.0% ( $\pm 2.1\%$ )
Never / less than once per year	25.4% ( $\pm 2.5\%$ )	83.0% ( $\pm 2.1\%$ )

N=1205, statistical uncertainty calculated at  $\alpha=0.05$

Despite the non-negligible levels of ebook use noted above, the ebook is by no means a mainstream phenomenon yet. The level of non-use for ebooks is about 83%, while non-use of ordinary books, as reported by respondents, lies much lower at about 25%.<sup>1</sup> Given the technological difficulties that users commonly have to negotiate in order to access ebooks (downloading apps to their tablet or working out how to access books which are often offered in a variety of ebook file formats), the relative differences between the technically mediated formats and the paper-based book appears realistic.

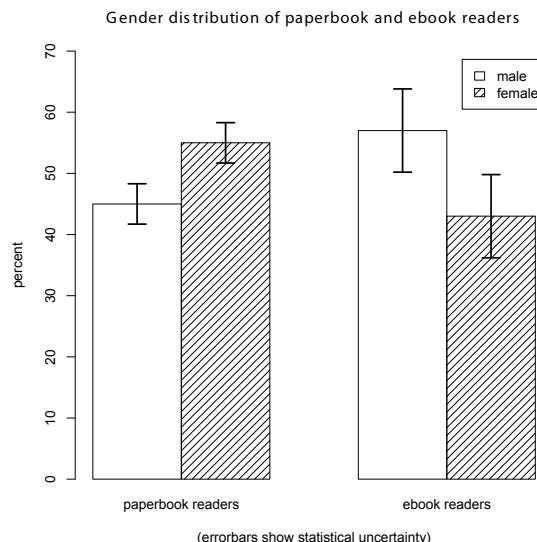
It is also noteworthy that the share of respondents who report to have used ebooks at least once in a year is about 17%. This corresponds closely to the 16% that by definition makes up the combined shares of the 'innovator' and 'early adopter' segments in Roger's diffusion theory (Rogers, 2003), signalling that the ebook might be

**Figure 3**  
*Age distribution of paper book readers and ebook readers*



N=899 (paper book readers) and N=205 (ebook readers)

**Figure 4**  
*Gender distribution of paper book and ebook readers*



N=899 (paper book readers) and N=205 (ebook readers)

gaining critical mass, and thus be about to enter a phase of more rapid diffusion to larger segments of the population.

### Reading habits

The acceleration of diffusion processes depends to large extent on the social transfer of norms and attitudes from adopters to non-users, so for an innovation to gain critical mass it is not enough that a large number of people have adopted a given innovation, they also need to be the right kind of people. Innovations become accepted into the mainstream when potential users meet people who are already users and through them learn the possible uses of an innovation for their own practices and concerns (Kawakami and Parry, 2013). Figure 3 shows the age distribution of ebook users and respondents who read ordinary books.

While figure 3 shows that ebook readers tend to be younger than people who read ordinary books, a more important observation is that the two age distributions follow the same pattern, suggesting that the two groups are not fundamentally different: The group of ebook reading respondents are not only young and (see figure 4 below) male (as might be expected of early adopters), but rather consists of people from all age groups and of both genders.

Taken together, figure 3 and 4 suggests that although ebook readers tend to be younger and are also more likely to be male, they have a demographic profile that broadly resembles that of paper book readers: although some differences exist,

the overall picture is one of broad similarity, not of difference. From the perspective of innovation diffusion, this suggests that potential ebook users (assumed to be most prevalent among people who already read paper books) are likely to meet or know people similar to themselves who already use ebooks.

The emerging character of the market has so far meant that people sought out ebooks from a variety of sources, both domestic and foreign. Since the market for ebooks is more mature not least in the US, it is relevant to look at the potential changes that the diffusion of ebooks may have on ebook users' preferences for the language of the books they read.

**Table 3**

*Ebook users' reading of books in English*

Reading habits	%
Ebooks have made me read more books in English	15.6% ( $\pm 5.0\%$ )
I never read books in English	17.1% ( $\pm 5.1\%$ )
Ebooks have not changed my reading of books in English	54.6% ( $\pm 6.8\%$ )

N=205, statistical uncertainty calculated at  $\alpha=.05$

As table 3 shows, a small group of ebook users (between 10 and 20 per cent) report that using ebooks have made them read more books in English, suggesting that although ebooks have not fully penetrated the market yet, the switch from paper based book distribution to digital distribution may hold a potential for shifting readers from Danish to English language reading to a non-negligible extent. If this trend turns out to be robust, it signals that the diffusion of ebooks may have wider consequences for literary landscape as a whole, beyond the immediate challenges to business models that are linked to the technological shift per se.

## Conclusion

The reading of ebooks is no longer a negligible phenomenon only to be observed among a tiny segment of technologically savvy us-

ers. It is still limited to a minority of books readers in general, but both the number of people reading ebooks and the currently available infrastructure in terms of a variety of digital reading platforms, online booksellers, and digital libraries suggest that the reading of ebooks will increase noticeably in the coming years. Our analysis indicates that ebook reading is about to reach a “critical mass” which will allow the further diffusion to be sustained not only by external incentives and technologically interested “innovators” but also through the social interaction between “early adopters” of the ebooks and the coming “early majority.” There is no sign of digital books replacing paper books, but the reading of ebooks and print books seems to be mutually supporting activities. An important indicator of a “critical mass” is, in fact, that the interest in ebooks seems to be driven not only by an interest in the technology, but also by a general interest in reading books.

Our analysis confirms that the diffusion of the ebook is also driven by factors outside the traditional stakeholders of the book. The spread of digital media platforms like iPads and other tablets has become more important technologies for the reading of ebooks than the dedicated ebook readers. Thus, the general availability of multi-purpose media technology comes to be an important condition for the future spread of ebooks. Furthermore, Anglo-American media conglomerates like Amazon, Apple, and Google have – among a host of other digital companies – promoted a whole new and global infrastructure for the digital book. National publishing houses and bookstores have so far not played a dominant part in the development of the ebook, having been far more reactive than proactive. One result of this new global infrastructure seems to be that a segment of the reading public comes to be more acquainted with English language books. An important exception to global trends in ebook diffusion is the important role of public libraries for the spread of ebooks in Denmark. As a traditional stakeholder of the book, public libraries seem to have played an important role for the diffusion of the ebook by both developing a national infrastructure for lending ebooks and providing a supply of digital Danish language books.

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### Notes

- 1 Some level of social desirability bias may be affecting the self-reported level of non-use of books in a negative direction.

# Blockbusters as Vehicles for Cultural Debate in Cultural Journalism

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## Abstract

Taking our point of departure in 'the cultural intermediary' as theoretical concept (Bourdieu, 1984; Maguire and Matthews, 2012) and in the coverage of blockbuster movies on Danish cultural pages from 1960 to 2012, this article analyses the changing role of the cultural journalist and the changing cultural approach in cultural journalism since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The analysis shows that the negotiation and definition of the blockbuster as cultural phenomenon has changed; whereas it was originally, critically, interpreted as a sign of cultural imperialism, Americanisation, or artistic decline, it is increasingly viewed as a global, omnipresent cultural and industrial phenomenon with its own aesthetic, narrative, and cultural logic. In this manner, the coverage exemplifies that the blockbuster has been and continues to be negotiated as a (relevant) object of cultural journalism; that cultural journalism at different times provides different

reflective spaces for popular culture; and that contemporary cultural journalism continues to be critical and contemplative at the same time as it provides cultural service and infotainment. Consequently, the analysis also illustrates how the role of journalists as cultural intermediaries has changed historically.

**Keywords** Cultural journalism, Blockbuster movies, PR; Cultural industries, Cultural intermediaries, Press coverage.

## Introduction

This article analyses how blockbuster movies have been covered and discussed in Danish newspapers during the past 50 years. When talking pictures were introduced in Denmark in the 1930s and movies became the Danes' favorite kind of entertainment (Dinnesen and Kau, 1983), national and international movies, film directors, and stars also became important subjects on the newspapers' cultural agenda (Kristensen and From, 2011; Kristensen, 2010). Since then, the often extensive coverage of, for example, blockbusters as well as the increasing personalisation and sensationalisation (Gripsrud, 2000) of the reporting on art and culture have been interpreted as a transformation from critical, cultural reflection to publicity-driven journalism, entertainment, and celebrity gossip, that is, as a decline in arts and cultural journalism (for example, Lund, 2005; Bech-Karlsen, 1991). These arguments, voiced in several Western countries both by scholars and in the public debate (see also Hellman and Jaakkola, 2012; Knapskog and Larsen, 2008; NAJP, 2004, 2000; Strahan, 2011), focus first and foremost on the commercial motivations of the cultural industries as well as the news media, and they imply that the commercial and publicist objectives of the press are almost mutually exclusive. Furthermore, the critical arguments often lack qualitative, historical analytical grounding since not much research has taken a detailed look at how *specific* cultural topics or phenomena – such as the blockbuster – have been covered by the press at different historical points in time.

Drawing on 'the cultural intermediary' as theoretical concept (Bourdieu, 1984; Hesmondhalgh, 2006; Maguire and Matthews, 2012) for understanding the changing role of the cultural journalist and the changing cultural approach in cultural journalism since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, this article analyses the blockbuster as a specific

cultural and commercial phenomenon on the Danish cultural pages in the period 1960-2012. The article aims at demonstrating the way in which cultural journalism may stimulate public debate, also when covering a mainstream cultural phenomenon such as the blockbuster, and the way in which this coverage of blockbusters in a historical perspective reflects more overall historical changes of Danish cultural journalism and changes in the media system as such. On the one hand, the analysis confirms the critical voices accusing cultural journalists of running the errands of the movie industry, and it confirms that the coverage of blockbusters in a historical perspective reflects the movie industry's adaptation to the media logic (see also Kristensen and From, 2013). On the other hand, the analysis *also* demonstrates that cultural journalists have redefined their role as 'cultural intermediaries' by providing new frames for understanding and evaluating popular culture, and that these frames have been negotiated in various ways and changed over time.

### **Blockbusters as cultural news**

The double perspective in cultural journalism when covering blockbusters, alluded to in the introduction, is closely linked to the 'nature' of the blockbuster. One may namely argue that the blockbuster as cultural phenomenon represents inevitable cultural news: blockbusters are spectacular due to their mix of economy, stardom, technical novelty, and marketing. As a consequence, blockbusters are characterised by – famously or notoriously for – their (economical) size and risk (for example, Neale, 2003). The movie industry and the recurring discussions of the blockbuster during its production on multiple platforms build up great public awareness and high expectations, and involve the potential of either great success or great failure both at the box office and more generally in the public debate. Both outcomes are newsworthy from the perspective of cultural journalism: A commercially or aesthetically successful blockbuster may be acknowledged for this, but if it fails, it is still newsworthy, precisely because of the disappointing outcome, which may foster cultural debate on the film industry and its production values. Put differently, their production budgets and box office potential make blockbusters unavoidable in the public realm and on the cultural agenda and may from a publicist perspective either way raise essen-

tial discussions on aesthetics, the distinctions and interplay between art and popular culture, culture industrial circuits, and commercial issues. In that sense, one may argue that cultural journalists become 'cultural intermediaries' between industries, producers of culture (in a broad sense), experts, and the public. This indicates that blockbusters are not only *inevitable*, but also represent *important* topics on the cultural agenda.

### **The cultural journalist as 'cultural intermediary'**

Bourdieu's concept 'the cultural intermediary' (1984) has been discussed and applied widely in academic literature – in fact to such an extent that Maguire and Matthews (2012) ask: 'Are we all cultural intermediaries?' Also Hesmondhalgh (2007) criticises academia for, faultily, having applied the concept in so many contexts and to so many types of cultural or creative labourers that it has become confusing and unproductive. In this article we apply the term to the media professionals or occupations, to which it seems to have originally been designated; the cultural critics or cultural journalists in the news media.<sup>1</sup> But we also apply Maguire and Matthews's (2012) distinction of three dimensions characterising what the cultural intermediary does in contemporary society – *frame goods*, *claim expertise*, and *have impact* – by exemplifying how these dimensions become visible in the work of cultural journalists; in this case, when they cover blockbusters, but also how they take different shapes at different historical points in time. That is, dimensions which make cultural intermediaries – and cultural journalists more specifically – distinctive, and imply that not everybody are cultural intermediaries.

In the case of blockbusters, the *framing of goods* involves cultural journalists framing the evaluation of specific cultural phenomenon or products – movies – and in this manner constructing and/or ascribing value to these movies. This evaluation is not only addressed to the cultural consumers (the movie audiences) but also to the circuit or network of cultural production and distribution which cultural journalists and the news media are themselves part of. That is, the network of peers in the cultural industry (ranging from public institutions to private companies), in academia, and in the cultural press across platforms (magazines, online, broadcast and so forth). Thus, the framing and evaluation of goods is conditioned

by a variety of media internal and media external factors and agents. This framing, to which we will return in the analysis, has changed historically and is, in a current perspective, closely linked to movie generic or genre-specific evaluation criteria, media institutional profiles, and the subjective positions / tastes of journalists / reviewers. Accordingly, cultural journalists as cultural intermediaries are characterised and distinguished by their *expertise* and *cultural capital*. As we will discuss further below, our analysis indicates that the expertise of the cultural journalist covering blockbusters is increasingly anchored in media professional criteria (reader / media profiles, the news paradigm and so on) rather than in aesthetic ideals (expertise on arts, aesthetics and so on), as also demonstrated by Hellman and Jaakkola (2012) and Vik (2008). As indicated by Maguire and Matthews (2012), the cultural intermediary's claim to expertise is, however, also anchored in personal or subjective tastes or preferences. Finally, the cultural journalist as cultural intermediary influences the way in which 'quality' is negotiated in culture and society. That is, s/he ascribes legitimacy to cultural artefacts or trends and, in this manner, has *impact*. Journalistic evaluations and journalistic genres construct, negotiate, and circulate definitions of legitimate culture, for example, blockbusters, and may in this process challenge and change these same definitions (Maguire and Matthews, 2012).

By means of our analysis of the newspaper coverage of blockbusters, we aim at demonstrating how cultural journalists in a historical perspective perform the role of cultural intermediaries between cultural commodities, artists / producers, and the cultural consumers or citizens and, in this manner, both frame and impact 'upon notions of *what*, and thereby *who*, is legitimate, desirable and worthy, and thus by definition what and who is not' (Maguire and Matthews, 2012, p 552), but also the ways in which their grounds for or terms of framing and unfolding expertise and cultural influence have changed over time.

### Methodology

A recurring argument in the vast academic literature on blockbusters is that defining what constitutes a blockbuster is challenging (for example, Schatz, 2003; Neale 2003). Scholars disagree on *when* the blockbuster is 'introduced' or 'conceptualised' and on its geographical spreading, but they agree that it is, first and foremost, an

American post Second World War phenomenon (Schatz, 2003; Neale 2003). For that reason, we have chosen to analyse the coverage of *American* blockbusters since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. That is, an epoch closely connected to the professionalisation of the movie industry's PR efforts (for example, Durie, 1993; Marshall, 2006; Thompson, 2007), a broadening cultural concept with dissolving boundaries between high brow and low brow (for example, Gans, 1999), and the development of a double contract in cultural journalism, addressing the public as cultural citizens, individual cultural consumers as well as media users (From, 2010; Kristensen and From, 2011).

The analysis includes the coverage of three blockbusters in selected Danish newspapers: The center-right, business-oriented broadsheet *Jyllands-Posten*; the center-left, culturally-oriented broadsheet *Politiken*; and the tabloid *Ekstra Bladet*. The three movies are *Ben-Hur* (1959), the remake of a silent movie from 1925, adapted from the novel 'Ben-Hur: A tale of the Christ by Wallace Lew', which opened in Denmark in 1962, and which has repeatedly been labelled a blockbuster in the academic literature (for example, Cook, 1990; Stringer, 2003); *Batman Forever* (1995), based on the DC comics character Batman; and *Sex and the City* (2008), the movie spin-off of the internationally successful television serial of the same title and also considered a blockbuster at the time of its release.<sup>2</sup> These movies were not selected because of their specific aesthetic, narrative, or technological characteristics, similarities or differences, or because of their success at the box office (besides the fact that they were all blockbusters) but as typical examples of the press coverage of blockbusters at the given time (1960s, 1990s, 2000s). However, they do illustrate the very wide 'generic' framework of what may be considered a blockbuster, just as all of the movies are part of a cultural circuit that includes adaptations or spin-offs from literary, film and/or television originals.

We mainly but not exclusively analyse the *reviews* of these movies, since this particular genre has a long history of defining cultural journalism as a specific *kind* of journalism based on views rather than news (Hellman and Jaakkola, 2012; Kristensen and From, 2011). The analysis explores the arguments deployed to evaluate the blockbusters and the ways in which this film critical argumenta-

tion has changed significantly during the 50-year time period represented by the selected movies and their critiques in the press.

### Analysis

The following analysis<sup>3</sup> aims at demonstrating the increasingly multifaceted critical approach to the blockbuster as film cultural phenomenon during the past five decades, involving a spectrum from critical debate to pleasurable entertainment, and displaying the double contract of contemporary cultural journalism. At all times, the cultural journalists facilitate public debate and reflection on film culture when covering blockbuster movies, but they take their point of departure in very dissimilar premises and approaches, closely connected to the cultural and societal circumstances of their time.

#### *Ben-Hur – art as critical yardstick*

The coverage of *Ben-Hur* at its opening in Danish cinemas in 1962 – three years after its American opening in 1959 – was characterised by a limited use of genres, a few reviews, limited service information about the movie, no celebrity stories (for instance, interviews with the star actor Charlton Heston or star director William Wyler), and a quite unbalanced discussion of the movie as cultural phenomenon.

No doubt, Danish reviewers and moviegoers had anticipated the opening of *Ben-Hur*. The review of the movie in the broadsheet *Jyllands-Posten*, 'Rome before and now and an exhausting Ben-Hur' (February 22, 1962), for example, framed *Ben-Hur* as a spectacular 'phenomenon' by arguing 'Finally the huge movie is launched in Denmark. Unfortunately, it was not waiting for'. Even though *Ben-Hur* as blockbuster was recognised as a topic of interest to the readers, the point of departure for its evaluation was art rather than popular or mainstream culture. The same newspaper, for example, argued: 'Wyler has at no point put his personal mark on the movie – fifty other Hollywood craftsmen could have done the same'. Similarly, the broadsheet *Politiken* (February 20, 1962) explicitly designated *Ben-Hur* in opposition to art: 'Now former artist William Wyler triumphed as producer of mass entertainment' and 'this is all quantity – but not art'. Thus the rhetorical framing of these reviews imply that popular movie genres were (often) perceived to be of low quality and symptomatic of the Americanisation of the film industry of the time (for example, Petersen and Sørensen, 2006), see-

ing art as the relevant point of departure for evaluation. The critics even allude to the 'insanity' of audiences enjoying the movie: 'If you need more entertainment after this movie, you must be ready for admission' (*Politiken*, February 20, 1962).

This conception is confirmed by the newspapers' coverage of the Academy Awards granted to *Ben-Hur* in 1960: while appraising a French actress for outcompeting her American contestants – 'The sensation at the Academy Awards this year was that a French movie star beat all of her American colleagues' (*Politiken*, April 6, 1960) – and characterizing her work as splendid, the broadsheet *Politiken* covered *Ben-Hur* in more sceptical tones, implying foul play by the film company: 'It came as absolutely no surprise in Hollywood, where the Metropol-Company [eds. Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer] has for months pushed the argument that the new adaptation of Lewis Wallace's biblical novel is the mammoth movie of all times'. Thus, the Danish press sidestepped *Ben-Hur*'s historical achievement at the Oscars.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, both the reviews of *Ben-Hur* and the coverage of the movie when celebrated at the Academy Awards presented a rather sceptical position, exemplifying the cultural journalist as cultural intermediary framing cultural goods and signifying legitimate cultural value in the terms of Maguire and Matthews (2012). That is, framing the evaluation of 'good' and 'bad' as closely related to art and judging *Ben-Hur* as a movie of poor quality, and discursively determining the American blockbuster as a film category of less cultural value. However, even though the coverage in this manner displays media cultural or institutional consensus on framing *Ben-Hur* as a spectacular 'phenomenon' but also on evaluating it on the terms of art despite its Hollywood production features, the various quotes also suggest that *Ben-Hur*, as a blockbuster, after all fostered critical debate on movies as cultural phenomenon and artefact.

### Batman Forever – media profiling reviews

The coverage of *Batman Forever* in 1995 included a more extensive and varied debate as well as use of genres compared to *Ben-Hur*, but it also demonstrates that different media institutions applied different approaches and claims when reviewing the movie.

The tabloid *Ekstra Bladet* (August 4, 1995), for example, claimed *Batman Forever* to be a good film, arguing that 'The movie is excel-

lently made' and emphasising the production and use of technology as fascinating and worthwhile. This implies that technological innovation had become a quality parameter, but also that the movie was reviewed on the terms of mainstream movie genres. Contrary to this positive approach, the broadsheet *Politiken* (August 4, 1995), a newspaper known for its cultural profile (Bredal, 2009), claimed that *Batman Forever* was a bad movie: 'The inventiveness is not huge' and 'you cannot experience it as art for the sake of art'. This indicates that art was still perceived a relevant yardstick for evaluation by this newspaper, regardless of *Batman Forever* being an action-adventure blockbuster movie.

These quite dissimilar interpretations and valuations may be a result of the individual reviewer's tastes and criteria of evaluation – or, in the terms of Maguire and Matthews (2012), a result of the cultural intermediaries' personal or subjective dispositions. However, in a broader media institutional perspective, the displayed differences in newspaper opinions also mirror diverse editorial interpretations of reader interests and thus exemplify that cultural journalism as topic or journalistic field – and opinionated genres such as the review in particular – may differentiate, profile, or segment the individual newspapers (Kristensen and From, 2011; Kristensen, 2010, 2009), similarly to the political leanings of the newspapers voiced in editorial and on the op-ed pages (Hjarvard, 2010). The framing or approach of the cultural journalist as cultural intermediary has changed in accordance with these media institutional transformations, since media professional conceptions of the role or impact of cultural journalism in general have come to the fore: Cultural journalism has to provide entertainment and cultural guidance *as well as* reflection and debate. More broadly, it implies a transformation where the profile or brand of the individual newspapers in an increasingly competitive media market – or, media institutional and professional aspects – has become part of the framing of cultural journalism and cultural reviewing.

### **Sex and the City – reviewing on movie generic terms**

The coverage of *Sex and the City* in 2008 confirms that the newspapers' approach to the blockbuster as film cultural phenomenon may serve as platform for accentuating specific cultural profiles. How-

ever, the reviews of this movie also illustrate that the point of departure when evaluating popular culture had changed further.

More specifically, the reviews of *Sex and the City* indicates that film generic aspects had become an important part of the reviewers' argumentation, because they evaluated the movie in the light of expectations associated with the romantic comedy as genre. *Politiken* (June 6, 2008), for example, stated: 'The most important ingredients are still part of the universe in the movie version [...] the dose has, however, been so radically changed that there – unfortunately – is less sex, less city, and less humour', designating that popular culture have to be assessed with regards to its generic affiliation. *Sex and the City* was in this manner neither compared to fine art, nor discussed as trash or low culture – it was compared to movies of the same genre and, of particular importance, to the extremely popular television series from the early 2000s<sup>5</sup> which it originated from. More specifically, all reviews compared the qualities of the television series and the qualities of the movie. The reviewer from *Jyllands-Posten* (June 6, 2008), for example, stated: 'I had so heartily hoped that this movie-continuation of my absolutely favourite pastime could live up to my naïve hopes and be a really good movie and meet all our desires for more genuine escapist entertainment.' Despite the critical and disappointed undertone, this quote confirms that the reviewer applies her critical view from within the generic universe of the movie and television series, and her disappointment is precisely caused by the fact that the movie does not fulfil the generic expectations associated with the romantic comedy.

Even though both *Ben-Hur* and *Batman Forever* were also adaptations of other cultural expressions, this legacy was less explicit in the coverage and evaluation of these movies, whereas the opening of a blockbuster at the turn of the 21st century is a more inevitable event from a cultural journalistic perspective than ever before, not least because of the rapidly changing and omnipresent cross-media environment as well as production- and promotional culture (for example, Davis, 2013; Jenkins, 2006; Thompson, 2007). This is emphasised by the fact that the coverage of *Sex and the City* in all the newspapers recurrently linked it to the broader culture industrial circuit, which it, as a spin-off cultural commodity, was part of. That is, a cultural phenomenon or trend touching upon gender issues, sex, fashion, work-life balance, salaries, big-city life and so on. For

the same reason, *Sex and the City* was often included as cultural reference in newspaper articles covering a range of topics concerning contemporary culture and society. In this manner, the opening of the movie and the expectations of the audience – as well as of the reviewers – were shaped by, among other things, encounters with the foregoing television series and by the on-going societal debates on gender, family, and ways of life, which *Sex and the City* was part of, epitomised, and had anticipated as a popular cultural reference. This exemplifies contemporary blockbusters as part of a vast circuit of interconnected popular genres and cultural forms with blurring boundaries between texts, cultural expressions, and society. However, it also indicates that art as well as popular culture has become flexible, because cultural legitimacy is negotiated in the light of everyday values and practices (see also Maguire and Matthews, 2012, p. 558). Last but not least, it implies that the framing of the cultural journalist as cultural intermediary has changed because popular culture has become something that must be evaluated on its own terms, and because cultural journalists may contextualise the interplay of cultural consumers and cultural products, negotiate cultural values, and provide new frames for understanding and valuating popular culture.

### **Conclusion**

The analytical findings presented in this article exemplify an increasing professionalisation of the interplay of the cultural industry and the press, but also an increasing professionalisation of the news media and their logic. On the one hand, the changing approach of cultural journalism when reviewing blockbusters illustrates increasingly close connections between cultural journalism and the movie industry, and that the press continues to play an important role in movie marketing despite the availability of an increasing number of media platforms. On the other hand, it illustrates that upcoming blockbusters provide important content to the cultural pages and are, for that reason, covered with an increasing awareness of genre, attention to reader interests and purposes, and having a broadened and less hierarchical interpretation of culture as point of departure. The press increasingly uses the opening of a blockbuster as an opportunity to address these kinds of movies in more analytical or commenting articles, discussing the blockbuster as film cultural

phenomenon, combining media commercial and publicist purposes. Thus, the analysis shows that the negotiation and definition of the blockbuster as cultural phenomenon has changed: whereas it was originally, critically, interpreted as a sign of cultural imperialism, Americanisation, or artistic decline, it is increasingly viewed as a global, omnipresent cultural and industrial phenomenon (see also Janssen, et al., 2008) with its own aesthetic, narrative and cultural logic. In this manner, the coverage exemplifies that the blockbuster has been and continues to be negotiated as a (relevant) object of cultural journalism; that cultural journalism at different times provides different reflective spaces for popular culture; and that contemporary cultural journalism continues to be critical and contemplative at the same time as it provides cultural service and infotainment. Consequently, the analysis also illustrates how the role of journalists as cultural intermediaries has changed historically.

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### Notes

1 In *Distinction* (1984, p. 325) Bourdieu argues that the typical new cultural intermediaries include 'the producers of cultural programmes on TV and radio or

the critics of “quality” newspapers and magazines and all the writer-journalists and journalist-writers’. See also Hesmondhalgh (2007, p. 66-67).

- 2 <<http://articles.latimes.com/2008/jun/02/business/fi-boxoffice2/>> [Accessed 27 August 2013], <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sex\\_and\\_the\\_City\\_\(film\)#cite\\_note-21](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sex_and_the_City_(film)#cite_note-21)> [Accessed 27 August 2013].
- 3 All quotes have been translated from Danish by the authors.
- 4 Only *Titanic* (1997) and *Lord of The Rings: The Return of the King* (2003) have been awarded a matching number of Academy Awards.
- 5 The television series ran for six seasons from 1998-2004 (<[http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0159206/?ref\\_=tt\\_ov\\_inf](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0159206/?ref_=tt_ov_inf)>, [Accessed 7 June 2013].

# Fieldwork

## Paul Auster as a Popular Postmodern Fiction Writer

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### Abstract

This article examines some aspects of the phenomenon of popular fiction, using the terminology proposed by Pierre Bourdieu in his works on distinction and cultural production, including 'position taking,' 'field,' and 'capital(s).' After the theoretical groundwork is laid, the second half of the article analyzes specifically the case of popular postmodern author Paul Auster, with regards to the role of genre and dual readership/reading protocol inscribed in his fictions, the mechanisms of gatekeeping, consecration and position taking involved in the production of his place in the field of popular fiction (cf. Ken Gelder's *Popular Fiction: The Logics and Practices of a Literary Field*, 2004),<sup>1</sup> and the distinct American and European/Scandinavian markets for his books.

**Keywords** Paul Auster, Pierre Bourdieu, fieldwork, position taking, capital, consecration.

### Bourdieu's fieldwork

Pierre Bourdieu's extensive work in literary sociology forms the starting point of this inquiry. Bourdieu was never explicitly inter-

ested in the popular forms of culture, but his theories concerning agency and taste formation in high culture lend themselves excellently to use also on popular culture phenomena. A very compact quote from Bourdieu's *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993) below must first be unpacked and operationalized:

The task is that of constructing the space of positions and the space of the position takings (*prises de position*) in which they are expressed. The science of the literary field is a form of *analysis situs* which establishes that each position – e.g. the one which corresponds to a genre such as the novel or, within this, to a sub-category such as the 'society novel' (*roman mondain*) or the 'popular novel' – is subjectively defined by the system of distinctive properties by which it can be situated relative to other positions; that every position, even the dominant one, depends for its very existence, and for the determinations it imposes on the occupants, on the other positions constituting the field, and that the structure of the field, i.e. of the space of positions, is nothing other than the structure of the distribution of the capital of specific properties which governs success in the field and the winning of the external or specific profits (such as literary prestige) which are at stake in the field. (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 51)

From here we get the following useful categories:

"Position taking" – which has a noticeably social-constructivist ring to it, and emphasizes the actor in a given field as taking a self-chosen position. It is thus more agency-focused than structure-focused. As we shall see in the case of Paul Auster, a savvy agent in the literary field can position him/herself with considerable tactical success by knowing the dynamics within a given field and its neighbors. A successful position taking in any cultural field will be accompanied by a consecration of the work or producer (author) in question by various gatekeepers within the field. This is valid both for popular and high culture, the main difference being the form of consecration, where popular culture more often is consecrated as successful through units moved and profits generated, whereas a purer form of aesthetic argument is usually marshaled for high, or

‘quality’ culture’s success criteria. Such consecration takes many forms, but awards, academic esteem and canonization, as well as general extra-literary fame in the public sphere, are essential aspects of the consecration process.

“Field (of cultural production)” – which indicates that any given type of cultural activity takes place within a bounded space with borders, entryways, or gates, with other agents attached to the given field, who serve as gatekeepers. Within each field, there is additionally a struggle for dominance, and position taking is key in the game that decides the dominant and subordinate positions. Transitions from one field to another are also regulated by gatekeepers and may only be possible on the basis on some capital exchange or other.

“Capital” – which of course is the main Bourdieu category as such. In the above quote, the subcategories of capital that Bourdieu has posited are not specified, but it is common knowledge from his other works (for instance “The Forms of Capital” in J.E. Richardson (ed): *The Handbook of Theory of Research for the Sociology of Education*, 1986) that he operates with the following: economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital. The latter of the four is really a subcategory of the institutionalized type of cultural capital, so it can be disregarded it here. The quote above refers “to the capital of specific properties which governs success in the field,” which can mean both social capital gained and spent in networking within a field; cultural capital which can be acquired through education and training / practice to gain entry into the field and negotiate more consecrated positions subsequently; and economic capital to which Bourdieu signifies property and possessions as well as capital in the traditional Marxist sense.

In the quote, Bourdieu also discusses how genres themselves take positions in the literary field, and one can employ a similar move to the fiction of Paul Auster, which can also be classified in terms of genre (detective fiction, political thriller, metafiction, magical realism, and so forth) and significant literary traits, such as complexity of narration, non-teleological versus epistemic writing, and plot resolution. These features can be argued to have an impact on the popularity of Auster’s fiction, in some cases severely delimiting his potential for attaining best-seller status, or entering the lucrative field of film options (in fact, only one of Auster’s books has been adapted into a film, although he has been a screen-writer on a few

other projects). Some Auster works can thus be argued to potentially be able to take more consecrated positions in the field of popular fiction, whereas others do not have this potential. Some academics, such as cultural iconicity studies specialist Joe Moran (in his book from 2000, *Star Authors: Literary Celebrity in America*), emphasize the complexities of the consecration process in a given field, seeing it as a series of negotiations between different agents (including reviewers, publishers, academic critics, and readers) from different positions inside and outside the given field. Far from taking issue with this commonplace observation, the present article aims to further nuance our perception of these processes by focusing on a highly intelligent and field-savvy agent such as Auster, and trace how he uses textual, paratextual and extra-textual strategies to enable a much more active position taking for himself than the average popular author is capable of.

On balance, Auster must be said to belong to the 'autonomous' (Bourdieu's term for a field not overly determined by purely economic parameters, that is, intended to generate primarily economic capital) field of quality literature (some would even call it avant-garde literature), which is to a large extent distinct from the field of popular literature, partly through its separate set of rules and success criteria (quantity of sales is crucial in the field of popular fiction, as is adaptability into other media such as films and games), and partly due to its separate categories of gate-keepers (academics play a larger role in delimiting and consecrating actors in the field of quality literature than they do in the field of popular fiction), although some overlap exists between the fields of quality and popular literature (as witnessed by for instance the *New York Times* best-seller lists which routinely feature titles from both these fields).

Related to the idea of popularity as a field position, sketched in the above, is the idea of dual reading protocols embedded in many postmodern cultural texts (whether they be fiction, music, art or film). A successful dual reading protocol will mean that the work lends itself to several readings by several audience types. A novel may for instance be read purely for the plot (teleologically / epistemologically, as for instance a detective novel which tends to offer a solution to the crime depicted), or for the enjoyment of play (ludically / ontologically).<sup>2</sup> Further reading positions one can imagine for a casual reader of fiction would include reading for the power of

fascination with charismatic characters (offering potential identification points for the reader), or reading for the fascination with setting (what one could call canvassing the 'exotic,' as seen in the case of Jonathan Safran Foer, Jonathan Lethem, Michael Chabon, and many other New York authors using the representation of the big city as a hook for readers). One must, however, be extremely careful not to make the misunderstanding of assigning only one reading protocol capacity to any one individual reader. Rather, readers swerve between reading protocols and are very substantially influenced by the archetextual markers the text comes with (signaling genre) and other paratextual markers used by publishers and marketers, as well as embedded textual instances such as an implied author. To be perfectly clear, any individual reader can alternate between reading for the plot and for the play at very short notice, and often does so during the course of reading one work.

I claim that as an author Auster oscillates between deliberately seeking to implement a dual reading protocol and therefore deliberately influencing the reader to read for the plot and/or the character in certain works (such as *Moon Palace* and *The Music of Chance*), and not caring about a popular readership at all in some works (such as *Travels in the Scriptorium*).<sup>3</sup> As a final twist in the tale of Auster's position taking in the popular literary field, a few remarks on his practice of publishing in Danish prior to his works appearing in the 'original' American versions are in order.

### Auster's fieldwork

Auster enjoys the role that chance plays in life as well as in fiction. Several of his novels are built around chance occurrences and their repercussions for characters in the plots. This preference for the aleatory wreaks havoc with many conventions of realism, and particularly with the conventions of the detective genre, which Auster used as a vehicle in the first volume of *The New York Trilogy*, *City of Glass* (1987). Here a resolution of the crime – even settling the issue of whether any crime at all was committed – was withheld from the reader, letting down anyone clinging to the epistemological reading protocol encouraged by the presence of stock elements from the detective genre. Auster seems later in his career to have chosen a position taking on the aspect of chance that seeks to vindicate his seemingly excessive use of it in fiction. His edited volume *True Tales of*

*American Life* from 2001 is a collection of tales that are ‘stranger than fiction,’ many of which feature more unlikely chance happenings than Auster’s own novels. As he writes in the introduction to the collection of stories from The National Story Project making up the volume: “More often than not our lives resemble the stuff of eighteenth-century novels” (Auster, 2001, p. xvii). The point here seems to be that life itself justifies Auster’s choice of unlikely plot starters and resolutions. This is a good example of an author moving somewhat outside his field as a novelist and from the outside seeking to manipulate potentially hostile gatekeepers (in this case, critics) within his main field to revise their positions.

Another favorite Auster move is to insert paper versions of himself into his novels. Again this goes back to *The New York Trilogy* where a character is explicitly named Paul Auster, but recurs time and again in later novels with anagrammatical character names such as Trause (*Oracle Night*, 2003), or with characters endowed with biographical details that closely match those that are public knowledge about the ‘real’ Auster. One such example is the conspicuously strangely named Marco Stanley Fogg (three travelers, two real – both also writers – and one fictitious go into this moniker: Marco Polo, Henry Stanley and Phileas Fogg from Jules Verne’s novel *Around the World in Eighty Days*) in *Moon Palace* (1989), whose biography in some elements mirrors Auster’s closely. Autobiographical fiction, especially of the confessional subgenre has of course been increasingly popular over the last few decades, but Auster’s position taking in that field is remarkably distancing from the conventional formula for success, which entails an emphasis on troubled life stories. Auster, by contrast, emphasizes the relative ease of his circumstances when he writes directly autobiographically – something he in fact had mostly reserved for his ventures into the essay genre until his most recent book, *Report from the Interior* (2013), a memoir.

Genre-games are also high on the list of Auster poetics. He stated in a 1988 interview in *BOMB Magazine*: “It’s a mistake to look down on popular forms. You have to be open to everything, to be willing to take inspiration from any and all sources” (Mallia, 1988). From his foray into the science fiction/dystopian novel field in *The Country of Last Things* (1987), and again in *Man in the Dark* (2008), to his detective experiments, Auster appears to be willing to try any

popular formula for success, until one takes a closer look at what he refuses to do within the genre of choice. His detective novel, *City of Glass* (1987), has no crime, no solution and barely a detective at all. Quinn, the protagonist, is a detective fiction writer who pretends to work for the 'Paul Auster Detective Agency,' and in fact to be 'Paul Auster.' His efforts at detection, however, largely fail, partly because he leaves far too much up to chance, undermining the whole epistemological ground of the fictional universe.

Later Auster novels can be read as failed political thrillers (Leviathan [1992] – the political issue itself is too non-consequential, and the narrative is too inconclusive and self-contradictory as a comparison with E.L. Doctorow, who is the American master of this genre, makes abundantly clear); family sagas (Moon Palace [1989] – too many circular coincidences of paternity); picaresque road novels (Music of Chance [1990] – too non-teleological); magical realism (Mr. Vertigo [1994] – which almost seems like a children's book); and even shaggy dog stories (Timbuktu [1999] – which in Auster's case has the requisite dog narrator, and the tear jerking ending, but still fails to anthropomorphize the dog, Mr. Bones, sufficiently to work).

Works like these inscribe in themselves the dual reading protocol option. Readers may peruse them for the plot and the end, and may thrill with the tragedy that strikes many of their protagonists and cry over the sentiments evoked by such circumstances, and may even enjoy the setting, for instance in the New York/Brooklyn novels – but ultimately these titles do not deliver full satisfaction to those who read for the setting, character, or story and its attendant emotional release. Rather the intellectual reading position seems privileged, as the novels refuse closure and epistemological certainty.

After the millennium, Auster seems to have deliberately devoted several of his novels to recycling themes and techniques from his early work. He has spoken openly of his dearth of new ideas in an interview with the UK newspaper *The Daily Telegraph*: "I used to have a backlog of stories, but a few years ago I found the drawers were empty" (de Bertodano, 2010). *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2006) continues the deliberately anti-populist gimmicks of *The New York Trilogy* (characters without real names, surveillance of said characters by other mysterious entities, and so on – all stuff that smacks of Pinter and Beckett, rather than, say, John Irving). *Two Brooklyn*

novels, *Oracle Night* (2003) and *Brooklyn Follies* (2005), could be read as historical fictions, more specifically New York novels, and share the two-tier structure that according to critics such as Linda Hutcheon (in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory and Fiction*, 1988) is typical of historiographic metafiction. Nonetheless, Auster's New York fictions refuse to paint a broad colorful canvas of city life as a backdrop for the action (the action is in fact largely absent), unlike other practitioners of this genre, such as Michael Chabon (*The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*) Jonathan Lethem (*The Fortress of Solitude*) and Mark Helprin (*Winter's Tale*).<sup>4</sup> *Invisible* (2008) is another multiple viewpoint story, where the final 'truth' is hard to decide upon, partly because of its gamut of first, second, and third person narrations. Auster's latest novel, *Sunset Park* (2010), returns to the Brooklyn territory and to a coincidence driven plot.<sup>5</sup>

This apparent kenosis of desire for new invention ("Does it matter if I publish 16 or 17 novels? Unless it's absolutely urgent, there's no point in writing," Auster has also remarked [ de Bertodano, 2010]) in favor of the recycling of familiar plots, scenarios, and techniques – even characters – would seem to be Auster's final renunciation of the chances of popular success (unless he banks heavily on the recent volume of memoirs to deliver this success).<sup>6</sup> This claim could be seen as further supported by the strange phenomenon of Auster electing to be published in Danish before his original American audience gets a chance to read his work. Novelist, creative writing teacher, and critic, Malena Watrous, has written of Auster's somewhat perverse refusal to be popular beyond a certain point: "Writers not always determined to please the reader are the ones who break new ground. Auster's renegade impulse has set him apart, earning him devoted fans. He has also been taken to task for following his own formula too often" (Watrous, 2010). As a gatekeeper within the field of contemporary quality fiction (the above was written for the *New York Times Book Review*), she has the power to consecrate Auster's position as a quality fiction writer, and in the quote above she even attempts to extend this power across fields, re-establishing an old hierarchy between popular / populist and ground-breaking authors. She thus attempts to regulate also the field of popular fiction, and in her assessment situates Auster once and for all outside that particular field. It is quite possible that she is right in her categorization of Auster as a narrow, highbrow author,

especially with his recycling manner after the millennium. What is more debatable is whether Auster's place in the canon is secure. Might not his repetition to the point of compulsion of certain mannerisms undermine this position?

There are numerous indications that Auster's European reception is more solid, both in terms of popular success (sales figures) and academic accolades (consecration elements one must tally up in the accounts of Auster's capital management and brokering of field entry). Auster's novels do enter the American bestseller lists (none, however, have ever broken into the *New York Times Fiction Top 15*), but rarely in elevated positions (in fact his only title ever on the Los Angeles Times bestseller list is his non-fiction title *Winter Journal*),<sup>7</sup> whereas they regularly top Norwegian, Danish, French, and Spanish fiction sales lists.<sup>8</sup> Following on the heels of French and Spanish universities who have given Auster honorary doctorates, Copenhagen University in 2011 bestowed honorary alumnus status on Auster, who spoke in front of a packed auditorium, an event that received mainstream media attention in sharp contrast to other academic ceremonies. Later he signed books in a Copenhagen book-store with queues reaching around the block. These facts may seem anecdotal, but nonetheless testify to how Auster's cultural and social capital is built up in one European country, where the author enjoys borderline celebrity status, in sharp contrast to his lack of such cross-field consecration in his homeland. Furthermore, Auster's oeuvre is regularly taught at Danish universities, which has resulted in at least two new MA-theses from the University of Copenhagen in 2013 alone, to which one can add that the present writer alone has supervised 5 MA-theses at Aalborg University over the last 15 years. Again, while not offering a complete statistical overview of Auster's curriculum presence at Danish universities, these facts point to a large issue, namely that Auster is academically consecrated in Europe to an extent that he is not (yet) in the US. Considering Auster's time spent abroad, especially in France, and his language abilities and familiarity with European literary history and literary theory, it is not too surprising that he also dedicates time and effort to a European market, where his cultural capital is significantly higher than in the US context, particularly outside New York City.

We shall close with two quotes illustrating the contradictory US reception of Auster's work.<sup>9</sup> Michael Dirda (who as a Pulitzer Prize

winner and Fulbright Fellow speaks with great authority within the field) has been one of Auster's most consistent champions. He sees him exclusively as a writer of quality fiction, and focuses on Auster's storytelling abilities, albeit in a slightly circumscribed fashion. In *The Washington Post* (a quality daily with high consecration power in the field of fiction), Dirda labels Auster's style as confessional, and his story-worlds as somewhat disorienting, yet compelling. He continues: "His plots – drawing on elements from suspense stories, existential *récit*, and autobiography – keep readers turning the pages, but sometimes end by leaving them uncertain about what they've just been through" (Dirda, 2003). Dirda's observation of this ontological uncertainty effect is very apt, and his remark that readers consider Auster's books page-turners is also true up to a point. However, there is little doubt that a reader only reading Auster for the plot will be left with an enduring sense of unease, and this will perhaps deter many from returning to Auster for his next book. On the other hand, those who enjoy Auster according to the other embedded reading protocol in his works, that of ludic postmodern metafiction, will quickly form an almost cultic fan following, as Watzrous pointed out in the quote above.

James Wood, in his piece "Shallow Graves" in the November 30, 2009 issue of *The New Yorker*, represents the other side of the divided professional criticism of Auster's place in the canon:

What Auster often gets instead is the worst of both worlds: fake realism and shallow skepticism. The two weaknesses are related. Auster is a compelling storyteller, but his stories are assertions rather than persuasions. They declare themselves; they hound the next revelation. Because nothing is persuasively assembled, the inevitable postmodern disassembly leaves one largely untouched. (The disassembly is also grindingly explicit, spelled out in billboard-size type.) Presence fails to turn into significant absence, because presence was not present enough.

This equally astute analysis (Wood, an English critic, speaks with considerable consecrating power as a Harvard professor and professional academic critic – author of four volumes of criticism – alongside his work for *The New Yorker*) of Auster's reluctance to exclu-

sively tell and never show, goes a ways towards explaining why Auster has never had a full popular breakthrough. Readers desire presence (usually through the medium of character identification) and persuasion (of plot rationality (telos), as well as ethos) over the pyrotechnics of ontological uncertainty inducing techniques. Auster can therefore, according to Wood, never become popular as long as he remains Auster, but must remain poised on the outside of the field of popular fiction and bestsellers.

Auster's authorial career is thus an example of someone skirting the boundaries between several fields, including popular fiction and postmodern experimental literature. His books, however, do not fully belong in either of these fields, but rather dip<sup>◦</sup> into both (via the dual reading protocol they have inscribed in them) and simultaneously deselect belonging to either of them (because they withhold full reader satisfaction which is crucial within the popular fiction/bestseller fields, and yet they are too accessible to fully qualify as academic standard postmodern experimentation). A phenomenon such as Auster is arguably all the more interesting and relevant to study because of this playful, yet carefully designed abstention from producing easily pigeonholed works. Bourdieu's framework of fields, capital and gate-keeping goes a ways toward conceptualizing what Auster is playing at, yet ultimately one is perhaps forced to postulate a whole new field of border-crossing fiction in order to pen him in as an agent in the literary field at large.

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## Notes

- 1 Gelder and other literary sociologists have flirted with Bourdieu's categories, but have not seriously attempted to apply them to the practice of specific publishers or authors. As John B. Thompson says in his book *Merchants of Culture*: "What is a field? I borrow this term from the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and freely adapt it for my own purposes" (2010, 3). This hardly constitutes a model of scholarly practice, but indicates that a large amount of work remains to be done in implementing Bourdieu's ideas to literary fields of production and reception. The present article attempts to contribute to this work in a very modest way.
- 2 These categories are inspired by Brian McHale's well-known contention (in *Postmodernist Fiction*, 1987) that Modernist works display an epistemological dominant when read with the grain, whereas Postmodernist works display a preference for an ontological reading position.
- 3 One main distinction between genre fiction and the literary novel could also be said to reside in acknowledging what precisely makes a best-seller, namely the invitation to read for the plot (a primary trait of the genre novel), and much less so, character development (a trait of the literary novel).
- 4 The three authors mentioned here have all had considerably more success on the *New York Times* bestseller list than Auster, and yet all position themselves mainly in the field of quality fiction.
- 5 The author of the present article has chosen to offer a complete overview of Auster's fiction, rather than presenting an in-depth analysis of a few of his novels. Such in-depth engagements are readily available in many academic articles already published in journals or in the several Auster monographs on the market, and repeating this work seems redundant. In addition, a thematic analysis of just two or three Auster novels from different positions within the spectrum of work proposed in

the above would require many more pages than present space limitations permit.

- 6 This volume has in fact featured on the *New York Times* non-fiction best-seller list.
- 7 Globally speaking, if one looks at Amazon.com's sales lists, older Auster titles in English are not wildly popular. An academically consecrated title such as *The New York Trilogy* does relatively well at no. 18,622; *Moon Palace* less so at no. 212,629; and another well-received title, *Music of Chance*, which was even adapted into a film, does even worse at no. 412,457.
- 8 According to Auster's agent The Carol Mann Agency, *Invisible* from 2009 was number one on the Spanish bestseller lists in December of that year "beating out Dan Brown's *The Lost Symbol*" (Myrsini, 2009)
- 9 Many more reviews could of course be quoted and discussed to complicate our understanding of the critical reception of Auster outside academe, but again space constraints forbid such an engagement. Therefore the choice has been to use the two quite polarized opinions discussed in the following to illustrate the ins and outs of consecration in Auster's case. If this seems oversimplified and binary, one needs to remember that a field cannot be adequately surveyed without attention to its borders and limit cases.

# Pure and Public, Popular and Personal

and the Inclusiveness of *Borgen* as a Public Service Blockbuster

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## Abstract

In the article I reexamine the traditional aesthetical and political critiques of popular culture and reevaluate the social and communicative potential of bestselling cultural artifacts such as highly popular television series.

First, I sketch the alleged aesthetic and social problems of popular culture as described in the critical tradition originating in Kant and radicalized by Theodor Adorno regarding the cultural industry, and by Jürgen Habermas regarding the public sphere.

Second, I draw attention to the blind spots of this critical tradition: the distinctions of the pure aesthetic and the exclusions of the public sphere. I argue that the ideals of a pure aesthetic and a public sphere neglect issues that are crucial to the type of commonality at stake in popular cultural artifacts: personal issues, social conflicts, and what is pleasurable to the senses or has to do with emotions.

Third, I exemplify my argument by drawing on the case of the television series *Borgen*, produced by the public service broadcaster DR (the *Danish Broadcasting Corporation*) in 2010-13. I examine how *Borgen*'s combination of themes, discourses, and domains includes the viewers in ways that point towards a more pragmatic and inclusive understanding not only of bestselling popular culture but also of aesthetics and the public sphere.

**Keywords** Popularity, aesthetics, public sphere, inclusiveness, *Borgen*.

### Pure and public

It might seem highly irrelevant to approach blockbuster cultural artifacts from the perspective of early modern ideas of aesthetic experience and the public sphere. Does it make any sense at all to examine an extremely popular television series equipped with Kant's concepts of disinterestedness and subjective universality? Have we not long ago left his sharp distinction between high and low? And have we not given up the ambitions of universality that are fundamental for his ideas both of a pure, reflective aesthetic judgment unaffected by private sensual pleasures, and of a general public debate unaffected by personal or social interests?

There are two reasons why it does make sense to revisit Kant when examining the aesthetic and communicative potential of bestsellers and blockbusters. One is that the ideas and concepts inherent in the Kantian tradition have contributed greatly to the low esteem of popular culture in general and bestsellers and blockbusters in particular – and that they still do. Contemporary ideas of what art and the general public ought to be can be traced back to Kant's conception of aesthetics and of enlightenment. And these ideas that were not only Kantian but became essential for modernity logically led to an aesthetic as well as political critique of popular culture.

The second reason for including the Kantian ideals of aesthetics and an enlightened general public which popular culture fails to live up to is that these ideals, paradoxically, can illuminate what popular culture does: why it can have a social and communicative potential in our late modern culture. I will emphasize two elements:

When Kant wrote his three critiques – of pure reason, of practical reason and of judgment – he made a distinction which has been essential for understanding modernity's differentiation in various discursive and institutional domains. We see a similar differentiation in Habermas's distinction between three validity-dimensions, each having its own specific form of argumentation and justification. Habermas distinguishes between a cognitive-instrumental, a moral-practical, and an aesthetic-expressive dimension, in which we treat respectively what is theoretically true, what is right, and what is subjectively truthful.

Secondly, Kant, in his *Critique of Judgment* from 1790, defined aesthetics in a way that is still extremely influential. The influences include his opposition of high and low taste. While the low, sensual taste is private (for instance, I like red wine better than white) and characterized by idiosyncratic judgments of what is immediately pleasurable to one's senses, the elevated reflective taste reaches out from "I" to "we." The social or even universal potentials of the judgment of taste is based on its disinterestedness, its ability to release the individual from both personal and social particularities and interests, including the limitations of already given rules or concepts. Only in the "subjective universality" of the aesthetic judgment do we transcend private and social limitations, appeal to what is common to everyone, and belong to a human community. Only when we judge something as beautiful without interest can we reach what is common for all of us: "the mental state in which we are when imagination and understanding are in free play" (Kant 2004, §§ 6). This is the democratic, optimistic, and edifying point in Kant's aesthetics: that this mental state in principle is open to everyone and can be communicated and shared. Every single one of us can participate in aesthetic communication and thereby in an inter-subjective and potentially universal community. In this way, the aesthetic experience also has social potentials when bracketing what divides us, and confirming and reinforcing what is common for all of us.

To sum up, this pure aesthetics is characterized by aesthetic autonomy, reflective taste, disinterestedness, and subjective universality while being opposed to cognitive/instrumental and moral/practical interests, idiosyncratic and low sensual taste, personal and social interests, and given rules and concepts.

## The problems of popularity – and of its critique

What is problematic in, for example, very popular films and television series, according to this dominant aesthetic tradition, is probably quite obvious: There is far too much interference from calculated commercial interests, far too many easily digestible industrial products, low sensual pleasures, cultural fashions, and economic and social power. Blockbuster film and television is not produced by, and – in this tradition more importantly, the audience do not approach them as – free, reflective, and disinterested subjects, detached from their own sensual taste, from economic, social, and cultural interests and from already given rules and concepts.

On the contrary, many blockbusters seem to confirm and reinforce the commercial interests and the already given recipes for success – resulting in numerous sequels, remakes and imitations. To a certain degree, this is valid also for public service broadcasters. Even though a national broadcaster like DR is “independent of economic, commercial and political interests” (*DR’s public service-kontrakt for 2013-2014*, p. 2), funding and political goodwill depend heavily on audience ratings.

We can read Adorno’s critique of the “culture industry” if we want an analysis of the commodification and the calculated appeal to conformity inherent in the standardization and pseudo-individualization of blockbusters. The vast audiences that today enjoy blockbusters would no doubt confirm Adorno’s most pessimistic view of the culture industry: That it supports an abstract conformity and prevents the formation of independent individuals who reflect and decide for themselves what books to read, what films or television to see – and more generally: how and what to think.

This brings me to the second type of critique of popular culture: the social or political critique that sees blockbuster phenomena as supporting the opposite of enlightenment, of modernity and of strong, autonomous subjects. Adorno made this point very (some would say far too) clear in “Culture Industry Reconsidered” from 1967, when stating that

The total effect of culture industry is one of anti-enlightenment [...]. It impedes the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves. These, however, would be the

precondition for a democratic society which needs adults who have come of age in order to sustain itself and develop (Adorno 1975, pp. 18-19).

One does not, however, have to be as radical as Adorno to present popular culture as a democratic and political danger. In Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989), the ideals attributed to the modern public sphere strikingly resemble the above characteristics of the pure aesthetics. Inspired by Nancy Fraser's "Rethinking the Public Sphere" (1990), I will point at three assumptions that are central to the public sphere as Habermas describes it: First, the assumption that participants of the public sphere can bracket status hierarchies and deliberate as if they were social equals. Second, the assumption that there is a single public sphere – *the* public sphere – and that this is preferable to a nexus of multiple public spheres. And third, the assumption that private interests and issues are unwanted and that the discourse of the public sphere should deal only with the common good (cf. Fraser).

These similarities between the ideal of a pure aesthetics and the ideal of a public sphere may not be surprising considering that both ideas can be traced back to Kant. Nevertheless, it is striking that modernity's dominant conceptions of both art and the public sphere rely on the notion that we as viewers or participants are able and willing to forget personal issues and interests, to regard social conflicts and hierarchies as irrelevant, and to accept reflective taste and abstract reasoning as the only acceptable way of legitimization – thereby excluding what is pleasurable to the senses, what is good for one's life, and what has to do with feelings and emotions. Both conceptions, of a subjective universality in aesthetics and of the common good in the public sphere, imply that we can eliminate the level of concrete, empirical sociality and community with all its differences, bonds, and conflicts, and that we can link directly from an individual, autonomous, reflective, reasoning subject to a common good or even a universal humanity.

The problem with these conceptions of a subjective universality in aesthetics and of the common good in the public sphere is that they seem to exclude so many people and so many ways of communicating about and relating to aesthetic objects and social issues. As Bourdieu has argued theoretically and showed empirically, a

disinterested aesthetic point of view is neither universal nor natural but a distinctive ability appreciated and acquired by the dominant social class from early childhood. Aesthetic judgments do not unite people in what is common to everyone but rather function as a distinction (1984).

Similarly, Nancy Fraser has argued that the concept and norms of *the* public sphere relies on a generalization of a particular bourgeois and masculine norm: a norm that has become hegemonic, but also a norm that marginalizes and excludes both groups and "languages" of lower status and social issues that are dismissed as "private" (1990).

Let us now return to the blockbusters. What they do is obviously attract a lot of people. And since people are different, this is, I will argue, only possible if the blockbuster films and television are open towards being read and used in different ways. Instead of claiming, like Adorno, that the culture industry attract by manipulation, I suggest that we have more faith in readers and viewers and accept that many people can relate to popular culture in a variety of ways that are not possible with more exclusive and pure versions of art or public debate. The reason for this, I will claim, is not conformism but rather that the highly popular artifacts transgress some of the demarcations characteristic of the pure aesthetic and the public sphere – and that they, exactly by doing this, are capable of creating a more pragmatic version of some of the qualities inherent in these concepts.

### The case of *Borgen*

Let me exemplify with the popular Danish television series *Borgen* (*Government*), produced by and shown on the public service broadcaster DR in 2010-2013. My reason for choosing this case is that *Borgen*'s combination of themes, discourses and rationalities includes the viewers in ways that point towards a more pragmatic and inclusive understanding not only of bestselling popular culture but also of aesthetics and the public sphere.

In the spring of 2013, *Borgen* finished its third and presumably last season on national Danish television with an average of around 1.6 million viewers. The series obviously has international appeal as well: In the UK, it had more than 1 million viewers in the second season; it has won several international prizes; it has

been sold to more than 60 countries; and it is being aired in an American television version and has been novelized in at least three countries.

But how is this popularity possible when *Borgen*, as described in the *New York Times*, is “a thriller woven around possibly the most boring conflict in Europe: parliamentary elections in Denmark” (Stanley, 2011)? How can this include people in Denmark and abroad?

One reason is, of course, that *Borgen* is more than a series about Danish politics. It is a television drama focusing mainly on two strong and beautiful female characters who both want to do the right thing: most of all the prime minister, and eventually ex-prime minister, Birgitte Nyborg (Sidse Babett Knudsen), but also the journalist, and eventually media adviser, Katrine Fønsmark (Birgitte Hjort Sørensen). And with minor but interesting male characters as well: the media adviser Kasper (Pilou Asbæk), and the head of news on national television, Torben Friis (Søren Malling). Focusing on these characters and on feminine perspectives, *Borgen* deals with problematic decisions regarding how to balance idealism, pragmatism and personal desires in the political sphere *and* how to live your life, including very well-known dilemmas of how to balance work and family life, how to maintain a family, and how to continue as co-parents when it turned out that you did not succeed in maintaining your family. Although Birgitte Nyborg is a prime minister, she is also an attractive, charming and vulnerable woman, whom it is very easy to like and identify with.

Secondly, *Borgen* is a piece of meta-fiction and meta-media. It reveals convincingly how the media produces reality, and how the political-commercial demand for higher shares of the audience can turn public service television into absurdist kitsch while destroying any ideal of enlightenment and quality. In this way, it has a critical and very self-ironical twist regarding its own status as blockbuster *and* national public service television.

Thirdly, *Borgen* is a political drama, and the political themes and parties are all very close to the actual political debates and parties in Denmark. When the series thematized whether to legalize prostitution and thereby formalize the social rights and obligations of sex-workers, the topic was immediately caught by Mai Henriksen, a conservative member of parliament, who proposed something very

similar two days before an episode of *Borgen* aired the fictionalized version of the dilemma in prime time.

More generally, *Borgen* is an interesting example of the interplay between fiction and real life politics. The television series includes some actual political themes, but politicians and others also use the fictionalized version to get more attention and raise a public debate about specific political topics. This happened again when the series thematized the use of antibiotics for pigs, a topic which was taken up in the media afterwards and led to protests against the use of antibiotics in Danish agriculture.

It is hardly surprising that politicians grab the opportunity to present political initiatives that have already been sympathetically motivated in prime time television with an extraordinary number of national voters as viewers. One may, of course, worry about the risks in mixing fiction and real life politics. We would not like the political priorities of our politicians to be guided by the most popular series on television. But I think the risk is minor compared to the positive potential in a television series like *Borgen* for engaging its viewers in political and ethical debates. Thematically, what *Borgen* does, is to mix three domains: the personal, the political and the media. It reveals how they are entangled, and how dilemmas transgress and traverse the individual domains. This means that we see politics with a human and even feminine face, the personal and democratic costs of the will to power, the mediatization of politics and personal lives and so on. But it also means that we get different types of entries to the fictional universe, from the most common problems regarding love affairs and family life to more un-familiar negotiations between politicians and media advisers.

This is even more conspicuous on the series' official website and Facebook profile. On Facebook, people discuss what type of jeans a certain character is wearing and how good he looks in them (*Borgen*'s Facebook profile). They debate whether Birgitte Nyborg and her ex-husband will get back together again – the majority hopes so even if they do not believe it. Although many discussions focus on personal and ethical dilemmas, they also include gender issues and Danish politics (for example, agriculture, including links to information about EU's rules about animal welfare). Most of all, however, people write how much they like the series, thereby making

aesthetical judgments and mixing these with emotional, ethical and political aspects of the series.

On the official website of the series (DR1 / *Borgen*), we find a similar mix of aesthetical, emotional, ethical and political perspectives but also a complex mix of fiction and reality. A few examples: You can vote whether prostitution should be legalized. You can make your own speech after having practiced with Birgitte Nyborg. You can write which political key issue you would choose in case you founded a new political party, and vote for the key issues of others. And you can take a test and discover how you balance your moral principles with your wish to reach your goals. There is even a Birgitte Nyborg-Twitter with a tweet telling you that "It is your life and your choice. Remember to make up your mind and vote!", as if you were part of the fictional universe with an election coming up. And if you cannot get enough, you can read a fictionalized version of the most important newspaper in the series, *Expressen* (DR1 / *Ekspres*), complete with breaking news, editorials, and personal tests in which you can test the importance of children in your life, the degree of gender equality in your family, your own fitness for politics, and so forth. Finally, you can find informative online teaching material about real life Danish politics (Undervisning / *Borgen i virkeligheden*).

### A need for inclusiveness?

*Borgen* moves in and out of domains and discourses that are kept separate in purer versions of aesthetics and public debates. It mixes the private, the political, and the media, and lets various and conflicting validity-claims and types of reasoning interact. This happens thematically but also formally by integrating various discursive domains, and it happens not least in the reception, where viewers are invited to combine politics, fiction, and their own lives in various ways.

This inclusiveness towards a plurality of discursive domains, validity-claims, and types of reasoning makes *Borgen* special compared to many other television series. If we compare it with some of DR's other recent television series like *Forbrydelsen I-III* (*The Killing*) or *Broen I-II* (*The Bridge*), they are obviously less concerned with political questions. Even though they also have strong female heroines, seem to subvert certain gender roles, and touch upon a few

ethical questions, the focus of these crime series is predominantly on the detection of the crime. On the websites of the two series (DR/forbrydelsen and DR1/broen), the focus is almost exclusively on exposing the crime plot: there is information about the locations and the suspects, and you can vote who you think “did it”, see how other viewers have voted, and so on.

Compared to these crime series, *Borgen*’s mix of private life and politics, aesthetics and ethics, fact and fiction, a feminine heroine and a traditionally masculine domain has invited the viewers to relate to and maybe also talk about a much wider variety of themes. Even if viewers have not been active on the website or Facebook profile, *Borgen* has aimed at and widely succeeded in creating various links between the fictional universe and the everyday life. In doing this it has also appealed to Kant’s two types of judgments – the low type regarding, for example, how attractive the characters are, and the reflective type regarding the quality of the episode or series. One might object that the fictionalized version of (Danish) politics is simplified, that the heroine’s political opponents fall into stereotypes, and that the drama only deals with the charming challenges of a privileged creative class. But still, the series combines private and public domains in a way that opens a semipublic debate for a variety of themes, perspectives, discursive modes, and ways of reasoning. *Borgen*’s success in doing this, not only in Denmark, is maybe best indicated by a 2013 article in *The Times* commenting on the close of the second season. Under the headline “Everyone’s talking about: Life after *Borgen*,” the article begins in Danish:

Hvad vil du gøre? Ikke mere *Borgen*! Hvordan vil du fylde dine dage? Oh come on, you don’t need a translation. All right, just in case: what are you going to do? No more *Borgen*! How will you fill your days? (Wagner, 2013)

The English viewers have probably not been so engulfed in *Borgen* that they have learned Danish by watching it. But they obviously found it so appealing that they watched it with subtitles and also in other ways mixed various languages. This mix was realized also by talking about the series: probably not “everyone” like the headline of *The Times* indicates but many, probably not disinterested but with a variety of personal and social interests, and probably not with

pure reflective taste or abstract reasoning but with various rhetorical, stylistic and argumentative forms.

The point is that this popularity is neither conformism nor total individualization and segmentation. *Borgen* might be a special type of blockbuster television in its combination of political and personal domains and its integration of a feminine perspective on the good life. It fits very well into the public service-obligations of DR: to “connect the Danes” around its products and stimulate “participation in the public debate and democratic process,” “culture and language,” and “interest in and knowledge of a wide variety of subjects” (*DRs public service-kontrakt for 2013-2014*). The fact that it is produced by a public service broadcaster gives it other conditions and obligations than purely commercial productions. This, however, does not mean that it exists regardless of audience ratings. As thematized in the series itself, popularity is a *sine qua non* also for a public broadcaster like DR1. This means that *Borgen* shares one quality with other highly popular artifacts: a necessary inclusiveness. And it gives a public service version of this inclusiveness when it generates communication and connectivity across differences.

Through its popularity, *Borgen* might actually make us communicate across specific discursive domains and with people who are different from ourselves. And this, I think, is very important in our current mediascape where cultural niche-marketing and niche-casting is increasing, thereby dividing audiences, consumers and citizens into ever more narrowly defined groups and presenting them only with information and media products made especially for them. In a situation where most media products are directed towards specific segments with specific lifestyles, conformism is not necessarily our most serious problem. Maybe it is time to worry more about the lack of communication and connectivity than about conformism, and to take interest in the forms of commonality and community generated by and around very popular books, films, television series, and so on. If we do that, we might welcome that so many actually see and like a series like *Borgen*, and we might also conceive of the common good and the public sphere in ways that are less pure and reflective but more inclusive and social than the ones we have got used to.

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# Frye and the *Opposition* between Popular Literature and Bestsellers

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Ph.D., Associate Professor of Literature, Media and Culture at Aalborg University. His first monograph, *The Necessary Unity of Opposites*, published by University of Toronto Press in 2011, is a study of Northrop Frye, particularly Frye's dialectical thinking. Graham continues to work with literary and cultural theory, but has also begun original research on English poet William Blake. He also teaches and writes about popular culture.

## Abstract

Northrop Frye's view of "bestseller" literature forms the focus of this article. The legacy of postmodernism entailed the demise of the division between high and low cultural products. However, this did not solve the problem concerning the value of a given work. Frye offers a different model. While Frye defends popular literature proper, he has general reservations about commercial bestsellers, and his choice of concepts represents an interesting contribution to the current discussion.

**Keywords** popular, mass, value, literature, postmodernism, bestseller.

## Introduktion

In this article, I discuss Northrop Frye's view of "bestseller" literature, providing an account of this area of fiction and placing it in the context of the most relevant earlier critiques of the same material. As I shall explain, while Frye defends popular literature proper, he has general reservations about bestsellers as well as specific concerns relating to some hardboiled crime fiction as well as the

later bestsellers which match it in terms of what Frye considers brutality and prurience (Frye, 2006, p. 21). I begin by focusing on the typical account of the postmodern breakthrough (highly relevant to the bestseller context). I then turn to Frye, who supplies us with a radically different conceptual framework for discussing twentieth-century popular literature – bestsellers included. I characterize his understanding of popular literature before turning to his view of the kind of commercialized – and indeed exploitative – fiction about which he has reservations.

In my view, Frye's conclusion – that a substratum of literature is perhaps “beyond the pale” – is a one which should be taken seriously. But whether or not the reader agrees with his outlook, Frye's views form a significant part of the history of ideas, and a proper account of them is important for all theorists interested in arguments about levels of culture and “value.”

### **The bestseller and the legacy of postmodernism**

The neatest, and for that reason one of the most persuasive ways of thinking about the opposition between modernism and postmodernism, is to think in terms of modernism as a time when there was a gap between high culture and low culture, and postmodernism as a time when that gap was closed. It is interesting to reflect upon how critics demonstrate that the gap was closed. Sometimes the focus is on the consumer of culture – the gap was closed owing to a new openness on the part of the reader or listener. In her “One culture and the new sensibility,” Sontag characterizes the new openness in a very memorable closing passage:

From the vantage point of this new sensibility, the beauty of a machine or of the solution to a mathematical problem, of a painting by Jasper Johns or a film by Jean-Luc Godard, and of the personalities and music of the Beatles is equally accessible. (Sontag, 1966, p. 304)

However, usually critics are interested in finding qualities in the cultural world which point to the fact that the gap has been closed. Writing in 1997, Hunter and Kaye, using verbs like “blur” and “to be eroded” convey a sense of our cultural world, previously a hierarchy, as one in which no demarcation can be made. This culture is

much less hierarchical than before – it may even be thought of as a horizontal culture:

Growing numbers of adaptations of ‘classic’ literature, novelisations of films and new media such as laser disks, CD-ROMSs and the Internet blur the lines between film and fiction, reader and author, spectator and participants well as mass and elite culture. (Hunter and Kaye, 1997, p. 2)

In this multimedia age, barriers are eroded between film and fiction and between elite and popular culture: director’s cuts, never seen at the cinema, are now available on laser disk, including commentary with the film. Films like *Braveheart* (1995) spawn CD-ROM interactive adaptations, *Babylon 5* creator, J. Michael Straczynski, corresponds with fans on the Internet. (Hunter and Kaye, 1997, pp. 9-10)

Different rhetorical strategies are employed by critics to convey a sense of the demise of the division between high and low. Of particular interest to critics is the notion of a popular culture which is touched by the “distinction” of high culture. Thus Louis Menand constructs the postmodernist moment in terms the appearance of a culture all of which is at once popular and sophisticated, his sweep including albums, novels, sit-coms, a music label, a musical, the work of a visual artist, and a magazine:

Just up ahead [...] a different dispensation was poised to come into being. This was a culture of sophisticated entertainment that was neither avant-garde nor mass, that was commercial but had a bit of brow. This was the moment of *Sgt. Pepper’s* and *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* and *All in the Family*, Motown and *Blonde on Blonde*, *Portnoy’s Complaint* and *Hair*, Andy Warhol and *Rolling Stone*. (Menand, 2011, p. xx)

In “Cross the Border - Close that Gap: Postmodernism,” perhaps the most well-known discussion of the postmodern phenomenon, Fiedler focuses mainly on literature. In his view, the new generation of

writers, the “young Americans” of the time, embrace “Pop forms.” Where Menand thinks of a popular culture which absorbs the sophistication of high culture, Fiedler records how serious writers adopted genre fiction:

The forms of the novel which they prefer are [...] at the furthest possible remove from art and avant-garde, the greatest distance from inwardness, analysis and pretension; and, therefore, immune to lyricism, on the one hand, or righteousness social commentary, on the other. It is not compromise by the market-place they fear; on the contrary, they choose the genre most associated with exploitation by the mass media: notably, the Western, Science Fiction, and Pornography. (Fiedler, 1972, p. 351)

As if by magic, all cultural phenomena are redeemed by this revolution and suddenly anything which might constitute “pseudo-culture” simply vanishes from our view. Everything in our culture now possesses some value, and resistance is cultural conservatism. Because the distinction between high and low fails, value is diffused throughout the cultural world, and nothing is untouched by the diffusion. Thus Lawrence Alloway fondly remembers how

the area of contact was mass-produced urban culture: movies, advertising, and science fiction. We felt none of the dislike of commercial culture standard among most intellectuals, but accepted it as fact, discussed it in detail, and consumed it enthusiastically. (Storey, 2009, p. 183)

The postmodernist outlook suggests we look at the cultural landscape differently from the modernists. They may have thought in terms of the palace of high art and the entertainment of the masses, but from the later twentieth-century perspective, mass culture is of enormous interest and undoubtedly “valuable.” The mass culture of the modernist period, therefore becomes an valid area of academic enquiry. The valorization of popular culture is not limited to twentieth century, however. The popular culture of all ages is valorized by this shift in paradigm.

## The Frye option

Not everyone will subscribe to the above view, however. One problem clearly stands out: Do we really want to work on the assumption that all types of culture – all movies, novels, television programs, and so forth – may be accorded value regardless of how blatantly commercial they are? Some might wish to offer a little resistance to the postmodernist view. In relation to literature, which is what I will be focusing on in this article, the postmodernist view attributes value to all twentieth-century literature, for example. But is that gesture entirely judicious? Bestsellers, as well as blockbusters, are effortlessly caught up in the realm of “value.” Perhaps, we might decide to valorize popular literature, while suspending our validation of many “bestsellers,” effectively driving a wedge between the two. Of course not every commentator harbors such a desire. But for our history of ideas to be complete, we should know at least know that making a distinction between the two is a genuine intellectual option. What we need in relation to these considerations is not an arch-modernist critic – a voice from the distant past telling us that we had been warned about popular culture. Rather, what is need is a critical voice which, on examining the area of popular literature, is capable of distinguishing between the literature which merits the term “popular” and the literature which may only lay a false claim to that status.

Frye, the subject of this article, provides us with a model of this kind of thinking. He provides us with some useful distinctions which help us to discriminate between not just “serious” and “popular” literature, but also different types of popular literature, especially the genuine and the purely commercial. I will turn to the precise nature of his attitude to the “bestseller” in a moment, but, first, Frye deals with the oppositions between “high” and “low” in an exemplary manner. The term “low culture” is not used in Frye’s criticism, clearly because it is patronizing to speak of a valuable cultural product as metaphorically “low.” Frye does use the term “highbrow” (Frye, 2003, p. 9), but he places the terms in speech marks to indicate his reservations about this formulation. What Frye is most comfortable with is the opposition between “serious” and “popular,” though, as we shall see, he does use the term “elite” as a synonym for “serious” at times, occasionally placing “elite” in speech marks, suggesting a certain number of reservations about

that term, too. “Popular,” in his view, may easily be employed as an appreciative word, suggesting the reader’s love for and valorization of, say, popular literature, and “serious” (or “elite”) is preferable to “high-brow.” Frye is very careful about never drifting towards the kind of Gilbert Seldes inverted snobbery, which subsumes the elite to the popular, but he forever defends popular literature. Indeed, he puts it on an equal footing with elite culture as far as it is possible to do so. In our day, some commentators have made names for themselves by boldly stating that a figure associated with popular culture is as good a poet/musician/painter as another figure drawn from our cultural heritage: Bob Dylan is as good as Keats, and so on. In *The Secular Scripture*, he states that the typical writer feels himself pulled in two directions:

The same writer may feel the pull of elite and popular tendencies within himself. The popular helps to diversify our literary experience and prevent any type of literary education from getting a monopoly of it; but as time goes on, popular writers without exception survive by being accepted by the literary ‘establishment.’ Thus Spenser has acquired the reputation of a poet’s poet, and a storehouse of recondite allusion and allegory; but in his day *The Faerie Queene* was regarded as pandering to a middlebrow appetite for stories about fearless knights and beauteous maidens, and hideous ogres and dragons, instead of following the more sober Classical models. (Frye, 2006, p. 23)

We should think, then, of writers as simultaneously “elite” and “popular” figures. In his most celebratory statements about popular literature, Frye explores reasons why we might think of elite and popular literature as *equals* and two manifestations of the *same kind of literature*:

Popular literature [...] is neither better nor worse than elite literature, nor is it really a different kind of literature: it simply represents a different social development of it. (Frye, 2006, p. 23)

Nevertheless, it is to some degree possible to separate elite literature from popular literature in Frye's view. He defines popular literature as

the literature that demands the minimum of previous verbal experience and special education from the reader. In poetry, this would include, say, the songs of Burns and Blake, the Lucy lyrics of Wordsworth, ballads and folksongs, and other simple forms ranging from some of the songs and sonnets of Shakespeare to Emily Dickinson. Much if not most of this would be very unpopular in the bestseller sense, but it is the kind of material that should be central in the literary education of children and others of limited contact with words. (Frye, 2006, p. 22)

Interestingly, however, as Frye starts to suggest in the last passage, he thinks in terms of the distinction between the genuinely popular and what he seems to view as the "pseudo-popular," which seems to point to the run-of-the-mill "mass" product, the "bestseller" (Frye, 2006, p. 22). Of course, certain types of cultural studies make interesting study objects of *all texts*. But Frye also demands of us that we consider the moral and/or aesthetic power of works of literature, and that type of consideration often leads us to different conclusions about the value of different works of literature. Throughout Frye's works we come across a number of statements which encourage us to distinguish between popular literature and the "bestseller." While popular literature is bound up with a very special education in the imagination, bestsellers do not possess that power. They are part of a "fad," which may only lay a false claim to the term "popular":

By 'popular' we usually mean what is temporarily fashionable, for reasons that can be derived from the social conditions of any given time. But there is a more permanent sense in which a work may be popular, not as a best-seller, but in the sense of providing a key to imaginative experience for the untrained. The popular in this sense is the continuing primitive, the creative design that makes its impact independently of special education. Burns is a

popular poet, not in any technical or best-seller sense, but in the sense that he continues and provides modern examples for a primitive tradition of folk song and ballad. (Frye, 2010, p. 161)

At times Frye is slightly more emollient on the subject of the best-seller: “no book can remain on a best-seller list for long,” he states, “unless it is written with a good deal of professional expertise” (Frye, 2000, p. 584). But what is perhaps more interesting is that he is particularly critical of one important type of bestseller. Having invoked the specter of “a packaged commodity which an overproductive economy, whether capitalist or socialist, distributes as it distributes foods and medicines, in varying degree of adulteration” (Frye, 2006, p. 21), Frye then proceeds to speak even more damningly of pseudo-popular literature, highlighting what he sees as its unequivocally exploitative treatment of sex and violence:

Much of it, in our society, is quite as prurient and brutal as its worst enemy could assert, not because it has to be, but because those who write and sell it think of their readers as a mob rather than a community. (Frye, 2006, pp. 21-22)

Interestingly, in *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye speaks confidently of readers’ ability to deal ironically with such fiction, thereby defusing any “danger” posed by it. “In the melodrama of the brutal thriller,” he argues, “we come as close as it is normally possible for art to come to the pure self-righteousness of the lynching mob” (Frye, 2007, p. 44). But readers are not helpless before this kind of fiction.

We should have to say, then, that all forms of melodrama, the detective story in particular, were advance propaganda for the police state, in so far as that represents the regularizing of mob violence, if it were possible to take them seriously. But it seems not to be possible. The protecting wall of play is still there. Serious melodrama soon gets entangled with its own pity and fear: the more serious it is, the more likely it is to be looked at ironically by the reader, its pity and fear seen as sentimental drivel and owlish solemnity, respectively. (Frye, 2007, p. 44)

That said, it is clear from both quotations that such literature is of little or no “value,” and Frye may be encouraging us to entertain the idea that there may be a literature type which is not part of the “elite-popular” continuum – a literature which is, indeed, “beyond the pale.” Ultimately, this judgment stems from moral considerations. “[T]rue comic irony or satire” – the novels of Graham Greene, for example, “defines the enemy of society as a spirit within that society” (Frye, 2007, p.44). The “brutal thriller,” by contrast, seems to be characterized by a decidedly illiberal spirit.

Frye is no doubt picking up on a vein in English letters about American or, better, pseudo-American, exploitative fiction, which runs from Orwell’s “Raffles and Miss Blandish” to Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy*.<sup>1</sup> Orwell and Hoggart shared something of a common outlook. Both believed that American mass-market fiction was wandering into an ethical gray area. But both were above-all focused on British imitations of that type of debased American fiction – *No Orchids for Miss Blandish* by James Hadley Chase, in the case of Orwell, and the British “sex and violence novelettes” published under names such as “Hank Janson” in the fifties, in the case of Hoggart. Frye’s own focus is the “brutal thriller” (Frye, 2007, p. 44), where “detection begins to merge with the thriller as one of the forms of melodrama” (Frye, 2007, p. 44). He never mentions specific authors’ names, but one can make a few educated guesses. In the period leading up to the publication of *Anatomy of Criticism*, hard-boiled crime fiction continued to sell well, and Frye feasibly had in mind Mickey Spillane’s Mike Hammer novels when completing that study. Similarly, one book which was widely read some years before the publication of *The Secular Scripture* was Harold Robbins’s *The Carpetbaggers*, described in a review in the *The New York Times* on the occasion of its release as “an excuse for a collection of monotonous episodes about normal and abnormal sex – and violence ranging from simple battery to gruesome varieties of murder” (Schumach, 1961, p. 14).

## Conclusion

It is difficult to avoid the sense that, for better or for worse, this tradition in letters petered out in the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> Frye’s distinction between the genuinely popular and the sham-popular no doubt represents a late restatement of the Orwell/Hoggart approach. Perhaps,

however, the distinction will be adopted by literary and cultural studies again. The feeling that some mass culture is better than other mass culture seems to be quite widespread in society today, despite the rejection of cultural hierarchies by so many academics. Continuing this tradition would involve picking up from where not just Orwell and Hoggart left off, but also from where Frye takes the discourse in his late but significant treatment of it.

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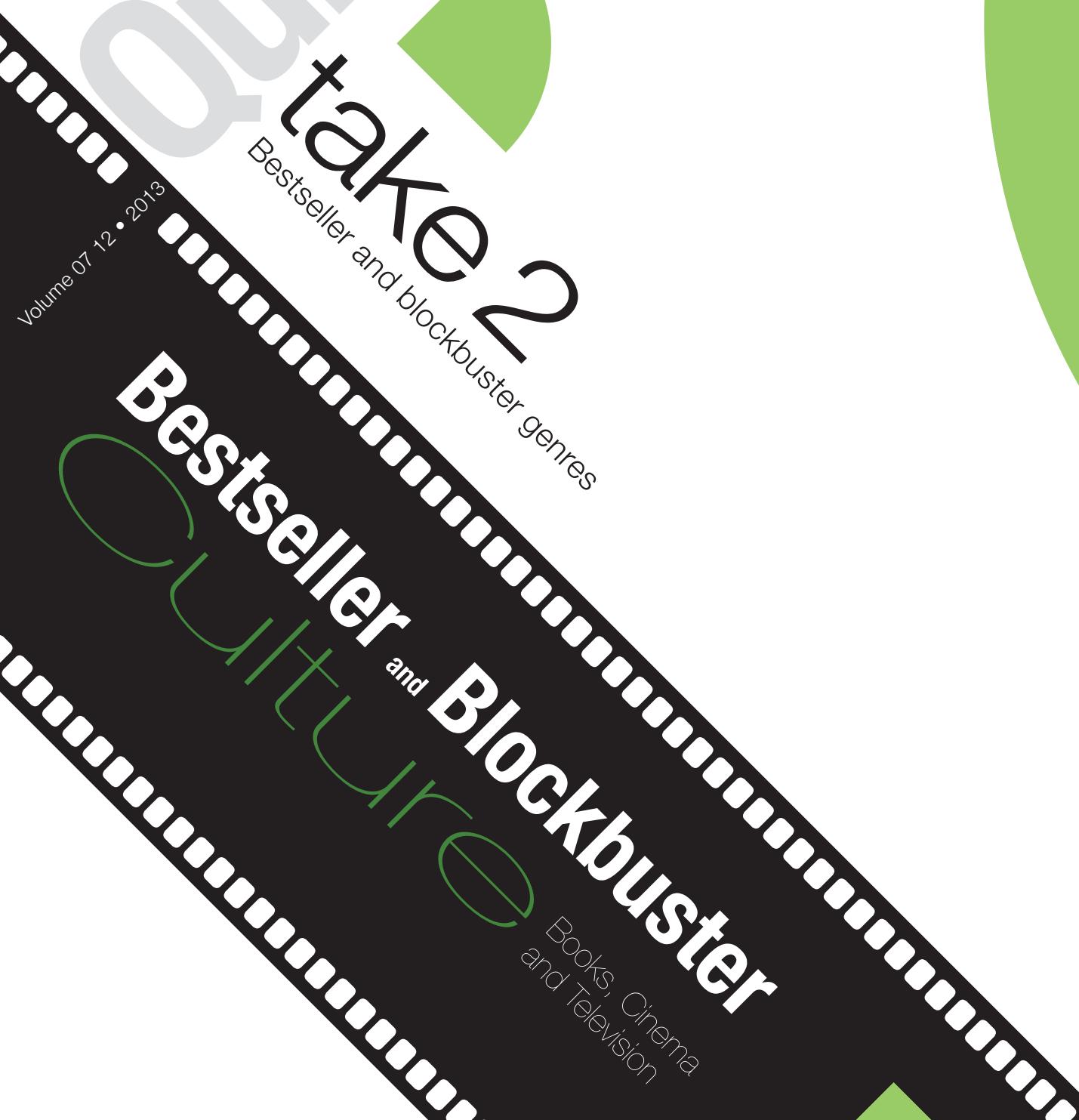
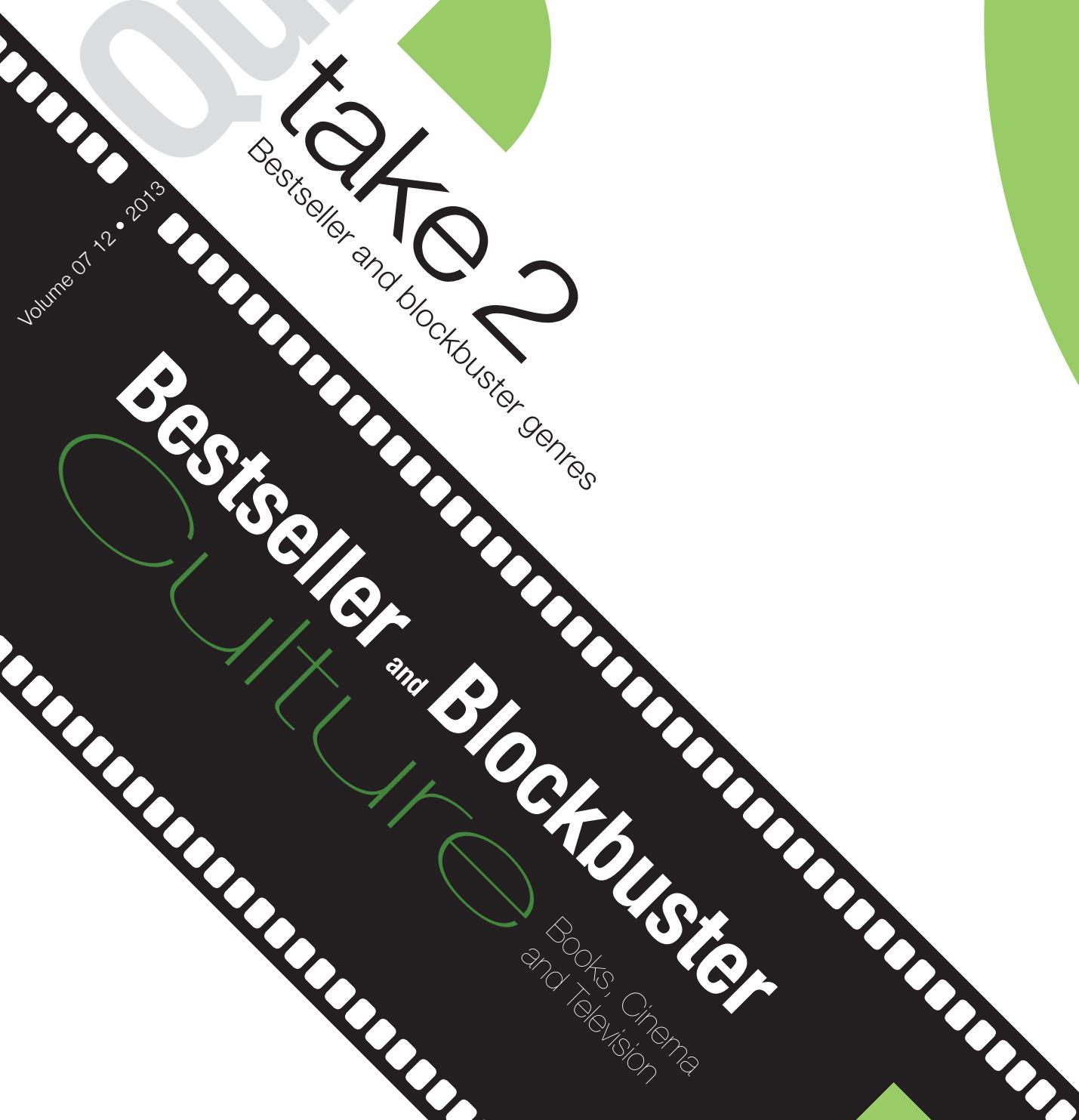
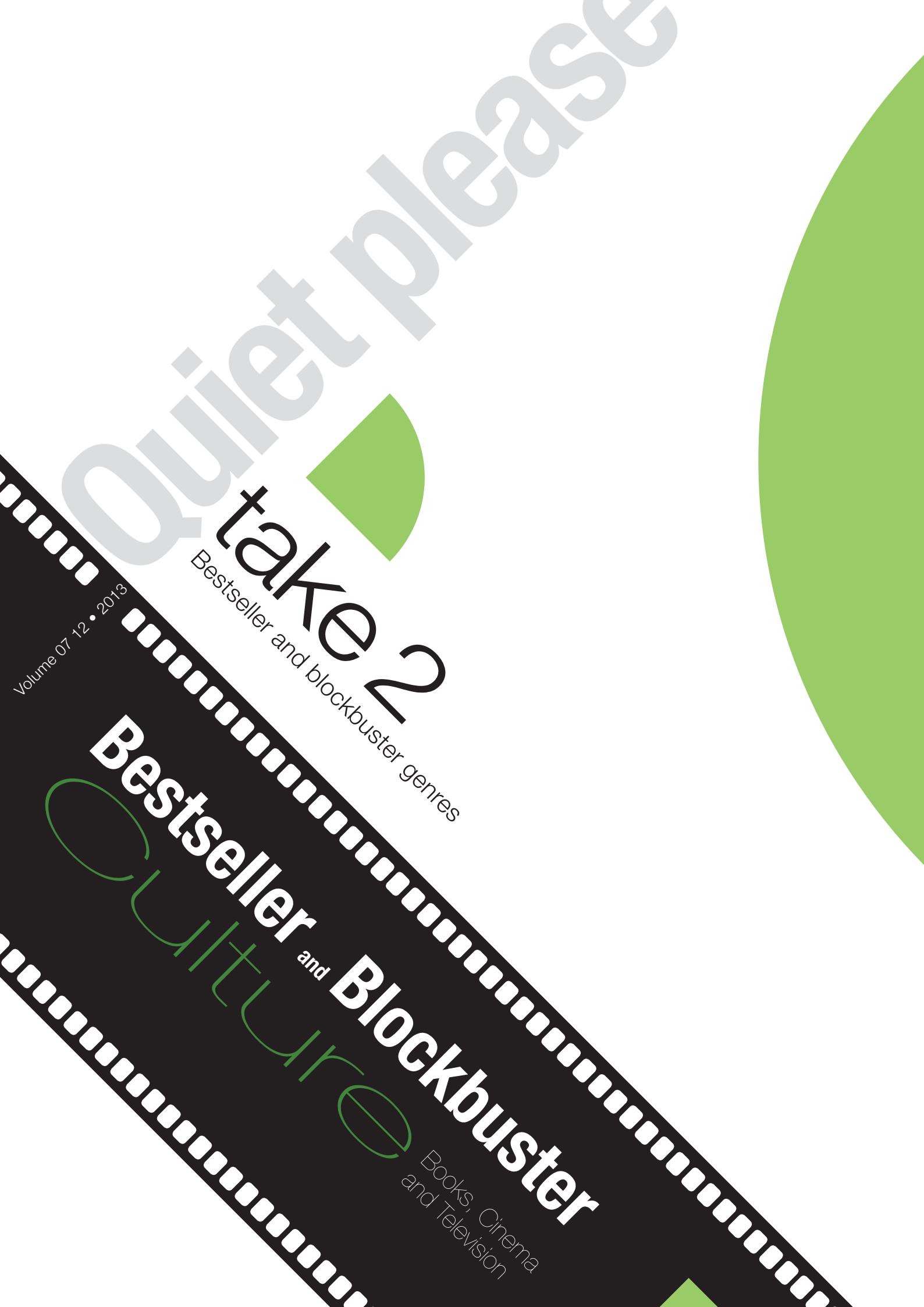
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### Notes

- 1 In "Raffles and Miss Blandish," Orwell argues that Chase's "whole theme is the struggle for power and the triumph of the strong over the weak" (Orwell, 1944, p. 218). The novel betrays "nihilistic" traits: there is no moral difference between detective and gangster. Orwell connects this to the culture of idolizing criminals. He sees the appearance of the book as evidence of the Americanization of British reading proclivities: "In America, both in life and fiction, the tendency to tolerate crime, even to admire the criminal so long as he is a success, is very much more marked" (Orwell, 1944, p. 220). Such storytelling may be indicative of an inversion of the underlying myth of Western literature: "Perhaps the basic myth of the Western world is Jack the Giant-killer, but to be brought up to date this should be renamed Jack the Dwarf-killer" (Orwell, 1944, pp. 222-223), he concludes. Similarly, in *The Uses of Literacy*, Hoggart focuses on the mass culture embodiment of literature, particularly "Sex novelettes" (Hoggart, 1957, p. 205). In the stories, all sex is violent, and "there must be violence all the time" (Hoggart, 1957, p. 213); "it is violent and sexual, but all in a claustrophobic and shut-in way" (Hoggart, 1957, p. 213). Crucially, "it exists in a world in which moral values have become irrelevant": "'forgiveness,' 'shame,' 'retribution,' and 'to be sullied,' 'to fall' or 'to pay' are all concepts outside their moral orbit" (Hoggart, 1957, p. 213). "Crooks" are defeated in the end, but the texture of the writing is bereft of moral reference. When men and women have sex, they do so as "physical enemies" (Hoggart, 1957, p. 215). The aim of the writing is to make the readers feel "the flesh and bone of violence" (Hoggart, 1957, p. 217). Gangster fiction, Hoggart admits, "moves [...] with a crude force as it creates the sadistic situation;" but even here "it has the life of a cruel cartoon" (Hoggart, 1957, p. 219).
- 2 Thomas Whiteside's *The Blockbuster Complex* represents a further attempt to develop a model for critiquing the bestseller. In his study, he criticizes book publishers for focusing upon "commercially successful

works of no literary merit" (Whiteside, 1981, p. 103), the publishing-industry equivalent of aesthetically-moribund television programmes and movies.



# Genre-Hybridization – a Key to Hyper-Bestsellers?

The use and function of different fiction genres in  
*The Da Vinci Code* and *The Millennium Trilogy*

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## Abstract

The majority of the novels that during the first decade of the 2000s became hyper-bestsellers share one thing in common: They tend to be genre-hybrids, mixing several different, often popular, fiction genres. This is true for *Harry Potter*, *The Da Vinci Code*, *Twilight*, and a number of other hyper-bestseller phenomena of recent years. The thesis of this article is that genre-hybridity is a fundamental feature that contributes to a novel's success by causing it to attract a larger and more diverse audience, and in so doing makes it stand out from most "regular" bestsellers.

In this article, the concept of the hyper-bestseller is introduced and outlined, followed by a comparative analysis of the use of different fiction genres and sub-genres in two of the most successful hyper-bestsellers of recent times, both of which exhibit strong links with the crime fiction tradition: Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* and Stieg Larsson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. The two novels are found to share many genre-related features, in particular, their dynamic detective duos, feminist agendas, anti-authoritarian attitudes, political criticism, exoticism, and religious elements. A majority of

the shared genre conventions are also found to enable a strong sense of reader identification with the detective characters.

**Keywords** hyper-bestseller, genre, genre-hybridity, crime fiction, Dan Brown, Stieg Larsson.

### **The concept of hyper-bestseller**

To describe and classify the most successful works of fiction from recent decades – those that have succeeded beyond even the status of bestseller or blockbuster – the concept of *hyper-bestseller* is introduced here.<sup>1</sup> The list below defines its main features:

1. A popular cultural phenomenon
2. Originates in a novel / a series of novels, which turn / s into something much bigger than the average No. 1 *New York Times* bestseller
3. Translated into a large number of languages
4. Sells in many millions of copies
5. Turned into blockbuster films
6. Adapted for several other media formats
7. Attracts enormous international popularity and fan culture
8. Known also to people who have not read the original novel / novels or approached the text through its remediations
9. Attracts extensive attention by media
10. Attracts extensive attention by scholars

The majority of novels that during the first decade of the 2000s became hyper-bestsellers share one thing in common: They tend to be genre-hybrids, mixing several different, often popular, fiction genres. This is true for *Harry Potter*, *The Da Vinci Code*, *Twilight*, *The Millennium Trilogy*, *The Hunger Games*, *Fifty Shades of Gray*, and a number of other hyper-bestseller phenomena of recent years. There are many other factors that contribute to turning a novel into a hyper-bestseller, not least factors of promotion and distribution. The thesis of this article is, however, that genre-hybridity is a fundamental – and so far under-explored – feature that contributes to such a novel's success by causing it to attract a larger and more diverse audience, and in so doing makes it stand out from most “regular” bestsellers.

As crime fiction in particular has grown to dominate the international fiction market during the last decade, I will compare the use of different fiction genres and sub-genres in two of the most successful hyper-bestsellers of recent times, both of which exhibit strong links with the crime fiction tradition: Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) and Stieg Larsson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2005)<sup>2</sup> from his *Millennium Trilogy*.<sup>3</sup> By comparing how these novels employ different fiction genres and sub-genres, I hope to be able to identify what they share in common in terms of use and mixture of genre elements – and which, furthermore, arguably constitute an important ingredient in their success and status as hyper-bestsellers.

Popular fiction has always had a strong bond to concepts of genre, closely following specific genre rules, traditions, and patterns. In the wake of post-modernity, however, the borders between different genres have become much more permeable.<sup>4</sup> This applies also at the level of sub-genres. Indeed, to look at crime fiction today, it is hard to find an archetypal whodunit, psychological thriller, or police procedural, as most crime writers now use elements from more than one sub-genre.<sup>5</sup> Readers and audiences today possess extensive knowledge concerning what characterizes different genres, and can thus often also identify genre patterns and conventions in fiction where several genres are mixed. Studying genre use in *Harry Potter*, Anne Hiebert Alton concludes that genre today is much more than a “classification tool,” it has rather become a “communication system”:

Because of their conscious or unconscious awareness of the various genres fused in the books, readers gain the delight of recognition as they read something that feels familiar in form: they know the conventions of the game, or the story, before they begin, and thus are looking for the tags, or signs. (Alton, 2009, p. 221)

To be able to recognize elements from different genres, as well as references to specific works of popular fiction, might even constitute part of the attraction for the reader.

When Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* was published in 2003, he was already an established author with three novels to his name. However, it was the above novel that propelled him into becoming a hyper-bestseller phenomenon. Despite being quite similar to his earlier *Angels & Demons* (2000),<sup>6</sup> the more controversial content of *The Da Vinci Code* was probably crucial in making it more successful than

the former. It could also be argued that the timing was riper for this kind of novel to become a hyper-bestseller, as crime fiction – widely defined – was just starting to eclipse all other genres in terms of popularity. A couple of years later, in 2005, when Larsson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* was first published, the novel was thus “carried” by the still growing popularity of crime fiction, and in particular on the back of Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*. Nordic crime fiction was also beginning to become known as a concept in its own right, and the translation of Larsson's *Millennium Trilogy* paved the way for opening up the international market to Nordic writers. Although already popular in many European languages, English-language sales of Larsson's novels (released in English 2008–2009) were unprecedented for a Nordic crime writer. That it was the *Millennium Trilogy* – and not, for example, Henning Mankell's Kurt Wallander novels or Jo Nesbø's Harry Hole series – that became a hyper-bestseller phenomenon, can in all likelihood be attributed to the extensive genre mixture of Larsson's novels (cf. the more extensive discussion in Bergman, 2013, pp. 51–53).

### **A cultural thriller packed with whodunit elements, and a whodunit turned serial killer thriller**

The main structure of *The Da Vinci Code* is based on the political thriller (the thematic content, however, qualifies it primarily as a cultural thriller) with a dominating “on the run” motif, where the heroes are both hunters and hunted, and where the suspense is built up around the constant threats that keep them running. To this basic structure, Brown adds a number of riddles and puzzles to be solved for his heroes to keep momentum and stay ahead of their pursuers.<sup>7</sup> The types of codes and puzzles used by Brown commonly belong to the classic detective story or whodunit. In these sub-genres, the puzzles give rise to a pause in the developments of the narrative. While this pause traditionally delays the solving of the case, in Brown's novel it contributes to the tempo by adding suspense. Unlike the classic whodunit, *The Da Vinci Code* contains not one puzzle-like mystery, but a series of mysteries and codes that need to be solved by the protagonists under extreme time pressure so as to survive, solve the initial murder, and complete what turns out to be a search for the Holy Grail.

In *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, genre associations progressively change. The initial mystery of the disappearance of a girl from an isolated island places the novel primarily in the whodunit sub-genre. Later events and genre elements eventually turn it into what is essentially a serial killer thriller. The transition between genres is a gradual process, but the final crossing of the line is clearly marked by several genre-related markers (Bergman, 2013, pp. 49–50). Larsson also uses the occasional riddle/puzzle in his novel, the foremost example being a list of names and numbers found in the missing girl's diary. These are believed to be (encrypted) phone numbers, but eventually they are deciphered as references to passages in the Bible, which, in turn, refer to a series of murdered women (Larsson, 2011, pp. 171, 252–253). In Larsson's case, the riddle thus illustrates the transformation from one sub-genre to the other, from whodunit to serial killer thriller, rather than constituting a driving force for the action. Although these are the main genre structures and affiliations characterizing the two novels, both contain an additional number of genre references and elements – from different crime fiction sub-genres and other (mainly) popular fiction genres. Gunhild Agger has, for example, convincingly demonstrated Larsson's extensive use of the melodrama (another genre common in hyper-bestsellers) as crucial for his success (Agger, 2010, *passim*).

### Dynamic detective duos and feminist agendas

Both Brown and Larsson chose a man-woman combo of amateur detectives as their protagonists. Robert Langdon and Mikael Blomkvist are investigating academics, respectively a symbologist/art historian and journalist, while the women have ties to professional investigation in their line of work – Sophie Neveu as a cryptologist employed by the police (although running from the police during the events of the novel), and Lisbeth Salander freelancing as an investigator for a private security firm. In Brown's case, it could be argued that the man-woman combo might attract more women readers to the thriller genre; in Larsson's, it might attract women to the kind of crime novel that conveys social and political criticism, another important sub-genre incorporated in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. Crime fiction is in many senses a traditionally male genre, and many of its sub-genres still have a predominantly male readership, despite the general tendency for women to be greater con-

sumers of novels. Furthermore, the dual gender combo enables a traditional romantic motif, something that both authors take advantage of. In classic detective fiction, romance tended to be avoided unless it was part of the motif for murder. In recent decades, however, romantic liaisons between heroes have grown to be a staple in most crime fiction sub-genres. This has contributed to broadening the appeal of crime fiction to new audiences.

While Brown's and Larsson's women protagonists can hardly be considered submissive or weak, it is clear that Brown relies more on traditional gender stereotypes. Langdon is the action hero and also takes on a progressively stronger position in deciphering the riddles, until he finally solves the mystery on his own, with Neveu placed in a more passive role (cf. Bergman, 2011, p. 96). Larsson rather inverts traditional gender dynamics, conferring on Blomkvist more traditionally female traits, with Salander acting as the action hero, who rescues the captured Blomkvist from the serial killer (cf. Kärrholm, 2012, p. 151). In spite of this, their working relationship tends to be gender equal, something an international audience might also expect, and accept, from a Swedish novel; and to international women readers, this is likely part of the novel's attraction.

Larsson's novel has a clear feminist agenda, aiming to criticize and raise awareness of structural and physical violence toward women. The theme persists throughout the trilogy, though it is perhaps most explicit in the story about Salander and in the first novel's case of the serial killer. Brown's novel, too, can be said to have a feminist theme at its core: the battle over the truth about the sacred feminine and the descendants of Jesus Christ, with it being argued that an ancient truth has been covered up by the patriarchal Christian Church to suppress women. Brown's and Larsson's novels thus, at least to some extent, challenge the male paradigm traditionally dominating the crime fiction genre and advocate modern ideas about gender equality while criticizing suppression of women in society. Both novels have received extensive criticism for their feminist ambitions – Brown primarily from religious circles accusing him of distorting historical facts, Larsson mainly from feminist fractions arguing that the novel cannot be feminist due to the explicit portrayal of violence against women, which is considered to be anti-feminist by default. None of the novels do, however, present *radical* feminist ideas, and this has enabled read-

ers to find them “refreshing” without feeling too provoked. Still, these perspectives have probably added to the novels’ appeal, particularly for women readers.

The protagonists of both novels also share in common that they are dealing with personal vendettas, which is most obvious in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. Blomkvist wants to prove his innocence after being convicted for libel over the Wennerström affair, something which he is able to do with the aid of Salander, who also helps him publicize Wennerström’s crimes. Salander herself is raped by her legal guardian and eventually takes revenge on him and reverses their power relations. Additionally, throughout the trilogy, she investigates her own past, finding out more about what happened to her as a child, and eventually confronts her father and, during a trial, exposes the fraction within the secret police that had protected him. In the end, she finally acquires the legal status she has been denied. In the case of Brown, it is primarily Neveu who has a personal vendetta, with Langdon assisting her in her mission to find out who killed her grandfather. Vendettas and personal missions like these are commonly used in crime fiction as motifs behind the crimes committed. However, when associated with the hero, they are rather reminiscent of the quest tales common in adventure stories, which is particularly pertinent to Brown’s novel, where the journey combined with the search for the Holy Grail is evocative of both classical quest tales and modern adventure stories. The vendetta motif increases the reader’s emotional attachment and support for the fictional character, and thus contributes to the page-turning qualities of the novels.

While Larsson’s protagonists, despite being amateur detectives, work primarily in the manner of hard-boiled private detectives, those of Brown are more clearly inspired by the heroes of the action/political thriller tradition. A specificity shared by all four heroes is that they are driven by strong, personal codes of ethics, particularly common among the hard-boiled PIs of the American tradition, whereas, for example, political thriller heroes are more often characterized by loyalty to their employers. Both authors are also very detailed in the description of how the detectives conduct their investigations and of how the cases progress, which is reminiscent of the police procedural’s accounting of process details. This is a way to further make the reader feel involved in the story, as if

partaking in the investigation, and it is an important part of the attraction behind police and other procedural series. Additionally, hunches, instincts, and gut feelings help the four heroes navigate among clues and dangers throughout the novels. While common to many crime fiction detectives, it is perhaps particularly characteristic of the middle-aged male detectives of the police genre.

### **Revolutionary spirits – and a touch of political criticism, exoticism, and religion**

Both Brown's and Larsson's novels blend fiction with reality by framing their stories with references to "facts": Brown as he initially informs the reader about The Priory of Sion and Opus Dei, establishing that "descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate" (Brown, 2004, p. [1]); and Larsson by introducing each of the four main parts of his novel by relating Swedish statistics about violent crimes against women.<sup>8</sup> This serves to bring the novels closer to the world of the reader – that is, making it easier to believe and engage in the fiction and to accept the often critical perspectives of society and established authorities presented in the novels.

In general, both novels show skepticism toward authorities. Indeed, more generally, from governments with double agendas in political thrillers to corruption among the highest ranks of the police in police procedurals and hard-boiled crime fiction, a mistrust of authority is very common in the genre of crime fiction. Brown and Larsson are especially critical of their portrayal of the police. In *The Da Vinci Code*, the French police hunt Langdon for a murder he did not commit, with the leading police officer connected with some of the villains, while in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, the police fail to solve the girl's disappearance and never realize there is a serial killer at work. Furthermore, the primary villains throughout *The Millennium Trilogy* are revealed as a fraction within the Swedish secret police. Both authors are also critical of other institutions. Brown primarily targets the Catholic Church and Opus Dei; Larsson critiques modern capitalism, the corrupt financial market, and the media (primarily the tabloids and financial journalists). The distrust of established authorities creates a sense of us-against-them, where it is easy for a reader to identify with the individual against the more abstract/distant powers. In a time of economic crisis, globalization,

and a generally changing world, this might be attractive to many people in today's society, and has, furthermore, likely contributed to the present general rise in the popularity of crime fiction.

An additional aspect is that the heroes of both novels have a tendency not only to hide things from the police, but they also even break the law in order to make headway in their investigations and/or to avoid being captured. In crime fiction from the early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, law-breaking detectives were primarily found in the hard-boiled tradition, while they tended to be more law-abiding in most other sub-genres. However, a declining respect for the law can be seen in most types of more recent crime fiction. The rationale for crime fiction heroes breaking the law stems from their actions benefiting the greater good, such as catching a murderer, staying alive, or preventing another, more serious crime. When the heroes go against the rules – as when Salander uses her skills as a hacker or when Langdon tricks the police to escape from the Louvre – it enhances the suspense experienced by the readers. Even though the reader is generally “positioned” to perceive these crimes as committed for a good cause, and thus not condemning the actions of the hero, the risk that they could be caught by the police for doing something illegal is added to the long list of things that might go wrong, causing the reader to worry about – and perhaps also to cheer on – the protagonist even more.

Swedish crime fiction in particular has a reputation for containing social and political criticism, a tendency traced back to the police novels by Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö (1965–75). The primary object of criticism in the national tradition has been the disintegration of the Swedish welfare state. To foreign readers, the image of Sweden presented in this type of crime fiction has thus clashed with the widespread notion of Sweden as a perfectly functioning welfare society, a socialist utopia of sorts. Portraying the Swedish state as a “villain,” which Larsson to a certain extent does in his trilogy – in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, Salander’s legal guardian and rapist Bjurman is the most noticeable representative of the state – is contrary to the idealized stereotype. This critical depiction of Sweden has probably increased the fascination for Swedish crime fiction among non-Swedish readers, who might get the impression that a secret truth about Sweden is being conveyed; perhaps some of these

readers even take a malicious pleasure in learning that “perfect” Sweden might not be so perfect after all.

Today it is almost the rule in crime fiction that motifs for murder are traced back not only to the childhood of the characters, but often even further back, to historical times and events. Brown and Larsson both follow this pattern – the former basing his story in the history of religion, the latter in the history of industrialism in modern 20<sup>th</sup>-century Sweden – with past mysteries reemerging into the present and posing new dangers. Larsson begins with what could be defined as a historical crime: the unsolved disappearance of a girl in the 1960s. However, in the investigation, Salander observes that “This may have started out as a historical mystery,” but now “we can be sure we’re on somebody’s trail” (Larsson, 2011, p. 331). Similarly, Brown’s protagonists repeatedly reflect upon the connections between the past and present, questioning whether the Catholic Church would really be prepared to countenance murder so as to prevent the Grail documents from being made public.

While Brown’s novel is permeated by the theme of religion, the main mystery in Larsson’s novel also has a religious element to it, as Bible verses prove to be the key in revealing that a serial killer is on the loose. From almost being “banned” from crime fiction, seen as contradicting factual logic, religion has become increasingly prominent in the genre in recent decades (Hansen, 2012, *passim*). Elaborate religious motifs and patterns have been important in serial killer thrillers. Nonetheless, Brown and Larsson both maintain a somewhat critical, or at least skeptical, distance from religion, avoiding association with any branch of faith or pedalling specific religious beliefs that could potentially scare off readers.

### Concluding remarks

Marketing efforts aside, in examining the texts of the two novels it is clear that they share in common certain features that might have contributed to their enormous success. In particular, Brown and Larsson use many different genre conventions that enable a strong sense of reader identification with the detective characters. Can these observations be used as a guide on how to write a forthcoming hyper-bestseller? Of course not, but it is nevertheless likely that many of the common, genre-related features identified above can also be found in other hyper-bestsellers from the recent past

– and will probably be found in equally successful works in the near future.

Reading the *Harry Potter* series as a “generic game,” Altman concludes that

Rowling has created something new: a generic mosaic made up of numerous individual pieces combined in a way that allows them to keep their original shape while constantly changing their significance. The ways in which these pieces operate vary and change depending on the generic tags being interpreted at any given time by any particular reader. (Altman, 2009, p. 221)

This allows for a wide range of readers to appreciate and feel engaged in her work. I would suggest that Brown and Larsson have both accomplished something very similar to Rowling’s “genre mosaic.” Although it is not possible to draw decisive conclusions from the examination of only two examples, it should be noted that these are not just *any* two examples. Brown’s and Larsson’s novels have become two of the most successful international hyper-bestsellers of the past decade. Additionally, they are probably *the* two most successful examples principally aimed at an adult audience (unlike *Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, or *The Hunger Games*). Published in the early 2000s, both Larsson and Brown benefited from the fact that knowledgeable readers/consumers were ready for a new type of novel, one which involved a more elaborate use of different crime fiction sub-genres.

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### Notes

- 1 I have borrowed, translated, and further developed the term *hyper-best-seller* (*hyperbästsäljare*) from Berglund (2012). The reason for suggesting the new term is that previously existing terms – such as for example the term *world literature*, as used by Damrosch (2003) – tend to be too inclusive and/or exclusive, and, additionally, give the wrong connotations. Meanwhile, the term *hyper-best-seller* is focused on the size, explosive expansion, and popular nature of the phenomenon at hand, and is not limited in terms of transnational and trans-medial factors.
- 2 Some of my observations concerning Larsson's novel have previously been presented more extensively in Bergman (2013). Although *The Da Vinci Code* phenomenon extends beyond that novel, to Brown's whole oeuvre or at least to all his Langdon novels, I will still refer to it as *The Da Vinci Code* phenomenon, thus stressing the importance of that very novel.
- 3 An important predecessor is Umberto Eco's *Il nome della rosa* (1980; *The Name of the Rose* [1983]). In this context, I use "genre" to define, for ex-

ample, crime fiction, romance, fantasy, and science fiction, while “sub-genre” refers to categories such as the whodunit, psychological thriller, hard-boiled crime fiction, and police procedural. When claiming that a motif or an element of narration is common in a certain genre or sub-genre, I refer to the typical “pure,” “text book” version of the genre or sub-genre – an ideal version that is rarely found in practice anymore. Since this belongs more to encyclopedia-type knowledge, knowledge repeated in common textbooks on the genre, I have omitted references to texts on the different genres and sub-genres.

- 4 I am aware that this is a simplification. Popular genres have always been mixed to some extent, although this practice has increased substantially in the last few decades. Still, it is very useful to be able to speak of genres and sub-genres in terms of their “classic” form, whether it ever existed as “pure” or not, and most people familiar with crime fiction have no problem making the relevant associations when encountering terms such as for example whodunit, police procedural, or spy thriller (cf. previous note).
- 5 Still, there is a big difference between those novels which might mix elements from two or maybe three genres or sub-genres, and hyper-bestseller phenomena like *Harry Potter* or *The Millennium Trilogy* that mix elements from a much larger number of genres and sub-genres.
- 6 The two novels are similar in terms of protagonists, main plot construction, genre associations, the strong focus on religious and cultural contexts, the “Old Europe” settings, and so on. On the back of the success of *The Da Vinci Code*, *Angels & Demons* also sold numerous copies, was adapted into a popular film (2009, directed by Ron Howard), and became part of what is the *Da Vinci Code* phenomenon.
- 7 For a more extensive discussion of codes and puzzles as the narrative force in *The Da Vinci Code*, see Bergman, 2011, pp. 95–96.
- 8 The mixture of fact and fiction is also something Altman stresses as one of Rowling’s strengths in the Harry Potter series (Altman, 2009, p. 214).

# From *The Flame and the Flower* to *Fifty Shades of Grey*

Sex, Power and Desire in the Romance Novel

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## Abstract

E.L. James's *Fifty Shades* trilogy has become a huge success and sold millions of copies. The novels' mix of romance and erotica has been described as something new. Reading these books mainly as romance, Nilson focuses on how James uses well known and established romance traits from, for example, the so-called "bodice-ripper" novel and chick lit, in order to create a hybrid. These traits are visible in both how James describes her protagonists and in how the relationship between them is portrayed. Nilson argues that the *Fifty Shades* trilogy is, rather than a new kind of romance, a compilation of well-established traits.

**Keywords** romance, "the bodice-ripper," chick lit, popular fiction, desire, sex.

## Introduction

The Swedish newspaper *Expressen* published an article on the 15th of August 2013 explaining how one of the big chains of clothing stores, *Kappahl*, is currently working together with E.L. James, author of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, on a line of clothing, probably lingerie,

though the article does not specify. This is one of several examples I could discuss that show how popular the *Fifty Shades* trilogy has become. What started out as a piece of *Twilight* fan fiction, published on the web under the title "Master of the Universe," is now three books that have sold millions of copies.

I have for a year now followed this success story, and I have tried to understand why these books, which almost everyone I meet describes as "badly written" but still have read, has become such a big deal. A few weeks ago, I was in Stockholm and listened to Agnes Ahlander Turner, a literary scout at Maria B. Campbell Associates in New York talking about what a scout does, and one of the questions she got from the audience was: "Why do you think that *Fifty Shades of Grey* has become so popular?" She answered: "Because it is something new." Now, having read our Bakhtin or our Barthes, we know that texts are hardly ever completely new; and as an avid romance reader, my first impression of James's novels was quite the opposite. To me these novels were almost too familiar, but having reread them a few times, I have been struck by how James mixes several different traits from the romance genre in order to create an interesting hybrid. I shall in this article try and explain how this is done.

*Fifty Shades of Grey* is usually labeled as erotic romance, and I will focus on this romance part. This is neither very original nor the only way to read the novel. In *Fifty Writers on Fifty Shades of Grey* from 2012, E.L. James's trilogy is read as romance, as erotica, and as fan fiction. There are several articles that vote for reading the books as romance. D.L. King, for example, asks: "Is Fifty Shades Erotica?" and her answer is no. She writes:

These books are unabashedly romantic. They follow the tried-and-true formula for romance and the series end happily. And, as previously stated, this would hold true even if aliens came down and vacuumed all the sex out of all the copies in existence. With that in mind, there can be no denying that the *Fifty Shades* series is a romance. (p. 78)

One way to label James's novel could be "romantica," a term coined by the website Ellora's Cave, where a great number of erotic romances are published (Frantz, 2010, p. 47). The label highlights the

romance part of the story, but it also indicates how the text has more erotic content than a romance novel.

But what does it mean to say that *Fifty Shades of Grey* is romance? Romance is a heterogeneous genre and, in academic circles, a rather invisible one. Before I turn to E.L. James's novels, let me say something about romance fiction research.

### One part romance

Romance is a genre difficult to define. Barbara Fuchs (2004) writes in her introduction to romance that "the term is variously applied to everything from Spenser's *The Fairie Queene*, to Shakespeare's plays, to seventeenth-century French classicizing fictions, to Harlequin romances" (p. 4f). In this article, my main focus is, of course, on the modern romance novel, and I will try to trace a connection from the romances of the 1970s to *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

There are still relatively few studies on the romance novel, and the studies that are available tend to lean towards defending the genre. This generally leads to a need to focus on the "classical heritage" of the romance novel. Lynne Pearce writes in *Romance Writing* more about Samuel Richardson, Chrétien de Troyes, and Ann Radcliffe than about the current popular romance writers (Pearce, 2007). Pamela Regis does mention writers such as Jayne Ann Krentz and Nora Roberts in her study *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (2003), but she spends a lot of pages discussing, for example, Jane Austen as a "master of the romance novel" (Regis, 2007, p. 75). My argument is not that it is in any way incorrect to discuss Austen, Richardson, or Radcliffe in a study of the romance novel, but due to the low status of the genre, most of the scholarly studies of the romance novel tends to focus on the classical heritage of the genre, but ignore or rush through the twentieth century development of the genre.

Studies of the romance novel also tend to focus more on the reader of the genre than on the texts themselves. Even if both Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984) and Tania Modleski's *Loving with a Vengeance* (1982) were in many ways groundbreaking, they have been critiqued not only for ignoring the texts of the genre but for the way they describe female consumers of romance. Radway, for example, says that even if the romance novels are traditional and even patriarchal, the readers interpret them in a different way. "The

traditionalism of romance fiction will not be denied here, but it is essential to point out that Dot [Dorothy Evans] and many of the writers and readers of romances interpret these stories as chronicles of female triumph" (Radway, 1991, p. 54). Modleski describes in her opening chapter how women tend to use popular literature as a kind of drug (echoing Adorno and Horkheimer) but also says that the popularity of these novels "suggests that they speak to very real problems and tensions in women's lives" (Modleski, 1982, p. 14).

Two studies that take a different approach to the romance novel are Carol Thurston's *The Romance Revolution* (1987) and Kay Mussell's *Fantasy and Reconciliation: Contemporary Formulas of Women's Romantic Fiction* (1984). Mussell is in her study critical of the romance genre and points out that the main theme of the genre has been the same for a long time:

The essential assumptions of romance formulas - belief in the primacy of love in a woman's life, female passivity in romantic relationships, support for monogamy in marriage, reinforcement of domestic value - have not faded or significantly altered. (Mussell, 1984, p. XII)

She argues that the main focus of the romance novel is the search for true love and sexual awakening. The female protagonist needs an "alpha male" to wake her desire and to fulfill her needs. The "alpha male," in turn, needs to be tamed and domesticated, but even after this has been accomplished, he is still in control of both their fates. He is, in a way, a "master of their universe."

Thurston focuses on the genre rather than on its readers, and she sees the genre as an advocate for a new and more liberating kind of female sexuality where women, finally, become sexual *subjects*. Defending the genre against the idea that it portrays old-fashioned patriarchal values, Thurston argues that a kind of feminist erotic revolution takes place in these books.

[I]t is somewhat paradoxical that it is to the most constrained form of genre writing, the series of category romance, with its publisher specified guidelines for authors, that the wand of evolutionary change and development passed in the early 1980s. (Thurston, 1987, p. 61)

She argues that it is in the romance novel that women for the first time are given both sexual freedom and sexual agency. This view of the romance novels is echoed in Jayne Ann Krentz's introduction to *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of Romance* (1992), where she writes that "Romance novels invert power structures of a patriarchal society because they show women exerting enormous power over men" (p. 5). Krentz is not alone in saying that the heroine in a typical romance novel today is usually described as a strong and capable character whose function is not so much to be "saved" by the hero, but to change him and in so doing enables the happy ending. Regis, in her study, makes a point of how the heroine has changed in the modern romance novel. She writes that:

Heroines in twentieth-century romance novels are not wispy, ephemeral girls sitting around waiting for the hero so that their lives can begin. They are intelligent and strong. They have to be. They have to tame the hero. They have to heal him. Or they have to do both. (Regis, 2007, p. 206)

In James's trilogy, Ana may be the virginal heroine who is seduced by Christian, but as a romance heroine her function in the novel is not *just* to be the object of Christian's desire or to discover her own sexuality, but to *save* Christian. In romance, an alpha male like Christian is described as almost omnipotent, but he is also described as "lacking." Not only is he lonely, as he has yet to find his one true love, but he is also often "damaged" in some way and lives separate from society as a whole. He is often described as arrogant and condescending towards both employees and family members. In the *Fifty Shades* trilogy, Christian is emotionally scarred by childhood trauma caused by his mother who was a drug-addict, and his sexual preferences is explained as his only way to connect to people. He is unable to have a "normal" relationship until Ana comes along and saves him. She is the only woman he has ever met for whom he is willing to try to change. Several of the authors discussing the novels in *Fifty Writers on Fifty Shades of Grey* are very critical of how James describes BDSM as something Christian wants because he is "unable" to have any other kind of relationship. Even if James makes BDSM "mainstream," she is in the trilogy very ambivalent, and

Ana's longing for a more "traditional" relationship is described as not only "normal," but also "healthy."

For many readers, there is a comfort in romance novels because of the unavoidable outcome. With few exceptions, romance novels have happy endings. There is, for example, never any doubt that the protagonists of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy, Ana and Christian, will find true love and happiness together. Even if *Fifty Shades of Grey* ends with Ana actually leaving Christian, in the second book, *Fifty Shades Darker*, it does not take long before they are a couple again. They are meant to be together. Instead of ending the trilogy with the almost inevitable wedding, this occurs at the end of book two. In book three, "happily ever after" is made complicated by Christian's enemies and by an unplanned pregnancy, but when James finally leaves Christian and Ana, they are a happily married couple with children and an adventurous sex life. To an experienced romance reader, this ending comes as no surprise. From the moment that Ana realizes that Christian is her one true love, there must be a happy ending.

Is the *Fifty Shades* trilogy romance? I would argue that it is, and that James has revisited a part of the romance tradition that today's contemporary romance has left behind, namely the "bodice-ripper."

### One part "bodice-ripper"

In 1972, Kathleen Woodiwiss's *The Flame and the Flower* started a new trend in romance literature. Thurston writes that:

The results was that what began as a small bushfire in 1972 with the publication of Kathleen Woodiwiss's *The Flame and the Flower* quickly raged into a conflagration of passion, possession, piracy and rape, portraying high-spirited women who ultimately won not only love but more respect and independence than the times in which they lived commonly would have allowed their sex. (1987, p. 19)

Woodiwiss's novel became a model for the so-called "bodice-rippers." The label is, of course, a disparaging one. The "bodice-rippers" were generally placed in a historical setting, often the Regency era, and they were more sexually explicit than other romance novels. They sometimes included the "raping hero." A recurring theme

is that the hero in the beginning of the novel rapes the heroine, usually mistaking her for a prostitute. He is a dominant and often brooding Byronic hero, who fails to understand the word "no." In *The Flame and the Flower*, the heroine Heather, who has just managed to avoid being raped by a distant relative, a repulsive older man, falls into the hero Brandon's clutches. He thinks she is a prostitute, and she is too shocked after her earlier ordeal, in which she accidentally kills her uncle, to say anything. The rape itself is described as a painful and shameful experience for Heather:

A half gasp, half shriek escaped her and a burning pain seemed to spread through her loins [...] When he finally withdrew, she turned to the wall and lay softly sobbing with the corner of the blanket pulled over her head and her now used body left bare to his gaze. (Woodiwiss, 2003, p. 29f)

When Brandon realizes she is a virgin, he is gentle with her, but it is not until she is pregnant with his child and he is forced to marry her that he understands that she is an honorable woman. It then takes more than a year and a few hundred pages before the couple can overcome the start of their relationship and end up in bed again. This time, Heather enjoys herself fully, thus signaling the happy end of the book. One of the most important traits of modern romance is that the heroine must have at least one orgasm before the happy ending. Wendell and Tan write in *Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches' Guide to Romance Novels* (2009):

No other genre is as obsessed with the heroine (a) having excellent sex, and (b) not having sex at all unless it's with the One True Love, who's also usually the sole person who can make her come. Got orgasm? Got true love. (p. 37)

In these books, sex is important and quite often connected to violence. But even if the hero is "allowed" to abuse the heroine during the course of the novel, he must repent and make amends. Not before they have arrived at a point where they have mutually enjoyable sex is the story over.

Not all “bodice-rippers” included a “raping hero,” but a lot of them did, and while they became quite popular in the 1970s, they also met a lot of critique. Thurston shows in her study that as early as 1981 when RWA (Romance Writers of America) was founded, the general consensus was that the romance novel needed to change. The readers wanted older and more mature heroines and a hero that “no longer gets his ultimate thrill from being first, and no more rape” (Thurston, 1987, p. 22). Gradually the “bodice-rippers” disappeared. The heroine of the romance novel became more sexually experienced and the power balance between the hero and the heroine became more equal. For a while, the domineering hero who does not understand the word “no” disappeared.

It is all too easy to fall into the trap of reading “bodice-rippers” as one-dimensional texts. On one hand, the “bodice-rippers” portrayed men as sexual predators and women as passive victims, but on the other hand, these novels also gave detailed descriptions of female desire and showed women both initiating and enjoying sex.

The “bodice-ripper” novels are not just about rape and sex, they are also about obedience. The hero is described as a strong-willed man who is used to getting his own way and who needs to be in control. A very typical trait is that the hero is damaged in some way. In *The Flame and the Flower*, Brandon distrusts all women, engaged as he is to the unfaithful and manipulating Louisa. He is used to being obeyed: “You are mine now Heather. No one will have you but me. Only I shall taste your body’s joys. And when I snap my fingers, you will come” (Woodiwiss, 2003, p. 385). In James’s trilogy, Christian is badly damaged by his birthmother and her client, and has never really been able to trust anyone completely: “‘I’m used to getting my own way, Anastasia,’ he murmured. ‘In all things’” (James, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, 2012, p. 44).

The heroine is often defiant. She refuses to obey in the beginning and thus earns the hero’s respect. He is angered by her, but unlike other women who obey him without question, the heroine does not bore him. Usually there is a scene in the novel when the heroine “takes charge” and confronts the controlling hero. In *The Flame and the Flower*, Heather’s brave speech is a bit one-sided as Brandon is passed out drunk at the time: “You blithering ninny, I am a woman. What I had, I was holding for the man I’d have chosen and you stripped me of even that. I’m a living, breathing human being, and

I do have some pride" (Woodiwiss, 2003, p. 191). In *Fifty Shades Free*, Ana, being pregnant, finally tells Christian to stop being a tyrant: "But you're an adult now - you need to grow up and smell the fucking coffee and stop behaving like a petulant adolescent" (James, *Fifty Shades Free*, 2012, p. 434). Ana is in a way empowered by her pregnancy that gives her a new kind of authority. She speaks not only for herself, but also for her unborn child. This does not mean that the hero stops being controlling, but these scenes are important in the novels. When the hero acknowledges that the heroine will not be a compliant slave, and that he has to change in order to keep her, this generally means that the happy ending is near.

Even if the "bodice-ripper" romance is born in the 1970s, there is, of course, a long tradition of these novels in popular literature, in which E.M. Hull's famous novel, *The Sheik*, published in 1919 is an obvious example. James borrows heavily from this tradition in her trilogy. She reintroduces an old-fashioned version of the alpha male. Does this mean that we should interpret *Fifty Shades of Grey* as backlash? Is James's recipe for success to go back to a formula that used to be popular and reinvent it? No, I would argue that she also uses current popular genres to make her own unique blend.

### One part chick lit

When chick lit enters the scene of romance with the publication of Marian Keyes's *The Water Melon* in 1995, Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones Diary* in 1996 and Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City* in 1997, something happens. Chick lit quickly became very popular and even if the genre has been proclaimed dead on several occasions, there is still an abundance of chick lit novels in book stores and on bestseller lists. There are many themes in chick lit that firmly establishes the genre as "something other" than romance (Nilson 2008; Nilson 2013; Harzewski 2011). Not only is the heroine in chick lit allowed to have sex with more than one man during the course of the novel (in search of Mr. Right, she usually meets and falls into bed with several Mr. Wrongs), but the focus is different than in the romance novel. Even if finding true love and a stable heterosexual relationship is the aim of every chick lit heroine, this is not the only important theme. Achieving a satisfying career, building and maintaining close relationships with friends, and shopping are almost as important as finding true love in chick lit novels. Rocío Montoro

says in *Chick Lit: The Stylistics of the Cappuccino Fiction* (2012) that “a chick lit protagonist would, therefore, be interested in happily resolving her quest for a prince charming in the context of a consumer society which not only invites but even urges these protagonists to overspend” (p. 3). In the *Fifty Shades* trilogy, we find the same focus on the importance of labels and luxury goods that we see in chick lit. Christian entices Ana with expensive gifts from a Blackberry (so he can keep track of her) to an Audi.

If romance fiction focuses on “larger than life” scenarios with exotic milieus, intricate plots, and a great deal of “sturm und drang,” a typical chick lit novel is placed firmly in an ordinary and recognizable reality. One of the reasons behind Fielding’s success with *Bridget Jones’s Diary* was that readers felt they could identify with Bridget. She was a heroine one could relate to, laugh at, and laugh with, and her struggles with everything from cooking to weight loss/gain were familiar to many readers.

An important difference between chick lit and romance is the tone of the novel. Even if romance novels can be funny, they are seldom filled with the same kind of irony we can find in chick lit. In chick lit, there is usually an interesting ambiguity. Even if the story is about finding true love, in chick lit this is simultaneously mocked, and the “happily ever after” scenario is often challenged.

How to compare the way chick lit describes sex, then, to the “bodice-rippers”? In chick lit, the heroine often has a great deal of sex in her attempt to find Mr. Right, but it would be wrong to describe chick lit as an erotic genre. Actually, quite the opposite is true, and the genre is often called chaste (Nilson, 2008). The sex scenes are usually short and not very detailed; and even if the heroine has sex with different men, this sex is generally not very satisfactory until she meets her one true love. So how does the *Fifty Shades* trilogy relate to this? I would argue that after almost twenty years of chick lit, there was an almost desperate need for something else. E.L. James came at exactly the right moment. But she is actually not the first to bring sex back. From 2004 and onwards, an important part of popular fiction has been the so called “erotic memoirs” that continue to flood the market. Books like Abby Lee’s *Girl with a One-Track Mind* from 2006 and Suzanne Portnoy’s *The Butcher, the Baker, the Candlestick maker: An Erotic Memoir* from 2006 became very popular. Kay Mitchell points out in her article “Gender and Sexuality in

Popular Fiction" that these "true stories" have a close connection to chick lit: "evident again in their packaging but also in the deployment of similar motifs and concerns - romance, consumerism, 'having it all', the legacies of feminism / the meanings of post-feminism" (2012, p. 135). In one way, these erotic memoirs combine the description of everyday life we see in chick lit with erotica, and in so doing paves the way for *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

Is E.L. James's trilogy chick lit? No, but it shares a few important traits with the genre. Ana is a kind of heroine many readers professed to being able to identify with. And even if the irony of, say, *Bridget Jones's Diary* is sorely lacking in the trilogy, there is humor in the books, especially in the email conversations between Ana and Christian. It is my firm belief that after more than a decade of funny, romantic, but not very sexy books, the public was ready for something more titillating.

### **A hybrid love story for a new century?**

I started this article saying that I could not see James's trilogy as something "new," and I want to conclude by reflecting a bit on what she says about romance, relationships, and power. I have argued that James blends romance, the "bodice-ripper" novel, and chick lit, but what does the final product say about men, women, sex, and desire? In the "bodice-ripper" novel, there is a traditional and stereotypical description of power relations between the hero and the heroine. Mussell writes: "The man always unbends at the end to show his love and need for her, but he retains the mastery to be firmly in control of himself and the heroine" (1984, p. 126). When the romance genre changed, the relationship between the hero and the heroine also changed to become more equal. In chick lit, we see very few alpha males of Brandon's or Christian's character and a great deal more of modern men who willingly do the dishes. So is this a backlash? On one hand, E.L. James has in the *Fifty Shades* trilogy successfully meshed different traits from different kind of romance novels into something new. On the other hand, I would say, yes, this is a return to an old-fashioned way to describe heterosexual romance. I have spent a great deal of time talking about Ana and Christian with different teenage girls, and I must confess that I try to steer them in the direction of other kinds of both romance and erotica in which men and women have a more equal relationship.

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# The Family Saga as a Bestseller Strategy

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## Abstract

In the post-millennial years, Danish literature has witnessed a veritable wave of biographically based, regionally rooted family sagas. One important factor of this surge is a reaction against a polarization in the Danish literature of the 1990s between, on one hand, a minimalist, experimental short-story prose, critically acclaimed, but marginalized by the reading public, and on the other hand, widely read biographies and autobiographies of publicly known figures, mostly written by journalists.

Examining lists of especially significant literary prizes and by way of a qualitative inquiry, the article claims that one determinant in the recent development of the Danish novel has been a biographically oriented bestseller strategy, aiming at a fusion of literary quality and a broad appeal to the readers. Based on recent bestseller theories the article defends the notion that certain genres or genre fields can be pertinent in the historical assessment of bestsellerism, and that a historically changing relation exists between popular

bestsellers and 'literary' literature. Finally, the article advocates the idea of a 'bestseller determinant' in literary history and sociology – as a *pull determinant* complementing the *push determinant* in the theories of 'deautomatization' of Russian Formalism (Sklovskij, Tynjanov), New Criticism and other theories connected to Modernism.

**Keywords** Bestseller, Family Saga, Danish Novel, Scandinavian Literature, Literary history, Bestseller Determinant.

### Are bestsellers totally unpredictable?

In John Sutherland's *Bestsellers: A Very Short Introduction*, Chapter 4, "The American bestseller", ends with the following disconcerting conclusion: 'Over the long term, all that can be said with certainty is (1) there will be more bestsellers; (2) they will sell ever better; (3) they will defy prediction' (Sutherland, 2007, p. 80).

If this is taken as a statement implying that the variety over time of the bestseller will ultimately prevent us from treating it as an 'object' with discernible tendencies, the statement is, quite predictably, contradicted several times in the book. In the very same chapter, Sutherland is not afraid to generalize the assumption that the success of Harriet Beecher Stowe's socially engaged melodrama *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) introduced a long-term tendency in American bestsellerism: 'Stowe had forged what would become an enduring link between the American bestseller and the American social conscience' (Sutherland, 2007, p. 45). Referring to John D. Cawelti's classic study *Adventure, Mystery and Romance* (Cawelti, 1976), Sutherland affirms the generic importance of the melodrama: 'As John G. Cawelti has argued, "melodrama" is a main (arguably *the* main) strand in American popular fiction through the decades' (Sutherland, 2007, p. 51).

Furthermore, Sutherland presents some suggestive reflections on the active, ambivalent relationship between popular and 'literary' literature:

The huge market opened up by the genre / pulp fiction factories was looked at, both enviously and disdainfully, by the 'literary' sector. William Faulkner (later a Nobellist) composed *Sanctuary* (1931) by asking himself what would

sell 10,000 copies, then 'invented the most horrific tale I could imagine and wrote it in about three weeks'. The tale of sadistic rape and violence duly sold its expected quantity. Less cynically, Ernest Hemingway (another future Nobelist) absorbed an idiom strikingly like that of the 'hard-boiled' crime writers into his fiction (Sutherland, 2007, p. 58).

Jim Collins's *Bring on the Books for Everybody: How Literary Culture Became Popular Culture* delineates some important recent tendencies in bestsellerism – and indeed in the very conditions of literature. A number of changes in the book market – promotion, sale and other forms of distribution, modes of reading, and so forth – have created a 'new infrastructure of reading'; and the growth of visual cultures – the overwhelming amount of film and television adaptations of books – has deeply influenced the literary experience. In the last part of his book, Collins focuses on two genre developments in contemporary bestselling – and often prize winning – literature. The first genre, recent forms of *chick lit*, he characterizes as a 'post-literary' form of the novel as captured by his heading: '*Girls' and Boys' Guides to Romantic Consumerism: The Post-Literary as iPod in Novel Form*' (Collins, 2010, p. 188, original emphasis). Referring to other recent studies (for example, Wood, 2005), he sees books like these as modernizations of the novel of manners in the vein of Jane Austen, appreciated not least as sources of knowledge about culture and as types of self-help books in fictional form.

According to Collins, 'The Devoutly Literary Bestseller' (Collins, 2010, p. 221) constitutes a complementary subgenre. This type of 'Lit-lit' is exemplified by the publication of no less than two celebrated fictional author-biographies of Henry James in 2004: Henry Lodge's *Author, Author* and Colm Toibin's *The Master*. The act of reading appears to be a much more exclusive activity: 'In these Devoutly Literary novels, the act of reading becomes an all-sustaining pleasure that is available only between the covers of the book' (Collins, 2010, p. 223). Through a number of critical procedures in the tradition of Pierre Bourdieu, Collins discloses this neo-aestheticism – a resurrection of the Golden Age of British and American aestheticism attached to a renewed interest in the Arts and Crafts movement – as some kind of '*Quality Consumerism*' (Collins, 2010,

p. 229, original emphasis). While satirizing mercilessly over John Sutherland's *How to Read a Novel: A User's Guide*<sup>1</sup> as 'a vestige of a literary culture based on fear' (Collins, 2010, p. 208), Collins concludes that the self-reflexive confirmation of an elite culture in 'Lit-lit' is not so very different in kind from 'the celebration of shared sensibilities' providing a 'sense of belonging to a reading community' (Collins, 2010, pp. 262f.) which is found in chick-lit. Through a complex convergence of processes, important parts of which are designated by bestsellerism, every type of literary culture has, according to Collins, become immersed in the all-pervading consumerism of popular culture.

Without committing myself unreservedly to either Sutherland's or Collins' approaches to bestsellerism, I would like to point out that they both seem to sanction the following hypotheses, which I would like to develop for my own purpose:

- 1 Certain genres or genre fields can be pertinent in the assessment of the historical development of bestsellerism;
- 2 a historically changing relation (which is active but more or less ambivalent) exists between popular bestsellers and 'literary' literature.

### **Bestsellers and novelistic subgenres in recent Danish literature**

In the post-millennial years, Danish literature has witnessed a veritable wave of regionally rooted family sagas, partly merging with versions of the autobiographical novel. One important factor in this turn of the tide is what I consider to be a reaction against the tendency toward polarization in Danish literature of the 1990s. Somewhat simplified, it might be argued that one side embraced a minimalist, experimental short-story prose, furthered by the Danish Author's School, praised by leading critics, but marginalized by the reading public; while the other produced a large number of popular biographies and autobiographies of publicly known figures, mostly written by (or with the help of) journalists.

This reaction can be seen as a literary turn to the biographical novel, a main form of narrative whose temporality is based upon the human journey of life from birth to death, which is often epic-ally and retrospectively oriented towards and focussed on the

family tree and its regional roots. Biographical and autobiographical forms were already important in Antiquity. Usually their perspective was public, connected to the (strong Roman) idea of the family, but more intimate, or even satirical and ironical (auto)biographical forms are also found. In the subsequent development of the novel, variants of the biographical novel and the family saga<sup>2</sup> have played an important role. In recent literary history, the 'serious' forms from the first half of the twentieth century by the Nobelists Thomas Mann (*Buddenbrooks*, 1901) and John Galsworthy (*The Forsythe Saga*, 1906-21) might serve as examples. In its more or less grotesque-satirical forms, the family saga is the main generic backbone in such important novels as Günther Grass's *Die Blechtrommel* (*The Tin Drum*, 1959), Gabriel García Márquez's *A Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) (both authors are also Nobelists) and Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995). Some Danish counterparts are Poul Vad's *Kattens anatomi* (*The Anatomy of the Cat*, 1978), Peter Høeg's *Forestilling om det tyvende århundrede* (*The History of Danish Dreams*, 1988) and Svend Åge Madsen's *Syv alders galskab* (*Seven Age Madness*, 1994). A Norwegian example is Jan Kjærstad's *Wergeland Trilogy* (1993-2000).

As has been demonstrated, there were several successful predecessors, in an international as well as a national context. A number of different factors will probably have contributed to a historic turn towards certain genres such as that emerging in Danish literature around the Millennium. But before presenting other historical motivations, I would like to argue the possibility of a specific 'best-seller factor'.

As an indication of such a factor I would like to consider two literary prize lists. In recent years, an increasing number of literary prizes have been created, and the publicity accompanying their distribution is becoming increasingly important for the fate of a book, furthering bestsellerism. The literary awards all have different profiles. The first prize to be taken into account is *De Gyldne Laurbær* (*The Golden Laurels*), awarded by the Danish Booksellers' Association. Every owner of or employee in a Danish bookshop has a vote in the selection of the book and the author of the year. In the award of this prize, both literary quality and commercial saleability are among the judging criteria. Therefore the prize list will represent an

extraordinary indicative value for preferences of genre and the development of literary taste.

Appendix I contains a commented list of the books awarded with *The Golden Laurels* since 1998. As will appear, up to two thirds of the fifteen works listed can be wholly or partially classified as family sagas. No other literary genre is anywhere near a similar status. The family saga, regionally rooted, often more or less biographically based, is clearly dominant. Moreover, this domination is undoubtedly epochally significant. In earlier periods, the generic variety of award-winning works was visibly larger.

Confirmation and further clarification of the tendency can be obtained if we compare with other prize lists. In 2009 the Danish daily newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* arranged a competition to select *Vor tids danske roman* (*The Danish Novel of Our Time*). An expert panel of critics and representatives of public libraries, bookshops and the educational world presented a selection of one hundred Danish novels from the last 25 years. There were two independent rankings, that of the jury and that of more than 8,000 readers. Appendix II contains the commented list of the Top Ten chosen by the readers followed by the Top Ten of the jury.

The overlaps in the three lists are, of course, very interesting to note. In all three, we find Ramsland's *Hundehoved*, Ejersbo's *Nordkraft* and Jungersten's *Undtagelsen*; in two of them, Smærup Sørensen's *Mærkede*. Several authors, for example, Anne Marie Løn, Helle Helle and Svend Åge Madsen, are represented with different works in two or more of the lists.

If we compare the two Top Tens of *The Danish Novel of Our Time*, it is obvious that the jury members have a somewhat longer memory than the readers. As for the generic profile, the only (minor) difference between the lists is the presence of two crime thrillers in the readers' Top Ten. But in both lists, the family saga is once again unquestionably the dominant genre.

The epochal dominance of the family saga is even more distinct when considering the number of other prizes awarded to some of the paradigmatic works. To mention just two of them, Ramsland's *Hundehoved* was awarded *The Golden Laurels* as well as *Læsernes Bogpris* (*The Readers' Book Prize*) and *Radioens Romanpris* (*Radio Denmark's Novel Prize*) in 2006; while, in addition to the *Golden Laurels*, Smærup Sørensen's *Mærkede* received *Blicherprisen*, *Statens*

*Kunstfonds produktionspræmie* (*The Production Award of the Danish Arts Foundation*), *Weekendavisens Litteraturpris*, *Danske Banks Litteraturpris* – and a nomination for *Nordisk Råds Litteraturpris* (*The Nordic Council Literature Prize*).

If we compare this to tendencies in Anglo-American bestsellerism, a similar genre profile stands out. On the one hand, as already mentioned, the family saga is one of the main and increasingly important subgenres of the novel on an international scale. Moreover, it is quite prominent in long, internationally successful television series – the television version of the novel.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the quantitative and qualitative weight of the family saga seems especially poignant in recent Danish literature – and competing genres seem proportionally weaker. If we look at two of the important bestselling genres treated by Jim Collins, examples of 'The Devoutly Literary Bestseller' (*Lit-lit*) and of chick-lit can be found in the Danish literature of the last decades, but we will look in vain for anything resembling their success as a trend in the Anglo-American literature around the Millennium.

### **A significant trend – converging factors**

After the Millennium, the (often) biographically based and (in general) regionally rooted family saga, already a significant sub-current in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, became a dominant trend in Danish prose fiction. Apart from the many authors and works previously mentioned, a number of novels by Bent Vinn Nielsen and Hans Otto Jørgensen, Dennis Gade Kofod's *Nexø Trawl* (2007), Kim Blæsbjerg's *Rådhusklatreren* (*The Town Hall Climber*, 2007), Julia Butschkow's *Apropos Opa* (2009) might be pointed out. Katrine Marie Guldager's novel *En plads i historien* (*A Place in History*, 2008) is a Copenhagen family saga, focusing on the German occupation. *Ulven* (*The Wolf*, 2010), *Lille hjerte* (*Little Heart*, 2012) and *Den ny tid* (*The New Times*, 2013) are the first three novels in a still uncompleted family saga by the same author; these are set in a provincial town – and in Copenhagen – from the 1930s and onwards.

All the novels mentioned present historical retrospections. I argue that part of the historical motivation for this genre dominance might be termed the Millennium factor, which is obviously operative in several countries. The Millennium is an occasion to take a retrospective look at history (that of the previous century). The Mil-

lennium factor connects the present trend with that prevalent at the turn of the previous century, with the 'Popular Breakthrough' of regional literature around the year 1900. Then as now, the regionally rooted family sagas bloomed in a similar process when a wave of globalization swept away people from the countryside – forcing them to migrate into the towns or to the US. The authors looked back at a disappearing regional culture, recreating it, but in general without the nostalgia and sentimentality more common in some Central and Eastern European literature.<sup>4</sup>

In the present revival of the regional family saga, stories from the hidden environments of the big city also abound in numbers that may prompt the idea of a form of Copenhagen Heimat literature. Guldager's Copenhagen matches Smaerup Sørensen's village in Northern Jutland. Jonas T. Bengtson's *Submarino* (2007) is an equivalent of Ejersbo's *Nordkraft* (drug abusers in Aalborg) in a Copenhagen setting.

A trend within the trend is the re-evaluation of the time of the German occupation during the Second World War and its long-term traumatic effects; just to mention some novels, this motif is important in Ramlund's *Hundehoved* (2005), Romer's *Den som blinker er bange for døden* (2006), Guldager's *En plads i historien* (2008), and Butschkow's *Apropos Opa* (2009). This trend also has its international counterparts.

As is seen, a number of good historical motivations may explain the importance, indeed the dominance, of the biographically based, regionally rooted family saga in the wake of the Millennium. But, as suggested above, there are many reasons to believe that one additional historical factor is the multifaceted development of the book market, subsumed under the concept of *bestsellerism*. Like other countries, Denmark has abolished its fixed price system favouring the professional bookshops. Bestsellers are now sold in large quantities in every major supermarket. Bestseller lists are much more important in the press than previously. Book prizes and book ranking lists are prominent in the literary landscape. And in the values and practice of reviewers and critics, the sharp demarcation line between 'literary' literature, 'genre literature' and popular bestsellers now seems to be significantly less rigid. On this background, I find it plausible that a biographically oriented bestseller strategy aiming at – and perhaps often achiev-

ing – a fusion of literary quality and a broad appeal to the reading public has become a determinant factor in the recent development of the Danish novel.

### A bestseller determinant?

If a 'bestseller determinant' could be said to apply – and probably gain in importance – in our contemporary literary situation (here exemplified by the Danish literary scene) – could such a factor have been instrumental in other historical contexts, that is, could this factor be worth considering in a broader and longer perspective of literary history and sociology? The notion of a dynamic 'bestseller determinant' in literary evolution as a *pull determinant* ought to be given a position complementary to the *push determinant* in the well-known theories of 'deautomatization' as conceived by Russian Formalism (Sklovskij, Tynjanov), New Criticism and other theories connected to Modernism. The Modernist optics of negative dialectics, in other words, the assertion of originality in the rejection of tradition, is not the only possible motor of literary change. In several periods, a form of bestsellerism – for example, the aspiration to reach a larger public by renewing a well-known genre, uniting the individual and the collective, the existential and the historical – could be, I would argue, a powerful pull determinant.

### Appendix I

Since 1998 *The Golden Laurels* have been awarded as follows:

- 1998: Jens Christian Grøndahl for *Lucca* (bestselling love and identity novel, hinging on the refinding of a lost father).
- 1999: Svend Åge Madsen for *Genspejlet* (*Reflected/The Gene Mirror*, satirical, metafictional biography, a daughter writing the (fictive) biography of her father, a famous scientist).
- 2000: Anne Marie Løn for *Kærlighedens rum* (*The Rooms of Love*, atypical love story from an author mainly known for her family sagas in a provincial, rural setting).
- 2001: Hans Edvard Nørregård-Nielsen for *Riber Ret* (memoirs from the author's youth in a provincial town).
- 2002: Jakob Ejersbo for *Nordkraft* (bestselling, theatre adapted slum naturalism, the dissolution of family relations in the setting of a major provincial town, Aalborg).

2003: Jette A. Kaarsbøl for *Den lukkede bog* (*The Closed Book*, historical novel in the form of fictive memoirs).

2004: Christian Jungersen for *Undtagelsen* (*The Exception*, bestselling psychological thriller in a contemporary setting).

2005: Morten Ramsland for *Hundehoved* (*Doghead*, bestselling family saga – about a family in which escape is in fashion).<sup>5</sup>

2006: Knud Romer for *Den der blinker er bange for døden* (*He who Blinks Is Afraid of Death*, autofictional family saga).

2007: Jens Smærup Sørensen for *Mærkedage* (*Red-Letter Days*, bestselling autobiographically based family saga in a rural setting).<sup>6</sup>

2008: Hanne-Vibeke Holst for *Dronningeofret* (*The Queen Sacrifice*, contemporary political fiction).

2009: Ida Jessen for *Børnene* (*The Children*, family saga, last part of a trilogy in the setting of a fictive village).

2010: Jussi Adler Olsen for *Journal 64* (*Case Note 64*, historical crime thriller).

2011: Helle Helle for *Dette burde skrives i nutid* (*This Ought to Have Been Written in the Present Tense*, minimal realistic, autobiographically based memory novel in a provincial setting).

2012: Kim Leine for *Profeterne i Eighedsfjorden* (*The Prophets in the Eternity Fiord*, broad historical novel, set in a settlement in Greenland at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century).

## Appendix II

The Top Ten voted by the readers was:

- 1 Carsten Jensen's *Vi, de druknede* (*We, the Drowned*, historical sailor novel, with a setting partly in a small harbour town on a Danish island, partly at exotic places such as islands in the Pacific; in 1996, Carsten Jensen had already been awarded *The Golden Laurels* for a traditional travel book; this award can only be given once to the same author).
- 2 Jungersen's *Undtagelsen*.
- 3 Ramsland's *Hundehoved*.
- 4 Kaarsbøll's *Den lukkede bog*.
- 5 Peter Høeg's *Frøken Smillas fornemmelse for sne* (*Miss Smilla's Sense of Snow*, 1992, bestselling, screen adapted contemporary/historical thriller with Copenhagen and Greenland as the scenes of action; Høeg received *The Golden Laurels* in 1993 for *De måske egnede* (*Borderliners*, autofiction)).

- 6 Ejersbo's *Nordkraft*.
- 7 Anne Marie Løn's *Prinsesserne* (*The Princesses*, 1997, historical provincial family saga).
- 8 Smaærup Sørensen's *Mærkedage*.
- 9 Leif Davidsen's *Den serbiske dansker* (*The Serbian Dane*, 1996, best-selling contemporary political crime thriller; Davidsen received *The Golden Laurels* in 1991).
- 10 Sara Blædel's *Aldrig mere fri* (*Nevermore Free/the Day Off*, 2008, contemporary feminist crime thriller).

The Top Ten voted by the jury was:

- 1 Ib Michael's *Vanillepigen* (*The Vanilla Girl*, 1991, autofiction, memoirs from a childhood in the setting of a small provincial town).
- 2 Erling Jepsen: *Kunsten at græde i kor* (*The Art of Crying in Chorus*, 2002, bestselling, screen adapted autobiographically based family novel in the setting of a small provincial town).
- 3 Ramsland's *Hundehoved*.
- 4 Svend Åge Madsen's *Syv alders galskab* (*Seven Age Madness*, 1994, historical, metafictional family saga).<sup>7</sup>
- 5 Henrik Stangerup's *Det er svært at dø i Dieppe* (*It Is Difficult to Die in Dieppe*, 1985, historical biographical novel about a famous Danish literary critic).
- 6 Ejersbo's *Nordkraft*.
- 7 Jungersen's *Undtagelsen*.
- 8 Løn's *Prinsesserne*.
- 9 Claus Beck-Nielsen's *Claus Beck-Nielsen 1963-2001* (2003, experimental, contemporary autobiography / autofiction).
- 10 Helle Helle's *Forestillingen om et ukompliceret liv med en mand* (*The Idea of an Uncomplicated Life with a Man*, 2002, contemporary minimal realism).

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## Notes

- 1 Sutherland, 2006. John Sutherland was chairman of the Man Booker Prize selection committee in 2005.
- 2 It is linked to the 'idyllic chronotope' and its counterpart, the destruction of the idyll that often takes place. I refer to the chapters on "Ancient Biography and Autobiography" and "The Idyllic Chronotope" in Bakhtin, 1981.
- 3 Cf. Nielsen, 2012.
- 4 Cf. Gemzøe, 2009a.
- 5 Cf. Gemzøe, 2009b.
- 6 Cf. Gemzøe, 2008.
- 7 Cf. Gemzøe 1999/2001.

# Hyper Attention Blockbusters

Christopher Nolan's *Batman* Trilogy

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## Abstract

In this article, I outline a theory of attention for 21<sup>st</sup>-century blockbusters, emphasizing the coevolution of attention in what N. Katherine Hayles has distinguished as deep and hyper attention. Furthermore, I elaborate on this theory with a discussion of kinetics as an embodied sensation integral to blockbuster, drawing examples from Christopher Nolan's *Batman* trilogy.

**Keywords** affect, attention, Batman, kinetics, sensation, superhero.

## Introduction

In this article, I wish to examine the intensity of sensation in the recently concluded Batman trilogy as exemplary of how blockbuster movies generate affect and apprehension in their audiences. Particularly Tom Gunning has been instrumental in proposing the notions of aesthetics of attraction and astonishment as part of how early cinema developed. He has also maintained that contemporary cinema inherits a fascination with attraction and astonishment, what other critics have termed spectacle. While narrative logic dominates contemporary cinema, it is not the only part, and Geoff King maintains

that spectacle remains a significant element of all movies, although certain genres depend on them more (King, 2001). The action movie is one genre where spectacle plays an integral part, and in the case of recent superhero blockbusters, it is evident that kinetic movement has taken up a central role. Consider, for instance, the vertiginous trip shot in subjective point of view in the latest Spider-Man installment, *The Amazing Spider-Man* (Marc Webb, 2012). Although an impossible feat, this scene does not suggest a displacement of the body or an incorporeal approach to the spectator. Instead, it reveals that we are moving into an image regime where we are attracted to what can go beyond the human body. Blockbuster movies are the locus of this transformation, where a form of what Scott Bukatman calls kaleidoscopic perception (delirium, immersion, and kinesis) takes us away from the merely human and into the posthuman (Bukatman, 2003, p. 114). This new perceptual mode correlates with a kind of post-attention state, where the movies reconfigure our attention according to new ways of seeing.

I will argue that these new ways of seeing are part of a larger shift in attention, a shift which N. Katherine Hayles calls hyper attention pointing to the co-evolution of the brain's synaptic connections in media-rich environments (Hayles, 2007, p. 188). It is this reconfiguration of attention which I will discuss in relation to blockbuster cinema, pointing out how the embodied affective engagement with these movies suggest that watching movies is no longer simply a matter of paying attention. Instead, we literally pay with attention in Hardt and Negri's conception of affective labor. The cinema of attraction and aesthetics of astonishment thus give way to the affect, dissipation, hyper attention, and disorientation; the ADHD of contemporary blockbusters.

### **The Culture of ADHD**

The presence of attention disorders is a result of changes in our contemporary media-rich environments, where boredom can always be staved off, but actual attention comes only with great difficulty. Newspapers and magazines are full of debates on attention deficiency disorders of varying degrees, and how it affects a culture. In 1994, *Time Magazine* wrote that as many as 5% of children under 18 suffered from ADHD, although the condition was essentially unknown 15 years before (Wallis, 1994). In 2013, *New York Times* dis-

cussed a study indicating that as many as 11% of children now suffered from ADHD (Schwarz and Cohen, 2013). Out of the many different forms of attention deficit disorder, ADHD is considered the most severe form, with hyperactivity making it impossible for children to remain still. It is important to keep in mind that ADHD does not mean that one cannot be engrossed in an activity for hours, it simply means that one is more distractible, more impulsive, and constantly in motion. Any sensation may trigger a shift in attention, despite good intentions. Also, while ADHD is often associated with children, the condition does not go away in adulthood.

Although ADHD is a neurodevelopmental condition, it is important to recognize that this condition is also cultural. Its presence has increased (although one could argue that doctors have become better at diagnosing the condition) and is more prominent on the US East Coast than the West Coast. This is not the place to enter a sociocultural argument about the reason for this divergence, and suffice to say that the historical and regional variation suggest a complex assemblage of reasons, extending from media environments, different parental outlooks, the presence of pharmaceutical companies and the use of such companies' products, along with a host of other reasons. What is clear is that ADHD is a debilitating condition and that ADHD's growing presence in contemporary culture leads not only to media scares, but also to different ways of adapting to a media-saturated environment. Here Hayles's hyper attention argument is a strong non-judgmental point which frees us from thinking in binary terms of distraction being a negative condition; rather, hyper attention becomes a way of dealing with intense and overpowering information flows, and although hyper attentive behavior may come off as ADHD to older generations favoring deep attention, the situation is in fact reverse. Hyper attentive people are much more adept at navigating media-saturated environments than are deep-attentive people. What all this suggests is that our attention is not simply a static perceptual tool, but rather a developing, evolving sensorium deeply tied to a period's visual culture.

"To look is to labor;" so succinctly put is Jonathan Beller's description of our current visual culture (Beller, 2006, p. 2). Earlier critics also pointed out the relation between cinema and our sensorium, employing the term "distraction" to note how audiences were affected by cinema. For Siegfried Kracauer, distraction was the

needed compensation for a full but unfulfilling work day. Since this dissatisfaction stems from the work place, the compensation can only take the same form, and so distraction takes the form of business — or rather, busy-ness which indicated the same accelerated movement found in the city (Kracauer, 1995, p. 325). Walter Benjamin never finished his theory of distraction, leaving behind only scattered notes, but we know from his artwork essay that cinema encourages the spectator to enter into into a state of distraction, resulting in “profound changes in apperception” (Benjamin, 2008, p. 41). Furthermore, Benjamin considers distraction to be a physiological phenomenon, thereby connecting the notions of spectacle, cinema of attraction, aesthetics of astonishment, and embodied perception unfolded in this essay (Benjamin, 2008, p. 56). Although it may at first seem counterintuitive, distraction and attention are correlated concepts in the way that our attention is commanded when we are distracted.

Jonathan Crary has shown that the modern period (from the 1800s onward in his Foucaldian optics) has been increasingly interested in commanding attention from its subjects. As he puts it, “Part of the cultural logic of capitalism demands that we accept as *natural* switching our attention rapidly from one thing to another. Capital, as accelerated exchange and circulation, necessarily produced this kind of human perceptual adaptability and became a regime of reciprocal attentiveness and distraction” (Crary, 2001, pp. 29–30). The advantage of Crary’s model is that it introduces history into the phenomenological and affective framework of film theory. While there is little doubt that distraction was what the salaried masses sought out in the cinema of attraction, the surfeit of kinetics and affect evident in today’s blockbusters reveals more a state of disorientation and a strain upon traditional attention. Here, it is useful to draw on work by N. Katherine Hayles, who distinguishes between deep and hyper attention, where we are currently undergoing a shift towards a greater degree of hyper attention (Hayles, 2007, p. 187). Hyper attention, argues Hayles, “is characterized by switching focus rapidly among different tasks, preferring multiple information streams, seeking a high level of stimulation, and having a low tolerance for boredom” (187). It may seem that contemporary blockbusters are primarily related to deep attention but in fact the hectic flow of images combined with the extensive use of kinetics

reveal that the blockbuster depends on hyper attention. Bukatman's kaleidoscopic perception of delirium, kinesis, and immersion is replaced by dissipative perception, which favors trance, acceleration, and disorientation; all sensations which stave off boredom, thus being eminently suited for an ADHD culture.

### **Movement and Sensation**

The exhilarating sensation of movement is the cornerstone of action movies, sometimes seemingly to the exclusion of any other concerns. Geoff King suggests in his book *Spectacular Narratives* that spectacle and narrative may peacefully co-exist and have in fact done so ever since Hollywood began: "From the very start, throughout the 'classical' era, and today, narrative and spectacle have existed in a series of shifting relationships in which neither has ever been entirely absent. The relative absence of coherent plot or character development in specific instances, even, does not entail an evacuation of underlying narrative themes and oppositions of a structural kind" (King, 2001, p. 3). What is evident, however, is a waning of narrative, while spectacle has become more dominant in blockbuster culture. The clearest expression of this is found in the transformation of movement.

Yet at the same time, there is a certain reluctance within scholarship to accept these transformations of movement. Bordwell clings to narrative as a totalizing structure when he in *The Way Hollywood Tells It* (2006) argues that "every action scene, however 'spectacular,' is a narrative event" only to go on to discuss the thrills and indulgences of Hollywood action movies (Bordwell, 2006, p. 104ff). Bordwell stacks the cards further when he points to *Die Hard* (John McTiernan, 1988) and *Speed* (Jan de Bont, 1994) as examples of spectacle movies with classical narrative structures; these movies are more than a decade old by the time Bordwell writes about them. Considering Bordwell's prominence, it becomes evident that most scholarship of blockbusters has been dominated by narrative approaches and the *longue durée* of classical-era storytelling.

Movement has always been significant for movies, not only because movement distinguishes movies from photography but also because movement allows for spectacle. As Richard Maltby points out, "American fiction movies have stressed movement from the outset, with early chase films providing the first synthesis of narra-

tive and the attractions of spectacular movement" (Maltby, 2003, p. 372). Tom Gunning also locates spectacle in the chase film, as part of a dialectics of spectacle and narrative: "The chase film shows how towards the end of this period (basically from 1903-1906) a synthesis of attractions and narrative was already underway. The chase had been the original truly narrative genre of the cinema, providing a model for causality and linearity as well as a basic editing continuity" (Gunning, 1986, p. 68). So, while a chase sequence provides a sense of astonishment and wonder due to hectic movement, it is also a mini-narrative of cause and effect and continuity. The spectator must understand where the vehicles are in relation to each other, the direction vehicles are moving in, and so forth. Movement becomes paramount to solicit the spectator's attention.

Cinematic movement has always been tricky to define since there are so many ways of achieving it. The movement of objects within the frame is the one which comes most readily to mind but this refers to objective movement and keeps the spectator in her seat. David Bordwell, in an older article, discusses the use of camera movement and points out that "The ability of subjective movement to endow static arrays with depth is usually called the 'kinetic depth effect.' As camera movement, the kinetic depth effect operates to some degree in panning, tilting, and all other rotational movements around the axis of the camera itself. But the kinetic depth effect achieves its greatest power to define space through the traveling shot" (Bordwell, 1977, p. 23). It is the camera's plunge into space that allows for the greatest sensation of movement, and while Bordwell does not discuss the cinema of attractions (always preferring to stay within narrative cinema), the sensation of movement through kinetic depth effects belongs properly in the aesthetics of astonishment as outlined by Gunning as an experience of assault (Gunning, 1995, p. 121).

Consider about an hour into *Batman Begins* (Christopher Nolan, 2005), the vertiginous visual assault when Flass (Mark Boone Junior) is grabbed by Batman (Christian Bale) and pulled up to the rooftop. The camera spins and lifts up, giving the impression of a subjective point-of-view from Flass, while also completely disorienting the spectator. Since the camera movement is not a plunge forward but a plunge backward, we have no information about what we might crash into, making for a gut-wrenching shot. Bordwell, perceptively,

notes that “we can hardly resist reading the camera-movement effect as a persuasive surrogate for our subjective movement through an objective world” (Bordwell, 1977, p. 23). While this is overwhelmingly true, it also marks the limit of Bordwell’s theoretical horizon, because he refuses to take the necessary step into spectator experience, discussing only the formal properties of positive or negative parallax (movement towards or past the camera), thus depriving us of a significant element of understanding these films.

The force of this experience of camera movement is that we move into the zone between our own look and the camera’s look, as Bordwell rightly points out, but he fails to recognize that this is a zone of immersion where we do not simplistically identify with one character but identify with the force of movement. The zone which blurs camera and spectator is precisely what Jennifer M. Barker identifies in her concept of apprehension, where “This constant feeling of being pulled and yet pushed leads us to the unique way we experience chase and suspense films, which is with a great sense of *apprehension*, in many senses of the word” (Barker, 2009, p. 107). All cinematic experience shares in this sense of mingling of our body with the cinematic body, existing in the zone between camera and subject, also referred to as spectacle. As Scott Bukatman argues, “Spectacular displays depended on a new mode of spectatorial address — essentially, *you are there* (even though you are not) — linked to new technologies of visual representation” (Bukatman, 2003, p. 89). He goes on to argue that this spectatorial address depends on kaleidoscopic perception “comprised of equal parts delirium, kinesis, and immersion” (114), which allows for a particular kind of “perceptual activity, kinesthetic sensation, haptic engagement, and an emphatic sense of wonder” (115-116). We are, in other words, pulled along by the movie, if not exactly into the movie.

The vertical axis of cinematic movement has itself been intensified in contemporary blockbusters, in part because vertical movement suggests power and control but also because it suggests movements we human beings cannot perform. This becomes a form of disorientation, as evident in the case of Flass, but also in many of the movements Batman performs. As Sara Ross points out, “soaring through space [ ] has historically been associated with progress and mastery, both literally and metaphorically, and thus can be used to structure the overall journey of a heroic protagonist”

(Ross, 2012, p. 211). This runs parallel to arguments put forth earlier by Kristen Whissel, who states that verticality is a technique for visualizing power (Whissel, 2006, p. 23). That Batman can pull Flass vertically up visualizes Batman's superiority and when Batman can also survive spiraling jumps to the ground, we can all see that he is beyond our capacities. These moments are spectacles which cannot be reduced to narrative structure without missing the point – audiences long for the masterful disorientations which these superheroes can perform. Although these spectacles fit within a larger narrative structure, our *experience* of the movement cannot be ignored at the expense of narrative.

Being pulled along by the movie is what I will term kinetics rather than kinesis. Kinesis is Greek for motion, while kinetics is the study of relations between motions of bodies and the forces acting on them (*Oxford English Dictionary*). We are worked on by the motion and force of the movie, which is what produces sensations in us. As Barker points out, “the film is to our bodies like car is to the driver: we live through it vicariously, allowing it to shape our own bodily image” (Barker, 2009, p. 110). In the vocabulary of film phenomenology, body image designates our sensation of our body and not its visual image. Instead, a movie actually takes us for a ride which connects quite distinctly with Gunning’s aesthetics of astonishment and its presentational mode, with direct spectatorial address as sensual and psychological impact. Kinetics align us with the movement of the film’s body, creating the spectacle of movement which throws us into the midst of things. These effects work as a form of direct address, engaging us directly and bodily in the intensities of affect.

Opposed to the dominant narrative cinema which privileges a rational (and often disembodied) spectator capable of recognizing cues and synthesizing actions into storylines, the moments of kinetics are moments “where the viewer is not recentred but is continually open and opened by movements (sensations) that pass through him/her and on which s/he is unable to attain the perspective of a disembodied consciousness capable of rational synthesis” (Walsh, 2004, p. 178). When, in *Batman Begins*, James Gordon (Gary Oldman) gets into the Bat tumbler to control it, the tumbler mostly takes control of him. That is the perfect image for many of the action blockbusters in recent years, where the movies take over and pull us along for the ride. The greatest transformation in these newer

blockbusters and their kinetics is how the emphasis on continuity has slowly dissipated in favor of more immediate payoffs. Kinetics allow us a way into understanding why movement becomes more important than narrative coherence.

### **Kinetics**

When the Bat-Pod is introduced in *The Dark Knight Rises* (Christopher Nolan, 2012), it is through a traveling shot from behind and below Batman, while Lower Wacker Drive is cast in darkness, so only a very slight silhouette of the vehicle can be seen. As the lights come back on, Batman slows the Bat-Pod to a halt, as we pull up behind him. Starting up again, the movie cuts to a close-up of the front of Batman from below as he starts driving, cutting to a shot from below and behind Batman, which then cuts to a reverse shot of the front of Batman from below. All these shots are traveling shots moving at high velocity with the Bat-Pod closing in. Shot from below, Batman towers over us as the Bat-Pod either closes in on us or moves away from us. The kinetics are clear: Batman is in complete control of his vehicle and the movie is in complete control of us. We are pulled along the mounted camera with a smooth, self-assured confidence in the motion, although the objects flying past us left and right make us truly apprehensive. These vehicle-mount shots remain stable, smooth, fluid, and balanced which ends up infusing us with the same sensations. Although the scene is tense, Batman and by extension us as spectators feel in control, exuding the intense confidence of Batman. This is a body that can do anything.

Christopher Nolan's Batman trilogy is interesting in the landscape of superhero movies precisely because of this self-assured cinematic body. While all superhero movies show superhuman deeds performed by the characters, Nolan's movies are the only ones shot in the IMAX format, which makes the cinematic body super-cinematic in comparison. Despite the bulkiness of IMAX cameras, Nolan decided to strap them on a Steadicam mount and use the IMAX for the biggest action sequences. Providing a deeper and more intense experience, despite the necessity of reducing the film to 35mm in most cinemas, the detail and sharpness of the image is not entirely lost. The action sequences of *The Dark Knight* and *The Dark Knight Rises* are thus not only superhuman performances,

they are also cinematically superior: sharper, deeper, richer; they present in all ways a cinematic body which is beyond the capacity of other superhero movies.

At the same time, Matthias Stork's two-part video essay "Chaos Cinema" argues for a new style of blockbuster film making which throws classical continuity style editing and even Bordwell's intensified continuity (Bordwell, 2006, p. 144ff) out the window in favor of excess, exaggeration, and overindulgence (Stork, 2011). Spatial coherence is lost, camera movements are no longer motivated, editing speed picks up for no reason, framing is tighter, and focus is usually shallow. Often the same event will be shown from different angles in order to intensify the moment. Many critics have picked up on this notion of a decrease in narrative coherence in favor of audiovisual intensity. At almost the same time as Stork, Steven Shaviro proposed post-continuity as a different term for much the same development, although Shaviro's term aligns with the tradition of continuity editing and the post-classical tradition. Speaking specifically of *Gamer*, Shaviro defines post-continuity as

a continual cinematic barrage, with no respite. It is filled with shots from handheld cameras, lurching camera movements, extreme angles, violent jump cuts, cutting so rapid as to induce vertigo, extreme closeups, a deliberately ugly color palette, video glitches, and so on. The combat scenes in *Slayer*, in particular, are edited behavioristically more than spatially. That is to say, the frequent cuts and jolting shifts of angle have less to do with orienting us towards action in space, than with setting off autonomic responses in the viewer. But even in their non-action sequences, Neveldine/Taylor usually avoid traditional continuity-based setups. (Shaviro, 2010, p. 124)

Nolan's Batman movies are more restrained than that, even if some of the action scenes do have a rapid editing pace. Favoring the Steadicam over the handheld camera, the Batman movies move at a breakneck pace but rarely completely break continuity style. Instead, Nolan's trilogy gives us surprisingly fluid, assured, and self-contained movements when Batman is in his different vehicles, despite the superhuman movements these vehicles perform. This is in

contrast to the barrage Shaviro identifies in *Gamer*, *Domino* (Tony Scott, 2005), and other movies. Where *Gamer* is jerky, nervous, and turbulent, the Batman movies are fluid, assured, and stable. Furthermore, although neither Stork nor Shaviro really go into detail with this issue, there is also the fact that these post-continuity scenes are moments of spectacle rather than narrative. Continuity editing is traditionally employed to articulate narrative and coherent space, and Nolan remains within the narrative tradition in his trilogy except for the action sequences, where he is willing to move into a form of superhuman spectacle, making us feel what it is like to be Batman in his vehicles.

Certainly this superhuman sensation is one of the biggest draws of Nolan's movies and is fully experienced in the flight sequence with the Bat. As the Bat descends to pursue Bane's minions in both the truck and the stolen Tumbler, the camera movement is again smooth and continuous. The kinetics of the movie plunges us into a headlong pursuit of these vehicles. Parallel editing is used to alternate between the Bat pursuit, Catwoman's pursuit on the Bat-Pod, and the confrontation between Blake and the police officers, raking up the tension. The Bat shots are always assured and smooth, even when dodging missiles or buildings, moving in long traveling shots, weaving between buildings while also exploiting the vertical axis in a total mastery of space. This contrasts with the shots from inside the pursued vehicles, where Miranda, Gordon, and other characters are shaken and jolted while their vehicles lurch and tilt. The kinetics could not be any more different: The Bat is in control (and, parenthetically, so is Catwoman on the Bat-Pod), while the regular humans are very much out of control. Considering the extreme vehicular movements, Nolan's IMAX images in smooth motion provide a sumptuous contrast; we are pulled along by the movie but always feel in control, never destabilized, and so we are content to leave our bodies in the hands of the movie, much like we leave our bodies to roller-coasters. The alternating shots between Batman and Catwoman versus the regular humans clearly align us with the superheroes — those are the shots where we feel safest, and by extension, where we feel at home in the zone created between camera and spectator. We are Batman in those shots: self-assured, in control, and courageous.

The superhuman control we feel in these situations comes from the use of nonhuman camera point-of-view's performed by vehicle-mounts and digital effects. Through extreme spectacle combined with balanced, authoritative kinetics, sensations flow through us that we could never otherwise feel. As Barker beautifully puts it, speaking of contemporary action films in general:

Here again, the camera placement combines with rapid-fire editing to make us feel in our muscles every hairpin turn and near miss. By alternating shots taken from inside vehicles with those taken from cameras mounted on them, these films force us into movements that aren't meant for humans, only for machines. In these moments, we go where not even fearless drivers and pilots would dare to go; we are riding without seat belts, without windshields, without any protection at all. The film throws us out and gives us nothing to hang onto. (Barker, 2009, p. 113)

To boldly go where no one has gone before is the premise of superhero movies and provides a spectacle that is very literally out of this world. We relish these moments of sheer delightful terror because there is in fact something to hold onto: the superhuman cinematic body. Barker is right when she argues that we go where no driver or pilot would ever go; that is why we watch these movies. The fascination of feeling more than oneself, to be taken beyond (but not out of) one's body for a little while, while still safely in one's seat is the adrenaline rush of the 21st century. Why else are 3D movies being pushed by studios, alongside larger screens, louder sound systems, and more outrageous CGI effects? It is austerity's answer to 20th-century tourism — be moved without moving, without the expense.

### Attention and Affect

While Nolan's trilogy teeters on the edge between continuity and post-continuity, it shares with other contemporary blockbusters the abundance of affect in its kinetics. It is this affect which is converted into what Hardt and Negri have termed affective labor (Hardt and Negri, 2005, p. 108). Where Kracauer's salaried masses would be compensated in the form of distraction, the compensation of the multitude is to work even during their compensation. Entranced by

the blockbuster's flow of images, an abundance of embodied affect is created, which, on the one hand, makes us feel what it is like to be superhuman through cinematic kinetics, while on the other, demands us to participate in the attention economy. Sensory overload was always the strategy for giving people the busy-ness they wanted after a full day of unfulfilling work, but for contemporary blockbusters, we can trace a move towards an overload of affect through the insistence on kinetics and a super-cinematic body, which provides us with vertiginous excitement and passion.

We are drawn to these movies because of how they make us feel, but at the same time, we do not realize that watching these movies in fact constitutes work. Our affects, excitements, passions, and sensations are thus capitalized on, as we willingly commodify our cinematic experience. The work does not begin or end in the cinema but before and after, as we "like" and share trailers, previews, reviews, alongside our own experience of the blockbusters on social media sites. Such reactions occur naturally within the affective states of the movie, and we promote those that move us, while ignoring the ones that leave us inert. All these experiences are caught up in a web of affect, dissipation, hyper attention, and disorientation; a swirling state which does not leave time to reflect on the significance or meaning of a movie, only its impressions and spectacles. Cinematic movement is thus not only about kinetics and affect, but also the movement of attention, so that enough value can be gleaned from our engagement with the movie. As the ADHD structure of these movies suggests, classical modes of relating to movies are no longer sufficient and only a small amount of the necessary work needed to better understand contemporary blockbusters has been done here.

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## Tonally Teen?

### Issues of Audience Appeal in Contemporary Danish Youth Films

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#### Abstract

This article investigates the trial and error of audience appeal in contemporary Danish youth films supported through the special children's and youth film commissioner scheme of The Danish Film Institute. Employing the concept of tone to textual analysis, the article focuses on the two films *Triple Dare* (Christina Rosendahl, 2006) and *Skyscraper* (Rune Schjøtt, 2011), which serve as an interesting comparison for being, respectively, the most and the least commercially successful of the publicly funded youth films in the 2000s. With the analysis of these films, I aim to explicate how tonal complexity may affect audience involvement and complicate the fundamental issue of audience appeal.

**Keywords** youth films, cinematic tone, audience appeal, film support, textual analysis.

#### Introduction

The tradition of addressing issues of youth is a longstanding one in Danish cinema. Most notably, it dates back to the 1950s when a wave of popular *juvenile delinquency* films swept across cinemas. Charac-

terised by their moralistic tone and suggestive titles such as *Dangerous Youth* (*Farlig Ungdom*, 1953), *The Young Have No Time* (*Ung Leg*, 1956) and *Sin Alley* (*Bundfald*, 1957), these cautionary film tales borrowed heavily from the American subgenre. In the late 1970s and early 80s, however, the youth film reached a creative and commercial peak with a string of *coming of age*-themed films that left behind the explicit pedagogical aim of the 1950s troubled youth-films. Instead, these films sensitively explored the psychological dimensions of adolescence in a more muted dramatic form, while continuously drawing on the realist tradition established in the 1940s.<sup>1</sup> A significant reason for the blooming of these films were related to developments in cultural policy as a number of incentives, including the earmarking of 25 per cent of public film funds and the appointment of a children's and youth film commissioner, was introduced with the new film policy of 1982.

Discussing the notion of youth films in Danish cinema is, however, a tricky endeavour. Firstly, as Anne Jerslev has argued, the vast diversity in style and theme makes it difficult to speak of genres and subgenres in the way that we might be inclined to do with American youth films (Jerslev, 2008, p. 185). Secondly, as Steve Neale points out, films about young people do not necessarily speak to a young audience (Neale, 2000, p. 119). Neale's argument is echoed in Danish film scholar Lene Nordin's work on genres in Danish films, in which she argues how a number of youth-themed films of the 70s and 80s, which historically have often been characterised as 'youth films', such as *The Three of Knowledge* (Malmros, 1981) and *Johnny Larsen* (Arnfred, 1979), are intrinsically aimed at an adult audience, and should therefore be labelled 'adult films' (Nordin, 1984, p. 157).

Thus, what is often generically referred to as 'youth films' should rather be understood as two separate but thematically united groups of films, namely films that target an adult audience and films that target an adolescents audience. As film scholar Jo Sondre Moseng has argued in a Norwegian context, the label 'youth film' is ultimately the most fertile when it is reserverved for youth-themed films that clearly target a youth audience (Moseng, 2011, p. 82).<sup>2</sup>

### Contemporary trouble

Throughout the 90s and 2000s the impact of American genre formulas has been increasingly evident in the Danish youth targeting

films due to high concept horror hits such as *Final Hour* (Martin Schmidt, 1995) and *Midsummer* (Carsten Myllerup, 2002). However, despite the commercial success of such genre exercises, and the increasing genre orientation in Danish cinema in general, the Danish youth film remains largely inclined towards the Danish realist tradition (Jerslev, 2008, p. 195). It is an inclination that unfortunately seems to have proven commercially unsuccessful with the average young moviegoer, who typically (and increasingly so) seem to prefer Hollywood's genre efforts (Bondebjerg and Redvall, 2011, p. 11).

This development is reflected at the box office. Looking at ticket sales numbers for selected youth films that have received support through the DFI's children and youth film commissioner scheme since the millennium (albeit with a few exceptions) the contemporary youth film generally has a hard time appealing to its target audience (see Table 1). This negative development has consequently fuelled a prolonged debate in national media questioning, among other things, the further sustainment of the children's and youth film commissioner scheme.<sup>3</sup>

**Table 1**

Danish (feature length) youth films supported by the children's and youth film consultant system with theatrical release between 2000 and 2012.

Film title (director, year of release)	Tickets sold	Reviews*
<i>Kick'n Rush</i> (Aage Rais-Nordentoft, 2003)	78.179	3,6
<i>Scratch</i> (Anders Gustafsson, 2003)	90.576	4,3
<i>Count to100</i> (Line Krogsøe Holmberg, 2004)	23.313	2,4
<i>Triple Dare</i> (Christina Rosendahl, 2006)	106.489	3,6
<i>Fighter</i> (Natasha Arthy, 2007)	52.189	3,5
<i>Hush Little Baby</i> (Hella Joof, 2009)	45.425	4,0
<i>Love and Rage</i> (Morten Giese, 2009)	27.425	4,0
<i>Hold Me Tight</i> (Kaspar Munk, 2010)	45.970	3,2
<i>Rebounce</i> (Heidi Maria Faisst, 2011)	29.189	4,6
<i>Bora Bora</i> (Hans Fabian Wullenweber, 2011)	75.428	2,8
<i>Skyscraper</i> (Rune Schjøtt, 2011)	1.095	3,6
<i>Love Is in the Air</i> (Simon Staho, 2011)	2.983	3,3
<i>You and Me Forever</i> (Kaspar Munk, 2012)	39.656	4,0
<b>Average</b>	<b>47.532</b>	<b>3,6</b>

\* Average of review stars given in newspapers *Politiken*, *Berlingske*, *Jyllands-Posten*, *BT* and *Ekstra Bladet*. The ranking system is one to six with six being the highest grade.

Investigating the trial and error of the recent Danish youth films as it is reflected in table 1, the million dollar question thus remains: Why do some films manage to appeal to the teen audience while others fail?

Focusing on the textual level, and without attempting to provide an exhaustive answer, I will concentrate on the two films *Skyscraper* (Schjøtt, 2011) and *Triple Dare* (Rosendahl, 2006), which are of particular interest as respectively the least and the most commercially successful of the publicly funded youth films released in the 2000s. When discussing the audience appeal of these two films, I propose the utilisation of the concept of 'tone'. Intrinsic of the film's address to its spectator, tone is an underdeveloped critical concept in film studies that can be explained roughly as 'the ways in which the film addresses its spectator and implicitly invites us to understand its attitude to its material and the stylistic register it employs' (Pye, 2007, p. 7). Focusing on the tonal qualities of *Skyscraper* and *Triple Dare* in order to explore the communication with its audience, I will argue that the tonal qualities of these two films, understood as 'the attitudes they communicate towards their own content and conventions', reveal radical differences in the way they attempt to appeal to their target audience on a textual level. A difference that may possibly contribute to shed light on their commercial fare success. The question of audience appeal is, however, an extremely complex one that touches upon a variety of intra- and extra-diegetic factors. Extending beyond the scope of textual appeal, I will thus end my exploration of the tonal workings of *Skyscraper* and *Triple Dare* on a more general note by discussing to what extent the application of tone is valuable when trying to understand film audience preferences.

### Targeting tone

In a scene about one third into Rune Schjøtt's *Skyscraper* (2011), the main character, 17-year-old Jon (played by Lukas Schwarz Thorsteinsson), is having a conversation with his mother (played by Rikke Louise Andersson) in their backyard. But something is off. The mother, a veterinarian with an already established drinking problem, is framed standing next to a cow while putting on plastic gloves. 'So, you want to know if you can do the things other people can without being circumcised', she asks him in a low, worried

voice. Jon, dressed in oversized working clothes and standing opposite in front of a caravan ornamented with antlers, has a discouraged, melancholic look on his face that gradually wrenches into humiliation as the mother continues her detailed explanation. 'You aren't able to have sex. Not if you can't pull back your foreskin', she says in a low, matter of fact tone of voice. The film then cuts to a shot of the two characters standing on each side of the cow with the animal's backside suddenly filling the frame. Cutting back to Jon, the film now frames him in deep focus in front of the antlers on the caravan wall, making it look as if the antlers are coming out of his head. 'So it is definite that I will never be able to...?' he asks almost whispering. His mother who is pervasively shot from a slightly higher angle, making her look smaller than we would assume she really is, replies with an uncertain voice, 'It would mean that we would have to sneak into the city without your father knowing about it, and we cannot do that. Or (pausing) what do *you* think?'

Several things are at play in this scene, both in regards to narrative and style. Focusing on style, we note a certain ambiguity in decisions made in the *mise-en-scene*. Colours and lightning give the scene a somber blue look, but the framing of the cow, of Jon's head against the antler, and the high angle shots of his mother somehow seem to deflate the apparent seriousness of the scene, making the characters come across as at once identifiable, sympathetic and mockingly humorous. Put differently, there seems to be something jarring in the *tone* in which the film is speaking to us.

Originating in literary studies, tone is an elusive and perhaps therefore somewhat overlooked concept in film studies.<sup>4</sup> The most immediate way to understand the concept is to liken it to the tone of voice in conversation as in 'the way that how something is said indicates to the listener how it is to be understood' (Gibbs, 2002, p. 112). Encompassing 'the kinds of attitudes and feelings we interpret to be embodied in the film's stance towards its narrative subject matter', as film scholar Susan Smith has put it (Smith, 2000, p. vii), tone in film relates to the film's mode of address and how we are invited to experience it. The evasiveness of the concept is derived from the fact that tone in film is rarely a singular matter. Rather, it is a unitary term for complex narrative effects. One of the few scholars within film studies to engage with tone as a critical concept is Douglas Pye. Echoing Gibbs, Pye argues in his extended essay

*Movies and Tone* from 2007 that tone in film is 'one of the central ways in which a film can signal how we are to take what we see and hear' (Pye, 2000, p. 17). According to Pye, the tone of a film is something that is 'implied scene by scene and even moment by moment by the network of decisions that creates the fictional world, its characters and events, and present them to the spectator' (Pye, 2007, p. 30). As a result, tone is, as film scholar James MacDowell has put it, 'affected by every aspect of a film and yet reducible to none' (MacDowell, 2012, p. 14). Thus, if we are to unpick the tone of a film, Pye argues, we need to unpick the network of stylistic and narrative decisions that creates our experience of the film's mode of address.

Stressing the affective dimension of tone, Pye then goes on to argue for a distinction of tone between a global and a local level. The global level, which he equates with 'mood', we may understand as our preparatory state of expectation as we begin to engage with a work. Paraphrasing cognitivist film scholar Greg M. Smith, Pye argues how a film through crucial initial apprehension will encourage its viewer to establish a consistent emotional orientation (a 'mood') to which the viewer will then progress to pick up cues laid out by the film.<sup>5</sup> As such, mood is a 'prevailing feeling or frame of mind, incorporating the apprehension of a mode or a genre and the kind of experience we are about to have' (Pye, 2007, p. 20). Conversely, a film's tone is perhaps best thought of as 'tonal qualities'; qualities that are implied locally from scene to scene, or even moment to moment in the film by the network of decisions that create the film's fictional world, its characters and events, and presents them to the spectator.

### **Growing pains: *Skyscraper* (Schjøtt, 2011)**

With the critical distinction between tone as the film's moment to moment modulation of our experience of the fictional world, its characters and events, and mood as the film's pervasive and consistent emotional orientation in mind, we are now able to understand the aesthetic ambiguity of the scene from *Skyscraper* a little better. On one hand, we have the sombreness and dreariness that is cued by the stylistic elements in the mise-en-scene, such as the blue and grey colours of the lighting, the costumes and the setting. These elements seem first and foremost to be conveying the emotional state of Jon and his mother and must therefore relate to the mood of the film. On the other hand, we have the subtle but carefully situ-

ated humorous elements that are evident especially in the framing and blocking of the characters and props, such as the cow's back-side, the antlers coming out of Jon's head, as well as in the cinematography, such as the high angle shots of the mother. All these aesthetic decisions made by the film subtly but continuously work to deflate our sympathy by inducing a subtle mockery in the attitude we are encouraged to take towards the characters. The decisions made by the film in this scene relate to (or rather, they *inform*) the tone of *Skyscraper*.

When analysing the stylistic decisions of this short scene, it becomes evident that the film is addressing its audience in a more complex manner than we might expect from a film targeting an adolescent audience. We experience how the film establishes a pensive, almost melancholic, mood cued by the soft timbered acoustic soundtrack music, a child's voice over, gloomy weather in the exterior scenes, and frequent shots of the main character pursuing solitude by walking along train tracks or sitting by a meadow. These elements, emphasizing psychological realism, strike an important resemblance to the sensitive characterisations of the young protagonists characteristic of the youth films of the 70s and 80s.<sup>6</sup> However, the invitation to emotional immersion and involvement of the audience that is triggered by the establishment of this specific mood, appears to be continuously countered by stylistic decisions especially related to the film's mise-en-scene that seems to function merely as a strategy for punctuating the emotional involvement.

This strategy of undercutting involvement is perhaps particularly evident in the deliberately caricatured performances by the actors who portray the film's adult characters. Most notably Jon's mother, his father (played by Morten Suurballe) and Edith's father, the local grocery shop owner (played by Lars Brygmann). The ridicule-inducing appearance of relentless optimism by Brygmann's character, brought about in the performance by a constantly exaggerated smile, marks a tonal clash with the seriousness of the narrative and induces an element of grotesqueness in tone that arguably results in a sort of ironic detachment rather than involvement for the audience. This distancing is also fuelled by brief but sudden eruptions of explicit sex and violence, as seen in the opening scene, in which the sentimental mood created by the lush backlight and sentimental guitar score is abruptly deflated as Jon, in an over the

shoulder shot, walks in on his unknowing father masturbating while spying on a female neighbor.

The result of this aesthetic decision-making in *Skyscraper* is a distinct tonal ambiguity, in which the invitation to audience involvement is continuously countered by tonal shifts with distancing effects. Undercutting audience involvement in this manner ultimately points *Skyscraper* less in the direction of sensitive psychological realism we were initially led to expect and more in the direction of contemporary genre hybrids such as *Adam's Apples* (Anders Thomas Jensen, 2005) and *Terribly Happy* (Henrik Ruben Genz, 2008) that favor the grotesque<sup>7</sup> and, perhaps most importantly, clearly target an adult audience.

### **Unequivocal emancipation: *Triple Dare* (Rosendahl, 2006)**

In contrast to the poor box office performance of *Skyscraper*, Christina Rosendahl's youth film *Triple Dare*, released in Danish cinemas in 2006, managed to sell 107.000 tickets during its theatrical run, making it the most successful of the films funded through the children's and youth film commissioner scheme in the 2000s so far. Why the film managed to connect so successfully with its target audience can, I will argue, at least in part be explained by studying the tone of the film. Compared to the complexity of *Skyscraper*, with its pervasive tonal alteration between distancing and involvement, *Triple Dare* offers a decisively different take on audience appeal by aiming for unambiguous audience involvement instead.

Clearly marketed as a 'girly comedy "teen pic", borrowing the poster iconography of three girls posing on a white background from a film like *Mean Girls* (2004)' (Jerslev, 2008, p. 185), *Triple Dare* is about the three high school girls Rebekka (played by Emma Leth), Claudia (played by Amalie Lindegård) and Sofie (played by Cathrine Bjørn). Longing to be considered adults, the three of them decide to make a rite of passage to quicken the process. They set up challenges for each other, preferably related to sex, and vow to succeed or freely accept public humiliation if they fail.

Aesthetically, *Triple Dare* employs a pervasive use of stylistic excess. On several occasions, the narrative is punctuated only to extend character movement in specific scenes via use of slow motion. This stylistic device is employed in each scene in which a new challenge is given to one of the girls. Putting the narrative on hold, these

scenes see each girl suddenly posing for the camera in slow motion from various angles as a pile of autumn leaves start to whirl up from the ground. The image is accompanied by a rousing musical theme on the soundtrack and the writing of the challenge in letters across the screen.

However, despite their pausing effect on the narrative, these scenes do not function to evoke detachment. Rather, they seem to work as extended idealising presentations of each character to an audience that is explicitly articulated and situated as young females. What is especially noticeable by this employment of stylistic excess, which also includes a pervasive use of colour grading, is how it functions to enhance emotional involvement despite the fact that the excessive moments deliberately halt the progression of the narrative. Thus, if we begin to trace the stylistic pattern of the film throughout the narrative, we will notice that it shifts to a neutral, unobtrusive mode in moments of emotional significance to the three protagonists. This is evident, for example, in the concluding reconciliation scene on the beach between Rebekka and her love interest Adam (played by Cyron Bjørn Melville). The scene is shot in conventional medium two shots and over the shoulder shots, and is accompanied by a slow, sentimental piano music on the soundtrack that seems to subtlety inform the scene's poignant character and emphasise an unambiguous emotional involvement with the characters.

By consistently relying on an unambiguously sympathetic attitude towards its characters allowing for serene audience involvement, with *Triple Dare* the tone thus remains in synch with the film and its message of emancipation and self-expression. Compared to the ironic detachment created by the aesthetic decisions in *Skyscraper*, the decision to employ excess as a stylistic device in *Triple Dare* works with the general aim of the film to create and maintain emotional involvement with the characters throughout the film. While *Skyscraper* ambiguously alternates between distancing and involvement and simultaneously tackles heavy emotional themes, *Triple Dare*, in contrast, anchors its glossy aesthetics in an invitation to serene involvement that ultimately renders it the most *tonally teen* of the two.

## Conclusion

Inherently intangible as a critical concept but nevertheless a pervasive affective dimension colouring our experience of a film, tone is perhaps best understood as the interplay of attitudes and feelings imbued in a work. As a vital part of understanding a film's mode of address, unpicking what may count as tonal qualities in a film can alert us to the pervasive evaluative and affective orientations that the film implies towards its fictional world, its character and subject matter. Contrary to the concept of mood, which we may understand as the consistent emotional orientation of the film, tone is subject to moment-by-moment modulation that can work either to challenge our emotional experience, as we saw it in *Skyscraper*, or to consolidate it, as appears to be the case in *Triple Dare*.

Employing tonal analysis to these two films, which stand out as respectively the least and the most commercially successful of the films supported by the children's and youth film commissioner scheme of The Danish Film Institute in the 2000s, we are able to explain how they wield consistently different modes of address in appealing to their audience. Unpicking the complex fluctuation between naïve sentimentality and mocking satire that characterises *Skyscraper* and comparing it to the serene audience involvement and unambiguously benign attitude in *Triple Dare*, I have suggested that the former essentially ends up targeting a grown up audience when compared to the teenage audience that seems so explicitly addressed in the latter.

In the end, however, matters of tone and how it works on the spectator invariably relate to the texture of a film. Attempting to explain the appeal of a given film beyond textual level, such as the commercial success of *Triple Dare* and the equal failure of *Skyscraper*, tonal analysis cannot serve as the exclusive analytic focus. Rather, we need to take into account a wider range of diverse contextual aspects of aesthetic, industrial and cultural character, such as genre preferences, media attention and marketing strategies, in order to understand the commercial appeal of a given film. The attitude and relationship designated by tone may be, as Douglas Pye argues, key dimensions of response and interpretation, but they are also inseparable from our wider understanding of the film (Pye, 2007, p. 75). Thus, unpicking tone in film may yield valuable insights about

how a film works once we are inside the cinema, but leaving open the answer to what got us in there in the first place.

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### Notes

- 1 For a discussion of realism in Danish cinema, see Langkjær (2012).
- 2 This definition further matches the aesthetic profile of the films supported through the children and youth film commissioner scheme of The Danish Film Institute (see the list in table 1).
- 3 See Schepelern (2009) and Ramskov (2011).
- 4 See Booth (1961).
- 5 See Smith (1999; 2003).

- 6 See Langkjær (2012) for a wider discussion on realism in Danish cinema.
- 7 And with a similar use of the small town village setting to mythologise rural Denmark as a place inhabited by rednecks and oddball prone to violence and other vices.

# Blockbuster Genres in Danish Independent Film

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## Abstract

Throughout the past decade, Danish independent cinema has grown from being amateur home productions to more self-aware production companies. What is fascinating about this development, though, is the fact that many of the indie filmmakers do not react against blockbuster marked dominance, but they respond by delving directly into specific international blockbuster genres and styles in the search for what appears to be missing in Danish cinema. This works for some directors, principally, by directly reacting against the institutional and economic dominance of primarily The Danish Film Institute. Indirectly, the filmmakers seem to react against 'what is allowed' in Danish film culture. Thus, they actually define themselves as being non-mainstream by focussing on international mainstream genres. By way of examples from the Danish indie scene and interviews with noteworthy indie filmmakers, this article draws attention to a still fairly anonymous trend in Danish film.

**Keywords** Independent film, Danish cinema, blockbuster genres, amateur cinema, film culture.

*'When you're independent in Denmark, you're independent from the institute.'*

Director Shaky González

### **Framing: indies rising?**

Throughout the past decade, Danish independent cinema has grown from being amateur home productions to more self-aware production companies. What is fascinating about this development, though, is the fact that many of the indie filmmakers do not react against blockbuster marked dominance, but they respond by delving directly into specific international blockbuster genres and styles in the search for what appears to be missing in Danish cinema. This works for some directors, principally, by directly reacting against the institutional and economic dominance of primarily The Danish Film Institute. Indirectly, the filmmakers seem to react against 'what is allowed' in a Danish film culture. Thus, they actually define themselves as being non-mainstream by focussing on international mainstream genres. By way of examples from the Danish indie scene and interviews with noteworthy indie filmmakers, this article draws attention to a still fairly anonymous trend in Danish film.

One objective of this article is to probe the ground for research into Danish independent cinema; no research has been done so far. This means that I need to frame my analysis with a short historical account of such productions in Denmark. My main focus of the article is, however, to introduce and highlight some of the generic and stylistic processes in the Danish indiefilm culture at present. My empirical material is procured through several e-mail interviews, which is a fairly new qualitative research method with both obvious advantages and drawbacks (Meho, 2006; Opdenakker, 2006). Here, I do not have room to delve deeper into the epistemological framework of such interviews, but I would like to underline the most important benefits. Lokman I. Meho stresses that the lack of in-person contact in online communication may, by virtue of anonymity, result in 'little accountability' (Meho, 2006, p. 1289). However, this implies that the opposite may be the case as well when the

participants are clearly named. In my case, the participants have been very interested in providing information about their film background in order to gain a voice in the film culture. The drawback here may be that I could be used as a marketing tool, which is why I must underline that I do not necessarily agree with the filmmakers' contentions. My interest is rather to pose them as an existing 'understanding of social and cultural phenomena' (Meho, 2006, p. 1284): that is, indie filmmakers' reflections on genres and styles Danish cinema in general.

This article is then the first account of a fairly unheard voice in the Danish film culture and as such the aim is to describe what we see and why we see such reactions. In essence, I realised that a number of my interviewees from the indie milieu independently drew attention to structural mechanisms regarding the presence and absence of certain genres in Danish film. 'DFI and the various consultants through the years dislike the support for genre film', says director Sohail A. Hassan. This means that I combine, substantiate and explain my findings through e-mail interviewing with a hypothesis about genre and style developments in Danish film: some genres and styles have had very little room in the established Danish film culture.<sup>1</sup>

### **Independent cinema: a Danish film culture?**

Already accentuated in his book title, Michael Z. Newman locates *independent cinema* as 'an American film culture' (Newman, 2011). Of course, the concept in itself has its roots in American cinema and has existed almost as long as film production has been going on. The term 'independent' was allegedly originally used as a description of filmmakers that refused to join The Motion Picture Patent Company, founded 1908 (King, 2005, p. 3). The patent company was declared 'an illegal restraint of trade' (King, 2005, p. 3) in 1915, but was soon replaced by a dominant Hollywood studio system from which to be independent.

Through the history of American cinema, independent cinema has been more or less referred to as being in opposition to Hollywood – defined as both 'a literal place and a state of mind' (Holm, 2008, p. 17). I cannot delve deeply into this conceptual discussion here, but a few things seem to be certain if we confer with titles dealing with indie film cultures: a) the idea of independence is by

all means difficult to define; b) independency is a historical variable that evolves in relation to a film culture at a certain time and place; c) approaches to independent cinema need a contextual approach (Holm, 2008; Horsley, 2005; Merritt, 2000; King, 2005; Newman, 2011; Berra 2008). There is, so to speak, certainty about the uncertainty of the concept.

One obvious question may therefore be: Why do I use 'independent cinema' as a term if it is so vague and imprecise? I do so because a range of directors, producers, actors and screenwriters in Danish cinema employ the term as a way of assigning themselves a certain – voluntary or imposed – role in the Danish film culture. The association *IndieFILM Denmark* – founded by producer, actor and director Mustafa Ali in 2010 – underlines the appropriation of the concept in the name of the organisation. Director and actor Kim Sønderholm emphasises the term's usefulness with reference to the fact that a lot of the filmmakers – though they are not necessarily widely known – actually make a living in the overall film industry as such. He objects, hence, to the idea of 'amateur cinema' and shows some reluctance towards a reference to 'underground film', because Danish independent cinema for the most part is involuntarily underground. Sønderholm describes the concept as a way of showing that there are filmmakers who are doing something different from mainstream Danish film production.

D.K Holm refers to the fact that the concept of independent cinema – by way of, for instance, the production company Miramax – may have lost its value because it has become 'a marketing tool' (Holm, 2008, p. 13). Danish independent cinema may have a hint of this, but the appropriation of the term is, in this case, rather an attempt to gain a voice in a film culture dominated by powerful actors. This culture – reply several of my interview respondents – is stylistically and generically marked by *social realism* or *folk comedy*.

Is this, then, something new in Danish film? Not really. Danish film culture has, at least throughout the second half of the twentieth century, given birth to critique of the establishment. Both a reorganisation of institutionalised film subsidies and the Danish Film School was launched in the sixties,<sup>2</sup> and a voice of protest was inevitable already among the first to be educated in the new system. Director Christian Braad Thomsen is an especially interesting example. Being among the first to be educated at The Danish Film School, he was as

well among the first to turn against the dominance of both the film school and the Danish Film Institute. Both organisations are under management of the Ministry of Culture, which moreover makes his reaction a protest against the major funding institution as well as the overall cinema system of Denmark. The critique of the system was incorporated into his debut feature film *Kære Irene* (1971), which actually was funded by the film institute. However, afterwards he has had a hard time gaining subsidies from the institute.

The film company Zentropa was once as well considered an independent company (Horsley, 2005). Established in 1992 by producer Peter Aalbæk Jensen and director Lars von Trier, the company aimed at a break with traditional ways of production and the established film styles. This was severely voiced through the Dogma95 manifest, which was among other things a direct attack on genre cinema. However, today Nordisk Film – the largest production company in Denmark – holds the bulk of the shares of the company, and in that sense it may be difficult to insist on Zentropa as an independent film company. In some way, it may be considered 'a Danish industrial variant of Miramax': at first aesthetically and industrially on the outskirts of the contextual film culture, later turning into a major and leading player on the film market. Jake Horsley, however, does interestingly enough still consider Zentropa – and especially Lars von Trier's films – indie. Though, in his view Trier's films now wage war against Hollywood and not major operators on the Danish film market (Horsley, 2005). Indies by way of Horsley's argument about Zentropa still react against the Hollywood system.

These two examples are historical examples of independent players in Danish film culture that is clearly separable from recent Danish indiefilm with its direct focus on popular genres. However, they never decidedly defined themselves as 'indies' in the way that the recent and nascent Danish independent film has been doing as an outward method of gaining public attention. It may, though, be doubtful that all new, small and low-budget Danish production companies should be viewed as reacting in exactly the *same* way towards the system. Production companies such as Lone Tower Visuals, Last Exit Productions and Cetus Productions are in different ways direct reactions towards the establishment, while companies such as Roberta Film and Bullitt Film produces low-scale productions while still considering themselves a part of an overall

Danish film culture. However relevant this discussion is, I now leave it aside in order to describe the appropriation of blockbuster genres and styles in recent Danish indies.

### **I want to make films that are larger than life**

Through the last decade or so, we have seen a wide range of new and small Danish production companies show up. D.K. Holm writes that independent cinema throughout film history generally 'mirrors advances in light-weight and inexpensive filmmaking technology' (Holm, 2008, p. 22). If that is the case, and it very much seems so, the recent *digital* development of recording equipment may be viewed as the sounding board underneath indies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This goes for international independent film as well with prevalent examples such as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) and *Paranormal Activity* (2007). A specific horror genre or style such as 'found-footage-film' may have developed out of cheaper digital equipment. This development has influenced Danish indies as well: What IndieFILM Denmark does for upcoming filmmakers is for instance, among other things, to put recording and editing equipment at the producers' disposal. Anything goes, it seems, if the digital devices are used in a noteworthy stylistic manor. Your smartphone may even be a tool for film aesthetics, cf. Patrick Gilles and Hooman Khalili's American indie *Olive* (2011).

Newman focuses on what he calls 'indie realism', which is a way of describing American independent cinema in terms of character based drama, social engagement of the narrative and naturalistic stylistics and themes (Newman, 2011, p. 87-140). This does, of course, not apply to all productions in an indie culture that shows significant inclinations towards several popular genres. However, this special attention to realistic styles and narratives in American independent film (as a reaction towards Hollywood's so-called 'dream factory') suggests a different approach to a dissociation from the establishment than in Danish cinema where character drama, social engagement and naturalism have been a mainstream, institutionalised trend. The Irish-Danish director David Noel Bourke says about the scope of the Danish Film Institute: 'It seems there is a trend for more "socio-realistic" films, light comedies, children's films'. Bourke's off-hand hunch seems to apply to the history of Danish cinema where realism has had a strong position (cf. Hansen, 2013a;

Langkjær, 2012). Several of my respondents claim that it is especially hard to receive attention from the film institute if the project is considered a piece of genre cinema. 'For a long time', says director Svend Ploug Johansen, 'it has been a joke in the horror environment that the film institute only supports social realism or folk comedy' (Lindberg, 2012, p. 26). What we see in Danish indiefilm, according to among others director Sohail A. Hassan, is a prevalent attention towards the genres and styles that receive very little overall attention in the established Danish film culture.

Regarding horror, Kim Sønderholm is a leading figure on the Danish indie scene. However, he has recently been pursuing an international career, but he is frequently used as an actor in Danish indies. His focus has, from the start, been horror seasoned with elements from thrillers and slashers. His debut film *Craig* (2008) is a lengthy study into the mind of a serial killer – a theme he reuses from his short film 'Mental Distortion' (2008). His two next movies, *Tour de Force* (2010) and *Little Big Boy* (2012), follow similar trends. Sønderholm's interest in horror is not only an aesthetic practice, but he employs horror as a special indie strategy: 'Luckily, especially the horror genre has so incredibly many fans who, at any price, want see whatever they can find', he says. 'Principally, it is a question of supply and demand'. This strategy has lead Sønderholm – and his films – into the English speaking market where his films have received some critical attention.

Several other directors in the indie environment focus on horror. The above mentioned Ploug Johansen calls his films 'indie-horror' and has, until now, directed short horror films such as 'Skizo' (2008) and 'Ansigtet' (2012) as well as a conspicuous horror stylised version of the H.C. Andersen story 'Historien om en mor' (2005). 'Ansigtet' was included in the compilation DVD *Supernatural Tales* (2012) that includes sixteen Danish indie short horror films.<sup>3</sup> Nicolas Russel Bennetzon's *Glimt* (2006) is another noteworthy example: it is the first attempt to direct a Danish j-horror (Japanese horror) film. Casper Haugegaard's *Opstandelsen* (2010) is among the very few officially released Danish zombie-films. Slasher horror, besides Sønderholm's films, takes up some space as well: David Noel Bourke's *Last Exit* (2003) and Emil Ishii's *Rovdrift* (2009) are in this case good examples. In all, this special attention to horror on

the indie scene is in some way a reaction towards a genre that receives little attention in the overall Danish production culture.

Of course, Danish film history includes some examples of the horror genre. In the 1990's the cooperation between director Martin Schmidt and writer Dennis Jürgensen resulted in two teen horror films. Subsequently, Schmidt made two additional horror films, but started directing television series during the 2000's. However, Schmidt and Jürgensen resumed the collaboration with *Bag det stille ydre* (2005), which was produced by the indie company Wise Guy Productions. In 2007, two horror films were released from larger established companies with institute subsidies: Hans Fabian Wullenweber's *Cecilie* and Martin Barnewitz's *Kolleget*. One interesting borderline case is Carsten Myllerup. He was among the first director's to be educated at the Danish independent film school Super16. Afterwards, he was granted institute subsidies for his debut film *Midsommer* (2003), which in turn was remade by the American indie director Dan Myrick as *Solstice* (2008) (one of the guys behind *The Blair Witch Project*). Lastly, Ole Bornedal's *Nattevagten* (1994) has a profiled position as a groundbreaking Danish horror film, but these very few titles – only six state subsidized horror films in twenty years – never really established an actual *tradition* for horror in Danish film. The reasons for this may be various, but for indie directors this appears as hesitation from the film institute.

However, internationally there is too a certain drift, mentioned by Sønderholm, towards underground horror within various indie cultures – sometimes referred to as *sleaze cinema*. Indie horror in Denmark seems, then, to be going both ways: There is a search for a indie horror hit, on the one hand, while the producers, on the other hand, never state that they would turn down potential subsidies from the institute. Basically, horror has both its underground tendencies as well as an international blockbuster impact and both aspects are internationally clearly encompassed by the unexpected indie blockbuster phenomenon *The Blair Witch Project*.

The Chilean-Danish director Shaky González has been playing a weighty role in Danish independent cinema for over fifteen years. He debuted with *Nattens engel* (1998) – one of the very few Danish vampire films – and followed up with *One Hell of a Christmas* (2002). However, González is additionally interesting because he introduces genres and styles in Danish cinema that are missing or at least

very rare. His post-apocalyptic short film 'The Last Warrior' (2010) is mainly a spoof of 80's action-adventure films such as the *Mad Max*-series (1979-85) and *Conan the Barbarian* (1982). Underlining the action-adventure spoof, Eric Holmey replays his own role from *Conan the Barbarian*. González's third feature film *Pistoleros* (2007) is, then, an action film and a gangster drama in the style of Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino, which basically means the ironic, humorous, violent exploitation action style sometimes referred to as *grindhouse* or even *tarantino-esque* (Holm, 2004: 139).

Several of my respondents – for instance the actor David Sakurai and horror director Svend Ploug Johansen – not only refer to Rodriguez as a stylistic inspiration, but they also directly place his book *Rebel Without a Crew* (1995) as a programmatic and strategic toolbox: 'If you want to be a filmmaker and you can't afford film school, know that you don't really learn anything in film school anyway' writes Rodriguez (1995, p. xiii). Rodriguez has – for indie directors not only in Denmark – become a voice for a generation of filmmakers focussing on a general 'do it yourself' culture. In many of my interviews, this is underlined by a recurrent reference to the indie filmmaker's love and care for film in itself and the subsidised film as a creativity killer based on a sense of economic bureaucracy.

González's genre interests connect the two most conspicuous genres on the indie scene: horror and gangster action, which are both very prevalent in his debut film with obvious similarities with Robert Rodriguez's *From Dusk till Dawn* (1996).<sup>4</sup> As a reaction towards the dominance of realism in Danish cinema, González maintains his interests in directing films that – with his own phrase – 'are larger than life' Qualitatively, this means heavy doses of action and the supernatural with a sense of humour. Gangster action is, generally, a conspicuous genre or style among Danish indies. Jonas Kvist Jensen's *Brutal Incasso* (2005) – co-written by Kim Sønderholm – appropriates Rodriguez's aesthetic violence with an evident hint at Quentin Tarantino's early films. David Noel Bourke's *No Right Turn* (2007) employs aesthetic violence in a stylistic blend of tarantino-esque gangster violence and art house pulp. Shaun Rana's *Westbrick Murders* (2010) draws heavily on Rodriguez's *Sin City* (2005). Dennis Bahnsen's *Krokodillerne* has an evident scent of Tarantino while at the same time drawing heavily on Lasse Spang Olsen's Danish gangster action comedies. In two short films, Philip Th. Pedersen picks up the

gangster drama in very different ways: 'The Fro' (2011) is a spoof of a humourous blacksploitation gangster drama while 'Små mænd' is more in tune with socio-realistic gangster films such as Nicholas Winding Refn's *Pusher*-trilogy (1996-2005). 'Små mænd' focuses on the relationship between Danish gangsters and integration, which is also an incorporated component in Kaywan Mohsens low-budget productions *Eye for Eye* (2008) and *Made in Denmark* (2012). Dennis Petersen's *Det perfekte kup* (2008) is more in tune with the mentioned lightweight Danish gangster comedies, a sort of a rough version of *Olsen Banden* (1968-2008), while Stefan Kjær Olsen's 'Blodbødre' (2013) is perhaps the indie production that comes the closest to a realistic portrait of Danish criminals.

In general, the gangster drama in Danish indiefilm points in different directions, but the films that are both feature length and widely distributed on a video format (*Westbrick Murders*, *Brutal Incasso*, *Krokodillerne*, *No Right Turn*, *Nattens engel* and *Pistoleros*) all accentuate a style that has been rarely used in Danish cinema. Gangster drama in Denmark has mostly been articulated through two lines of interests. The first one is a light folk comedy version modelled after *Olsen Banden* and similar examples, and the other one is a serious and aestheticised violent version primarily voiced by Nicholas Winding Refn. Tarantino and Rodriguez combined rough violence with a light humoresque tonality, which – as a result in Danish indiefilm – becomes an interesting blend of humour and violence with an inspiration from the two path-breaking American directors. In Denmark, Lasse Spang Olsen paved the way for this type of film with his blockbuster hits *I Kina spiser de hunde* (1999) and *Gamle mænd i nye biler* (2002), which are mentioned as inspiration by indiedirector Jonas Kvist Jensen – and Jensen's *Brutal Incasso* has obvious thematic and title similarities with Olsen's *Incasso* (2004). Generally, this means that Danish cinema of course has its narrative tradition of various gangster dramas, but besides Olsen's films, the humoresque, aestheticised and violent version of the style has worked its way into films produced without state subsidies. Interestingly enough, two of Olsen's latest films – *Den gode strømer* (2004) and *Den sidste rejse* (2011) – was made without funding from the film institute.

## Indies in Denmark: counterpublics or training camps?

In my interviews, there seems to be a gradual transition from being truly independent (dubbed 'guerrilla style' by David Noel Bourke) towards being a part of the establishment. Hesitance towards the film institute comes directly from a sense of reluctance towards genre cinema, which indirectly means that indie directors fear losing generic control of their projects if they were to do what it takes to be granted subsidies. In some cases, participants express that they seem to play a subordinated role and feel particularly pressured by the establishment; these are the filmmakers I would describe through *institutional independency*. It is within this group we find the voices that are the most critical and to some extent here we, as well, find most of the horror and action productions, which seems to link critique of state subsidies with specific absent styles and genres in Danish cinema. The main reason why they are institutionally independent is the fact that they have either been turned down by the institute or basically expect to be if they apply for funding with a specific genre project.

In other cases, participants highlight that they are in the film business because they feel a need to be and not in opposition to institutions and production companies; I would call this grouping *aspiring independency*. These two groups are not at all clearly separable, and there are developments back and forth from one group into the other. One obvious example is, of course, the director Nicholas Winding Refn, who left the Danish Film School (the establishment) in order to shoot *Pusher*, but today he is granted substantial subsidies for his feature films. The Swedish director Johan Melin made his second feature *Preludium* (2008) in Denmark as an indie director, but he was granted subsidies for his third film *Profetia* (2009). Shaky González too moves back and forth between state funded film and independent productions, but he still insists on being indie, because the most of what he has made has been indie.

This means that the Danish film culture in general seems marked within by what Nancy Fraser has called 'multiple publics', but among these there may be 'interpublic relations' (Fraser, 1990, p. 65-66): Institutionally independent filmmakers, such as David Noel Bourke or Sohail A. Hassan, can then, within the Danish film culture, be described through Fraser's term *subaltern counterpublics*: 'they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated

social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses' (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). The counterdiscourses are, then, the films themselves and ways to finance and produce film. Rather than being countercultural, aspiringly independent filmmakers, such as Charlotte Madsen or David Sakurai, can be explained by what Jostein Gripsrud – drawing on Nancy Fraser – calls *training camps*: 'these counterpublics would often tend to regard themselves as training camps and waiting rooms for aspiring future participants in the "proper", national public sphere' (Gripsrud, 2010, p. 5). Here, the specific national public sphere would the established, subsidised film culture. However, critique may come from both sides of the matter and even from established and state subsidised filmmakers as well (cf. Vuorola and Hjortshøj, 2013).

In conclusion, Danish independent cinema seems to react, through such genres or styles, against an established film cultural and institutional focus on social realism and light comedy. Reality may not be as obvious as the environment itself makes it seem if we ask the film institute itself, says Rasmus Horskjær (film consultant at DFI), but nevertheless the indies are clearly doing something different than Danish cinema in general has been doing: There is no real tradition for horror in Denmark, while the gangster drama – perhaps stemming from films like *Olsen Banden* – still mainly fuses with non-violent satire and comedy. These genres and styles are, then, appropriations of international trends and, thus, introduced in a Danish film culture that seems to have a stylistic void.<sup>5</sup> Quantitatively, indie filmmakers in Denmark then seem to have a point. To some extent, Horskjær defends his position as a film consultant by underlining that he does not subsidise certain genres, but funds what he terms 'good films' in general. However, he acknowledges the fact that specifically horror has been almost absent in Danish cinema. Claus Ladegaard (DFI head of Production and Development) admits that 'subsidies for horror film historically has been modest', but he assumes that this may change (Lindberg, 2012). Whether or not Danish indiefilm, qualitatively, lives up to the expectation of supplying Danish cinema with an alternative is a study left for later. And if change in Danish cinema is about to come, only time will tell.

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### Notes

- 1 This article is part of a larger work in progress about Danish independent cinema and low budget productions in Denmark. I have published various interviews with players in the field – for example, Mustafa Ali, David Noel Bourke, Sohial A. Hassan, Svend Ploug Johansen, David Sakurai, and Jonas Kvist Jensen – in the online magazine *Kulturkapellet*. You may consult these for more information.
- 2 The Danish Film Institute was established in 1972 as a continuation of state-financed film subsidies through Filmfonden (est. 1964). In 1997 Statens Filmcentral and Det Danske Filmmuseum were closed and placed under The Danish Film Institute as an umbrella organisation. The Danish Film School was established in 1966. However, the idea of state subsidies goes back to the establishment of Statens Filmcentral in 1938 with the intention of supporting film without commercial interests.
- 3 In between 'Skizo' and 'Ansigtet' we find the *post-apocalyptic* short film 'Global Alarm' (2009), which was a theme and genre that was taken up by a number of indie directors in the film festival MovieBattle 2010 and released on the compilation DVD *Wasteland Tales* (2010).
- 4 For additional information about González, see Hansen (2013b).
- 5 I should note that Danish independent cinema as well has its component of what Holm calls 'non-conformist films stripped of the predictable or familiar story structures' (Holm, 2008, p. 14). This is sometimes termed

*art cinema* (King, 2005, p. 102) or *art house*. The Swedish director Johan Melin's feature films *Preludium* (2008) and *Profetia* (2009), produced by the Danish company Bullitt Film, and Henrik Kolind's *Caroline – den sidste rejse* (2012) are in this case interesting examples. David Noel Bourke turned away from horror in his second feature film *No Right Turn* (2010) that may be described – besides obvious references to Tarantino – as a coupling of art house and pulp.

# Nordic Noir Production Values

*The Killing and The Bridge*

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## Abstract

In this article, the authors argue that Nordic noir constitutes a set of production values utilised and conceptualised to make Danish television series attractive in the international market. The idea of production values is embedded in a media industrial context where market principles of target groups, sales, funding and marketing/branding are as important as aesthetic principles. *The Killing* and *The Bridge* are used to illustrate how features such as setting,

climate, light and language serve strategic as well as aesthetic purposes in the production process. The authors conclude by relating the specific Nordic noir production values present in the two series to changing conditions in Danish television drama production, in particular the internationalisation of DR Drama Division.

**Keywords** Nordic noir, television drama, production value, *The Killing*, *The Bridge*.

## Introduction

Following the rise of Scandinavian crime stories as an international bestseller and blockbuster industry with Stieg Larsson's *Millennium Trilogy* as a prominent example, and the subsequent popularity of what some have termed the *Nordic noir* genre, Danish television crime series have also risen to a relative fame internationally. In this article, we argue that Nordic noir, as a concept, constitutes a set of *production values* utilised and conceptualised to make Danish television series attractive in the international market. We use *The Killing I* (*Forbrydelsen I*, DR1, 2007) and *The Bridge I* (*Bron/Broen I*, SVT1/DR1, 2011) to illustrate how features such as setting, climate, light and language serve strategic as well as aesthetic purposes in the production process. The term 'production value' is a practical concept without an exact theoretical definition. However, the term most commonly refers to the *balancing act* of economic, practical and market interests, on the one hand, and aesthetic and quality interests, on the other. Although Andrew Nestingen's (2008) notion of 'medium concept' is originally related to Scandinavian filmmaking, we also believe it can be used to describe what is going on in Danish television production. In this regard, 'medium concept' production values integrate aspects of the region's predominant auteur cinema, while merging it with the conceptualisation of film, stylisation, and marketing that draws on genre cinema (Nestingen, 2008, p. 53). Consequently, the idea of production values is embedded in a media industrial context where market principles of target groups, sales, funding and marketing/branding are as important as aesthetic principles – and maybe at times even more important (Waade, 2013). In this respect, we conclude by relating the specific Nordic noir production values present in *The Killing* and *The Bridge* to changing conditions in Danish television drama production, in

particular the internationalisation of public broadcaster DR's Drama Division from within.

### **'Nordic noir' and Nordic melancholy**

*Nordic Noir* (2013) and *Death in a Cold Climate* (2012) are titles of recent books written by the British critic Andrew Forshaw describing the current popularity of Scandinavian crime fiction. The titles illustrate how locations, nature and the environment are essential in its popularity. 'Nordic noir' also refers to the historic film noir, a French concept typically used to describe American crime dramas and psychological thrillers in the 1940s and the 1950s that were characterised by certain narrative and visual features, including melancholic and desperate antiheroes, low-key lighting, striking use of light and shadow, unusual camera placement and often tragic endings (Fay and Nieland, 2010; Luly, 2012). In the 1970s, a new wave of noir-films emerged, the 'neo noir', in which modern themes reflecting the surrounding society were at play – for example, technological problems and their social ramifications, identity crisis, memory issues and subjectivity (Abrams, 2007; Haastrup, 1999). Nordic noir follows the same narrative, stylistic and thematic concepts, for example, crime and thriller, tragic plots, melancholic and desperate antiheroes as well as unusual camera placement, heavily subdued lighting and a pronounced use of shadows. The difference is that Nordic noir uses recognisably *Nordic* phenomena, settings, light, climate and seasonal conditions as well as language(s), characters and themes such as gender equality, provincial culture and the social democratic welfare state (Waade, 2011).

Nordic noir is inevitably linked to the international popularity of Scandinavian crime fiction as well as Danish television drama series as an international trademark. The narrative, genre-specific and melancholic features are already playing an important role in these contexts. The concept of Nordic noir adds and foregrounds some *stylistic* characteristics, including setting, climate, light and language. Kerstin Bergman (2011) claims that Swedish crime fiction includes a neo-romantic tendency that follows in the footsteps of the British crime tradition of Agatha Christie's authorship and television series such as *Midsomer Murders* (ITV, 1997-) when using rural areas as setting. This neo-romantic tendency fits the melancholic antihero we know from Nordic melancholic art and Scandi-

navian crime fiction, as well as the use of the characteristic Nordic rural settings, climate and light as visual style. As Bergman points out, this new tendency of emphasising rural landscapes and settings, the typical seasonal, climate and light conditions as visual and picturesque stylistic elements in the series is related to the growing media tourism industry in the region (Bergman, 2011, p. 42). Not only are the Nordic settings, climate, light and language used as practical and dramaturgically logical elements in the series; these same elements also seem to entail a significant exoticism – when looked at from outside the Nordic region – insofar as they offer a rather remarkable style and distinct features emphasising something typically Nordic.

'Nordic melancholy' is another trademark linked to internationally well-known and acknowledged Nordic art, literature, film and music in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, including the works of Sibelius, Munch, Strindberg and Bergman, from which the Nordic noir also benefits. In that sense, both Scandinavian crime series and Nordic noir draw upon a rich Nordic tradition of aesthetic references, as well as the French, British and American crime / thriller tradition in both film, television and literature (Agger, 2010). This melancholy is expressed in the main characters' inner psychological and personal conditions and conflicts, but also in terms of external conditions such as landscape, nature, climate and general atmosphere. The protagonist most often has a hard time dealing with his or her own life, experiences emotional conflicts with others, and is often lonely and pensive. There are many examples of melancholy in both Danish television drama series specifically and Scandinavian crime series more generally, where most main characters seem to be struggling with close relationships and personal life, experiencing failed marriages, alcoholism, and often disappoint family and friends while they are busy saving the lives of others. Sarah Lund in *The Killing* is a good example of this miserable antihero and of Nordic melancholy. At the beginning of the first season of *The Killing*, Sara has a Swedish partner and – together with her son from a previous relationship – is on track to move to Sweden to be with him. But 20 episodes later, Sarah is still in Copenhagen, and her relationship is disintegrating because she has been too busy solving the crime, neglecting her private life and family in the process.

### ***The Killing I: November, November, November....***

*The Killing I* is undoubtedly the most successful Danish television export so far. Besides being sold for broadcast in all other Nordic countries, the series has, according to lists made available by its distributor ZDF Enterprises, been exported to 97 countries and territories in all continents but Africa, including Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Great Britain, France, Turkey, Japan, Australia and New Zealand. In Great Britain, for example, *The Killing I* was called 'the best series currently on TV' (Jarossi, 2011) and became a relative hit with viewers and especially critics (Jensen and Waade 2013), paving 'the way for a wave of subtitled European crime drama' proving it was possible to successfully broadcast foreign-language drama on British television (Frost, 2011a). Additionally, the series has also been re-made into an American version (*The Killing I, II and III*, AMC, 2011-2013) and Indian, Russian and Turkish remakes may be underway (Dohrmann, 2013).

Ingolf Gabold, former Head of DR's Drama Division and producer of *The Killing I*, explains that the overall vision of the series was inspired by Danish writer Henrik Nordbrandt's poem saying that the Danish year has 15 months: 'January, February, March, April, May, June, July, August, September, October, November, November, November, December' (Gabold, 2013). This is to say that the country's climate conditions and its seasons played a significant and outspoken role in the series' production value.

The plot of the first of a total of three seasons, *The Killing I*, is about a young high school girl, Nanna Birk Larsen, who has disappeared. Already in the name of the missing girl, the Nordic noir production value is marked. 'Birk' is the Danish name for the typical Nordic wood species birch, and 'Larsen' is a common Danish family name. Police detective Sarah Lund is asked to solve the case. It turns out that Nanna has been murdered, and we follow the reactions of her family, teachers and friends as they try to come to terms with what has happened; and we follow Sarah Lund's and her fellow police detectives' tenacious work to find out who killed Nanna. During the series the viewer gets to know a lot of friends and family members related to the victim, and it turns out that everyone may have a motive to kill Nanna. This ambiguity in relation to the characters in which we do not know whether they are good or bad

is a thriller genre element, also used in film noir, and it helps to create the suspense and excitement of the series (Agger, 2011).

The series takes place in Copenhagen. The City Hall, Nanna's home and the police station are the main locations of *The Killing*. Sarah's own home is disintegrating, and her son has to live with his grandmother, Sarah's mother. As a viewer you follow Sarah on her way through Copenhagen and its surroundings and inside the City Hall. In the first episode the police search for Nanna in a meadow. It is late autumn, and the grass is yellow and withered. The viewer does not know whether it is a crime scene or just an innocent meadow. The place is significant in the opening scene and represents a cinematic landscape in which the landscape imagery in itself indicates a narrative and visual style (Lefebvre, 2006). The setting is marked as a bleached Nordic autumn landscape in a frosty, cold climate. The story's dramaturgy follows the overall vision: It starts in early November and ends three weeks later. Nanna's killer is finally revealed in the story's climax, in which the action takes place a dark autumn evening in a birch forest, again within a typical Nordic natural setting. With torches as the only source of light, the viewer follows the hunt in the woods, where crosscuts between the police, Nanna's mother and the murderer, who has taken Nanna's father as a hostage, threatening him with a gun. The crime scene is a genre-specific place, and in this case it is also part of the climax scene, marked by Nordic nature and rainy weather conditions and low-key lighting as the general visual style.

The series' radical televisual style with consistent dark colours and dim lighting, the significant lurking camera placements and the many rainy autumn scenes emphasise the series' significant cinematic noir style. Iconic places such as the Danish parliament, the city of Copenhagen and its significant neo-classical police headquarters, as well as the names of the characters, the regions' typical climate conditions and landscapes, make up the 'Nordic' in the Nordic noir production values of the series. Sarah Lund's Faeroese jumper furthermore indicates something essentially Nordic. This *Nordic-ness* is even manifest in the US remake of the series, which stylistically is fairly close to the original both when it comes to location (Seattle) and characters. Sara Lund's American equivalent, Sara Linden (the surname referring to linden trees), even wears a jumper similar to Sara Lund's jumper, which has also be-

come an important part of the series' trademark in Britain (Kingsley, 2012).

The Danish language is not really a part of the series' Nordic noir style and concept from the onset rather the Danish language is a natural and conventional part of a Danish television drama production. But when we look at the reception of the series in for example Great Britain, the Danish language has become a significant part of the series, insofar as the need for subtitles has become a quality indicator in itself (Frost, 2011a; Jensen and Waade, 2013).

### ***The Bridge I: explicit meta-style and concept***

*The Bridge I* (Bron/Broen I, SVT1/DR1, 2011) is a co-production between DR and Swedish public broadcaster SVT, produced by independent production companies Filmlance International (Sweden) and Nimbus Film (Denmark) but co-funded by other (public) broadcasters such as Norwegian NRK and German ZDF. As was the case with *The Killing*, *The Bridge I* has proved quite a successful export, being sold to markets as different as Australia, Brazil and Poland. Two remakes of the series have also been produced. One is a French-British co-production (*The Tunnel*, Sky Atlantic/Canal+, 2013), which uses the Channel Tunnel between the two countries as its pivotal point. The other remake is American (*The Bridge*, FX/MundoFox, 2013), produced for the American cable channel FX and its Spanish-language channel MundoFox, in which police detectives from the US and Mexico are teaming up to find the killer and the bridge in question is the *Bridge of the Americas* crossing the iconic Río Grande and connecting Mexican Ciudad Juarez with US El Paso (Jones 2012; Jensen 2013).

Since the series is a co-production with Swedish public broadcaster SVT, and undertaken by independent production companies, as opposed to DR's usual *in-house modus operandi* of series such as *The Killing I-III* and *Borgen I-III*, DR's production philosophy only indirectly influences the production. Filmlance has previously produced the *Beck*-series, based on and inspired by Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö's bestseller crime novels about the Swedish detective Martin Beck, and as such the company knows the tradition of Scandinavian crime fiction very well. This is also a manifest part of *The Bridge*'s concept, plot and aesthetics, in which all elements from the region's popular crime series are reflected. In other words, the

series is a meta-series demonstrating popular elements of Nordic crime series' significant style and societal critique. One example is the first body found on the bridge between Sweden and Denmark in the first episode, which alludes to both the transnational co-production and the construction of the new bi-national region of Oresund, but at the same time reflects the cultural and national differences between the countries.

The Danish detective Martin Rohde refers to all the miserable, emotionalised, male antiheroes in the Scandinavian crime tradition, such as Henning Mankell's Kurt Wallander and Sjöwall and Wahlöö's Martin Beck. As the kin of Wallander and Beck, Rohde is struggling with both private and professional relations. The pronunciation of his name Rohde in Danish is similar to another word 'rode', which means 'make a mess'. Rohde's Swedish counterpart, the female detective Saga Norén, has a name with references to both the old Nordic saga tradition and to Lars Norén, a significant Swedish melancholic poet and playwright. Her 'autistic' behaviour is both a humoristic element in the series and refers to other famous insensitive female characters within the tradition, including *The Killing*'s Sarah Lund and Stieg Larsson's Lisbet Salander. The plot is the general serial killer plot of many crime series, following the serial structure of the genre. Martin Rohde's son, who plays a significant role in the story, is killed in the last episode of the first season. This ending is unusual in action-driven crime stories, but demonstrates another noir element, namely the tragic ending. The use of glass and mirror, for example, letting the camera follow an action through a window, is also a characteristic noir element (Haastrup, 1999). In addition, the story includes critical approaches to the Scandinavian welfare society, another well-known trademark of Scandinavian crime series, in which police, press corruption and shortcomings of the social, health and political systems are revealed. What is interesting is that viewers not only get to know 'whodunnit', they also get to know the revenge motifs and sad circumstances behind *why* the serial killer has become a criminal.

Nordic settings and the region's climate, light and language conditions are also emphasised as stylistic and conceptual elements of this series. For instance, iconic places in Copenhagen and Malmö are used in the opening sequence (for example, 'Turning Torso' in Malmö, and the Police Headquarters, the City Hall and the State

Hospital in Copenhagen), as well as the highway and the bridge between the two countries and cities. The Nordic neo-classical police headquarters in Copenhagen is used as setting, which is also the case for a lot of other Danish crime series, making it an iconic setting of Scandinavian crime series itself. The lighting emphasises the bleached, grey, pastel nuances of the series, reflecting the winter landscapes outside (for example, the repeated image of the bridge in lilac sunset) as well as the Nordic architecture and design tradition present in for example Martin Rohde's home and the Swedish news room, with glass facades, wooden interiors and furniture made of natural materials by well-known Danish architects such as Wegner and Jacobsen. The language also plays a prominent part. The series mixes Swedish and Danish, and the characters have difficulty understanding each other, an example of which is Saga's difficulty in pronouncing Rohde's name, which makes it sound more like 'rød' (red) or 'rod' (mess). These linguistic nuances are particularly funny for Nordic audiences, who will recognise language as an established mode of humour and jokes within the region, as well as the acknowledged difficulties every non-Dane has experienced when attempting to pronounce the uvular 'r', the soft 'd' and the large variation of distinct vowel sounds of Danish. In *The Bridge I*, the Nordic languages are not only a natural part of the series' *mise-en-scene* but they are emphasised and transformed into a reflected and significant part of the series style and production value.

### **Concluding perspective: DR Drama's subtle internationalisation**

Concluding, we argue that the Nordic noir production values presented above – and arguably perceived as essentially Nordic and even at times essentially *Danish* – are actually a consequence of the increasingly international orientation and ambition of Denmark's public broadcaster DR to win international prizes in order to attract international funding. The success of DR Drama, domestically *and* internationally, has been attributed to the so-called 'dogmas', applied from the mid-1990s onwards. The dogmas originally consisted of 15. However, today most industry people and academics agree that four dogmas summarise the peculiarities of DR's approach to television drama production: one vision, double story, crossover and producer's choice, respectively (Nielsen 2012a, 2012b; Agger 2012;

Redvall 2010, 2011). These dogmas have allowed DR to create a new conception and interpretation of Danish television drama, in combination with a change in the production culture of DR Drama itself (Redvall, 2011).

What is interesting about the dogmas in our argument, however, is that they are partly inspired by international production practices. Thus, 'one vision' was inspired by the so-called 'show-runners' of especially American television series, and 'producer's choice' found inspiration in American – and British – production practices that allowed for a more flexible organisation. In the same vein, the cross-over dogma – stating that there must be a crossover between the DR in-house production team and the independent television/film production industry in order to achieve aesthetic and artistic innovation – has arguably led to a more international and movie-like visual style (Bondebjerg and Redvall, 2011; Nielsen, 2012b). This style has garnered much international acclaim and been a contributing factor in DR winning five Emmy Awards since 2002 (Redvall, 2011), together with other international prizes such as Prix Italia (Nielsen, 2012b), and as such, part of a conscious – and, as we now know – successful strategy to attract funding from abroad by winning international prizes (Redvall, 2011).

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# Characters and Topical Diversity

## A Trend in the Nonfiction Bestseller

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### Abstract

The purpose of this article is to contribute to our understanding of the difference between the bestseller and the non-bestseller in non-fiction. It is noticed that many bestsellers in nonfiction belongs to the sub-genre of creative nonfiction, but also that the topics in this kind of literature is largely ignored by the critics. Thus, the article tests how topics may work in creative nonfiction. Two Danish bestsellers belonging to the genre, Frank's *Mit smukke genom* ( *My Beautiful Genome*), about genomics, and Buk-Swienty's *Slagtebænk Dybbøl* ( 'Slaughter-bench Dybbøl'), a history book, are chosen as cases and analysed using a slightly modified motif model by Johansen. The result is that in both books the main topic is treated from a double perspective, but also that six out of seven secondary topics, or motifs, are treated as well. It is concluded that also in a topical sense creative nonfiction may span traits from nonfiction and fiction, and that this may contribute to our understanding between the bestseller and the non-bestseller in nonfiction.

**Keywords** Creative nonfiction, narrative nonfiction, bestsellers, literary motifs, literary characters.

## Introduction

Usually bestsellers mean bestsellers in fiction, but of course nonfiction has its bestsellers too. These bestsellers may roughly be divided into two major groups, one of which serves practical needs (for example, travel guides or books about gardening, pregnancy and so forth). Titles of this type are rarely found on the bestseller lists, but because they meet practical needs, they often become steady-sellers and gain impressive sales figures over time.

The other group is different. These books enter the bestseller lists shortly after being published, stay there for a few months or in a few cases remain there for a year or two, and then the public demand declines pretty fast. This pattern indicates that the main attraction of these books is not that they serve practical needs. Of course, they may serve some readers' needs, for example, professional needs, but in order to become must-reads for a much wider audience, it is obvious that they have something else to offer. A lot of people do not *need* to read these books; still they buy them. Otherwise, they would not be bestsellers.

Many of the books in this group belong to the flourishing umbrella genre called either creative nonfiction, literary nonfiction, or narrative nonfiction. As Lee Gutkind, founder of the literary magazine *Creative nonfiction*, founder of the first MFA program in creative nonfiction in the world, and author of several books about the genre, explains: "Creative nonfiction has become the most popular genre in the literary and publishing communities. These days the biggest publishers – HarperCollins, Random House, Norton, and others – are seeking creative nonfiction titles more vigorously than literary fiction and poetry" (Gutkind, 2013). In accordance with the various genre terms, creative nonfiction is definitely a very literary kind of nonfiction, and in the United States, it is possible to earn a fellowship in creative nonfiction from the National Endowments of the Arts, but many of the titles, for example, Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henriette Lacks*, Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, John McPhee's *Coming into the Country*, and Tracy Kidder's *The Soul of a New Machine*, also entered the bestseller lists and some of them stayed there for years.

However, it seems that the very artfulness of the genre also means that most writers writing about the genre are mostly concerned with form, style and sub-genre issues, while the topical content is largely ignored, except that it should be "documentable" (Lounsberry, 1990, p. xi) or at least true (for example, Gutkind, 2012, p. 14-43). A book like Jack Hart's *Storycraft: the Complete Guide to Writing Narrative Nonfiction* includes chapters on for instance 'Structure', 'Voice and Style', 'Scene' and even 'Theme' (Hart, 2011), but neither this book nor the popular anthology *The Fourth Genre: Contemporary Writers of/on Creative Nonfiction* (Root and Steinberg, eds., 2012) include a substantial chapter or essay on the treatment of topics in creative nonfiction. This is interesting because in literary theory, it is taken for granted that form and content are intertwined, that is, when the form changes something happens to the content, and vice versa. If this is true, topics do not work in the same way in creative nonfiction as they do in other kinds of nonfiction, and in order to test this thesis, two cases of creative nonfiction from the Danish best-seller lists have been selected for closer inspection. Of course, two cases cannot show much about how a genre works in general and surely more studies of this kind are needed. Still, I think the findings are interesting.

The first case is Lone Frank's *Mit smukke genom* (*My Beautiful Genome*), on genetics, or actually state-of-the-art genomics. The other case is Tom Buk-Swienty's *Slagtebænk Dybbøl* (not translated into English, but the title reads 'Slaughter-bench Dybbøl'), a history book about a particular battle in the war between Prussia and Denmark in 1864. Given these topics, the books were hardly predestined to become bestsellers. Still, in Denmark *My Beautiful Genome* has been a solid bestseller, printed in six impressions, while *Slaughter-bench Dybbøl* became an extraordinary bestseller, printed in twenty-one impressions – and of course both books have been published in numerous other formats, too. Both authors also received the Danish Author's Guild Prize in nonfiction for these books, Buk-Swienty in 2009, Frank in 2011 (Dansk Forfatterforening, [n.d.]). Moreover, the most expensive television serial ever produced in Denmark, scheduled to hit the screen in 2014, is strongly inspired by *Slaughter-bench Dybbøl* and its sequel, *Dommedag Als* ('Doomsday Als'). Internationally, Frank's book has been the more successful, translated into six

foreign languages, including English and German, while Buki-Swienty's book has only been translated into German.

Now, the core question is: Can the study of the topical content of *My Beautiful Genome* and *Slaughter-bench Dybbøl* contribute to our understanding of the difference between the nonfiction bestseller and nonfiction books with more humble sales figures? Of course, there might be many other important issues at stake too. Some books are better promoted than others; some get a lot of (good) reviews, others do not; some have a cover that catches the attention of the book buying public, others do not; some books are written in a style that appeals to many readers, others do not; and so on. But, after all, the topics and how they are treated may also be very important.

The theoretical approach is based on a model roughly outlining the main motifs in fiction. At first sight this may seem an odd choice since the two cases are not fiction, but the point is that the topics of creative nonfiction often are doubled up in order to match topics in ordinary nonfiction as well as motifs in fiction, and the chosen model can grasp both those dimensions. The model was originally conceived by the Danish professor in Literature, Jørgen Dines Johansen, but I have slightly modified it.

### **A motif model for fiction**

According to Johansen, fiction basically deals with five main motifs. These are as follows:

*The individual's relation to*

- the body
- the mind
- the other, the object(s) for desire
- the others
- exterior nature

(Johansen, 2007, p. 278; my translation)

Johansen's first and quite startling point is that these motifs are simply the same as the main motifs in real life. Real persons are concerned with themselves (the first two categories), their relations to other people (the next two categories), and their relations to exterior nature (the final category). That is, these motifs are existential, but

also essential, and that is why fiction is concerned with the same motifs. His second point is that a single work of fiction can easily embody *all* of these motifs. I have tested this hypothesis on dozens of fictional texts, and it seems to be true that fiction, even a single short story, often thematize three, four or in fact all of these motifs, although usually some motifs are much more important than others. And obviously his final point is that these motifs all are relational. It is not the individual that matters, nor is it the objects in themselves. What matters is the fictional character's *relation* to the object. Fiction is not only anthropocentric but subjectivistic. How the world is perceived and how the individual relates to the world is more important and more 'real' than the world itself. Epistemological matters are rarely discussed explicitly in fiction, but in general fiction displays a phenomenological approach to the world and what reality is.

On the other hand, in nonfiction in general and in scientific publications in particular, it is common to deal with just a single topic and the treatment of this topic does not have to be related to humans at all. Of course, there are exceptions; in biographies, memoirs, travel books and personal essays, the topics are almost always related to the author or other persons in the book. However, reading a book about a particular topic, birds, for instance, you are supposed to learn something about birds, but you do not necessarily learn anything about anybody's, not even the author's, *relation* to birds. If the model is applied on a book like this, it is obvious that it should be categorised as 'exterior nature', but humans, not to mention particular individuals, need not to be a part of it as such. Compared to fiction, nonfiction in general is rather objectivistic. It is the topic in itself that matters and that is why the individual's relation to the topic is often ignored.

However, it could be argued that exactly 'exterior nature' is a very comprehensive and possibly a somewhat confusing category in Johansen's interpretation because it does not only include physical nature but also the metaphysical, for example, God. Moreover, Johansen does not distinguish between nature itself and what we as human beings do to this nature when 'things', such as merchandise, are produced, nor are more intangible concepts like 'society' or 'culture' discussed, but just like things, the very content of society and culture is also manmade. Thus, I have divided 'exterior nature' into

three new categories and labeled them myself. For the sake of clarification, a few words have been changed elsewhere in the model, too. The result is the following seven motifs:

*The individual's (or character's) relation to*

- his or her own body
- his or her own mind
- the other, the object(s) for desire
- other human beings
- non-human nature
- things and society and culture at large
- the metaphysical

Now, what happens when this model is applied on the two cases?

### My Beautiful Genome

In library catalogues *My Beautiful Genome* is usually classified as genetics or genomics, concepts that unfortunately are to some extent difficult to fit into the model (which, by the way, is quite an unusual thing). The problem is this: Is the topic simply Lone Frank's own genome, that is, a part of her own body and maybe even her own mind? Is the topic the genomes of human beings in general? If so, the category of 'other human beings' is relevant. Is the topic actually the social regulations of the scientific research and business in genomics, or maybe the 'culture' signifying this particular field? If so, the category of 'society and culture at large' is at stake. Or does the term 'genetics' mean that the topic is also non-human nature, that is, genes of animals? And finally the most important question: Is Frank concerned with these topics in their own right, or is it her own or other individual's *relation* to the topics that really matters?

The answer is that she is concerned with most of it. Being a book about genomics and not genetics on a general level, it is not about non-human nature, but she is certainly writing about humans genomes in general, the social and cultural circumstances are treated both explicitly and implicitly, and she is particularly interested in her own genome, and even more so: Her *relation* to her genome.

At the end of the prologue, outlining her plans for her journey into her own genome, she writes: "Of course, I will ask the experts for advice. Let state-of-the-art scientists interpret the text. But the

most important question I'll have to answer for myself. And that is how it *feels* to have a close encounter with your own DNA – this invisible, digital self that lies curled up like a fetus in every single cell of my body" (Frank, 2010, p. 21; my translation).<sup>1</sup>

Obviously, Frank has two major purposes with her book, and this explains why the text throughout the book time and again switches between more or less objective information on frontline research in genomics and a highly personal account about her encounter with her own DNA and her thoughts and feelings in regard to this new information. That is, one part of the book treats a topic in the traditional nonfictional or even scientific way, while another part exhibits a personal and relational motif just like autobiographies or fiction. This article is not concerned with style, but it can hardly surprise that the treatment of the general topic is factual and not literary, while the personal motif often is treated in scenes and in a significantly more personal and literary language. In other words, she is also switching between 'telling' and 'showing'.

However, the single most interesting point may be that Frank does not stop with the human genomes and her reaction to her own tests, because almost all motifs in the model are present in her book:

- Yes, it is about her relation to her body. Not just the genome in its own right, also what she thinks about her face, her breasts, and so on.
- Yes, it is about her relation to her mind. For instance, what she used to believe in and what she believes in now, and why.
- Yes, it is about her relation to 'the other', particularly her Dad, but to a lesser degree also her Mum, her brother, and her boyfriend.
- Yes, it is about her relations to humanity at large, and it is quite obvious that these relations are often tense.
- And to a lesser degree it is also about her relation to non-human nature (such as her passion for biology) and society and culture at large.

Thus, the only absent motif is her relation to the metaphysical, and overall it is not easy to decide if it is the scientific topic or the abundance of personal motifs that matters the most. It depends on the point-of-view and that may be at least one reason why the book

turned into a bestseller. As noticed above, *My Beautiful Genome* is usually classified as genetics or genomics in library catalogues, but according to the reviewer in *Publishers Weekly*, it is rather “a probing biological memoir” (Oneworld, [n.d.]). Both classifications make sense, but none of them are adequate for the book as a whole, and the point is that it is possible to read it either way.

### Slaughter-bench Dybbøl

As already mentioned, the obvious topic of Buk-Swienty’s *Slaughter-bench Dybbøl* is a particular battle in the war between Prussia and Denmark in 1864. In terms of the model, this topic belongs basically to ‘things and society and culture at large’ – in a historical context, of course. This war has already been treated in numerous other books and to a certain degree also Buk-Swienty addresses traditional issues like the political situation before and after the war, how and why the battle was won by the Prussians, and so on.

However, libraries and archives store surprising amounts of personal accounts about this war and even that particular battle – diaries, letters, memoires, autobiographical novels, and more – and these documents turn out to be just as important as more official and political documents. In the preface to the book, Buk-Swienty reveals that he himself grew up in Sønderborg not far from Dybbøl and in his childhood as well as an adult he has often thought: “Who *were* these men? What did they *really* experience those days in April in 1864? What does it mean to be right in the middle of a battlefield – and to top it all, a battlefield that decisively changed our history?” (Buk-Swienty, 2009, p. 18; my translation). The personal documents serve to answer questions like these; they are tools to get into the minds of historical persons long gone. Actually, this approach is reflected in the very title of the book: “Slaughter-bench Dybbøl” was simply the wording the soldiers used to describe the battle they participated in. In other words, *Slaughter-bench Dybbøl* is not just a history book about the battle on a more or less objective or scientific level, it is just as much about how people living in that time *related* to it.

But the heavy use of personal documents and books also imply that other motifs in the model are touched upon. The account of the German war painter Wilhelm Camphausen’s experiences on the battlefield the day after the battle may serve as an example. Based

on the painter's autobiography the narrative takes off when Camphausen "shivering and hesitating" steps forward to the first dead bodies lying outstretched on the ground. At first he can hardly look at them, but in a short while he is able to meet the challenge.

Surprisingly, I experienced how incredibly fast the feelings of human beings can be blunted faced with the terrible and shocking [...]. Then I took my pencil and started making the first sketches of characteristic groups of dead bodies; by now all my disgust had disappeared. I only noticed the sad mess of limbs as curves and straight lines I should imitate as if I was just sketching a table or a chair. I [...] do not dare to think about how emotionally cold the soldier must be, seeing scenes like these so often.

Finally, he enters other parts of the battlefield while describing the dead bodies in a very detailed, apparently objective, manner (Buk-Swienty, 2009, p. 322; my translations).

These events, as well as Camphausen's thoughts and feelings, have everything to do with the war, of course, but in terms of the model, it is very interesting that Camphausen also relates to his own mind and what his state of mind does to his body. The 'I' is watching the 'me', you might say; he is self-reflexive. Moreover, he also relates to the minds of the soldiers, something he cannot see. Finally, the topic of art is introduced.

Though in some respects this account may be outstanding, it still signifies the approach in the book overall. The most important topics are definitely the war and how different individuals related to it, but as far as the sources allow, it is obvious that Buk-Swienty tries to include other topics and motifs as well. When the model is applied on the text as a whole, it could be argued that the result is as follows:

- No, the characters relation to their own body is hardly there at all. Camphausen is definitely an exception. Since many soldiers lost a limb, this is surprising, but possibly the sources did not include other descriptions of that motif.
- Yes, to a lesser degree some of the characters relate to their own mind.

- Yes, the relation to 'the other', that is, particularly wife and children, is rather prominent in many of the quoted letters.
- Yes, relations to other human beings are frequently mentioned, but actually it is mostly the observers and not the soldiers who state this motif. How the individual soldiers related to other soldiers is hardly to be found.
- Yes, the relation to non-human nature is present. Particularly the weather and even the sound of larks seem to be important.
- Yes, as noticed above, the topic of the individual's relation to 'things and society and culture at large' is one of the two main topics in the book. In terms of the model the other main topic is simply 'things and society and culture at large', in a non-relational way.
- And yes, the metaphysical in the form of God is frequently mentioned, especially in the letters the soldiers write home to their families.

Again only a single motif is absent. In Frank's book, it was the relation to the metaphysical, in Buk-Swienty's book, it is the relation to the body that is (almost) missing.

### Characters, topics and motifs

Now, comparing the two books, it can be concluded that in some respects they are very different. Buk-Swienty, holding a MA in History, writes about a long gone past, while Frank, holding a Ph.D. in Neurobiology, writes about genomics, and she is much more concerned about the present and the future than the past. Also, Frank writes scenes with a lot of dialogue and interior monologue, while the scenes in *Slaughter-bench Dybbøl* lacks those features, more than anything probably because Buk-Swienty is not 'allowed' to do so. Although parts of his book may look like a historical novel, ultimately, it is not fiction. And a final example: While Frank strongly thematizes herself, even exhibits herself and appears to be a very outspoken personality, Buk-Swienty stays humble in the background as far as the narrative goes. When he analyses the events, his own voice is heard, of course, but *Slaughter-bench Dybbøl* is not a personal book like *My Beautiful Genome*.

However, the two books also share many characteristics, the most significant being that the main topic is treated from a double

perspective and that both books use nearly every motif in the model. Concerning the first of these issues, both authors are obviously very conscious about what they do. The topics of genomics and the war between Prussia and Denmark in 1864 are treated in their own right in a serious, even academic, manner, but how these topics are or were perceived by particular persons, which feelings they generate, are equally important. In *My Beautiful Genome*, the issue is very much what her personal tests means to Lone Frank, and in *Slaughter-bench Dybbøl*, it is mostly what the battle meant to particular persons a long time ago, but that difference is probably not too important to the reader, because no matter the case it is perfectly possible to think: 'What if it was me?' Exactly this kind of identification was obviously one of Buk-Swienty's purposes with his narrative: "We listen to their thoughts and feelings about participating in the war. And we watch through their eyes and we perceive with their sens-es" (Buk-Swienty, 2009, p. 9; my translation).

Concerning the second issue, the comprehensive use of motifs from the model, it is not evident if this was a conscious choice or not. Maybe it was just something that happened more or less spontaneously, but if so, I think the single most important reason why it happened is in both cases the creation of *rounded characters*. As noticed above, Buk-Swienty is limited by his sources, but obviously he is trying to create as rounded characters as possible and this ambition requires that they relate to different things. If they only relate to one thing – the war, for instance – the characters would be considered 'flat' or 'two-dimensional', and it is difficult for the reader to identify with such characters. And surely the only rounded character in *My Beautiful Genome* is Frank herself, but it is also her relation to the different categories in the model that saves the outcome since all the other characters are rather flat. In other words, there seems to be a strong connection between the use of rounded characters and the use of motifs.

So why did *Slaughter-bench Dybbøl* and *My Beautiful Genome* turn into bestsellers? The question may still be difficult to answer, but I guess it is quite obvious that both cases have at least two main attractions: They offer factual, even scientific, information, and they offer an aesthetical reading experience. However, given that the basic structure of topics and motifs in the two books are very similar, it is also possible to be a little more exact than that: A

topic is treated in its own right just like in other kinds of nonfiction; this topic is perceived by rounded and trustworthy characters, whom the reader can identify with or at least can relate to, just like in fiction; and in order to create these rounded characters, numerous other motifs are stated as well, just like in fiction – and in real life. Apparently, a lot of book customers find this combination attractive.

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## Notes

- 1 The official translation does not stress the scientific aspect quite as much, nor is 'feels' in italics: 'I want to go in search of some answers to these questions, and to try to find the limit to which we're willing to probe our futures – *my* future. I want to know how it feels to have a close encounter with my DNA – this invisible, digital self that lies curled up like a fetus in every single cell of my body" (Frank, 2011, p. 10).

A large, light gray diagonal text "quiet please" is overlaid on a black and white photograph of a person in a suit. A bright green semi-circle is positioned in the bottom right corner, partially obscuring the text.

# take 3

adaptations and remakes

# make 3

Adaptations and remakes across media and cultures

Books, Cinema  
and Television

# Finding the Next Book to Read in a Universe of Bestsellers, Blockbusters, and Spin-Offs

**Margaret Mackey**

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## Abstract

Finding a good book to read is part of the challenge of becoming a successful reader. Bestseller lists offer shortcuts, and many readers take advantage of the power to select from a radically smaller pool of possibilities. This article explores aspects of the impact of bestsellers and their adaptations and spin-offs on people's reading choices. It draws the examples of one children's and one adult blockbuster title (*Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and *Fifty Shades of Grey*). Both these titles made their first appearance online, and, in each case, the printed novel is an early adaptation of the original text. Further adaptations, spin, publicity, and a variety of media tie-ins complicate the ways in which readers may approach these titles. Such proliferation also affects the potential strategies readers may acquire for selecting books, in ways that may be either helpful or restrictive.

**Keywords** bestsellers, adaptations, selection, recreational reading, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

## Introduction

What can *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* tell us about readers? These two examples of enormous bestsellers, one for children and one for adults raise many lively questions. Instead of discussing the market implications or the textual details of these materials, however, I am going to address the perspective of readers trying to find another book to read.

That readerly question – what can I read now? – is one of the great divides between active and dormant or non-readers. We often confuse two separate categories: on the one hand, genuinely weak or indifferent readers, and, on the other hand, people who can read perfectly well and enjoy it when they find a book that suits them but who have very limited selection skills.

For many such people, those who are willing to read but do not have much luck finding good reading material, more choice is very often not the answer. Too much choice can be overwhelming rather than appealing.

There are too many books published for any reader even to imagine, as illustrated by one recent example from one country, the United States: in 2011, somewhere between 325,000 and 350,000 books were published there (Price, 2012, n.pag.) The number of self-published books is rising exponentially (from 235,000 titles reported by Bowker in 2011 to 391,000 in 2012, for example [Cader, 2013, n.pag.]). Keeping up is impossible in this scenario. And many, many readers will find themselves overwhelmed by even a tiny fraction of such enormous output.

In such a situation – and, remember, this is a situation that repeats itself annually! – the bestseller list becomes a very helpful selection tool. It reduces, say, 328,259 possible titles down to just a handful. And these are titles that are vouched for already by large numbers of other people; what Valerie Bang-Jensen calls the “social contagion” (2010, 169) of other readers’ choices is a potent reading energizer in itself. These are the books that other people will be talking about. A choice that was simply impossible to make suddenly becomes very manageable indeed.

Of course, bestselling books do not simply remain as books. They are adapted into movies. They provide the base plot of game worlds. They feed fan fiction. They supply fodder for countless articles, interviews, reviews, commentaries, and critiques, on paper,

online, on television and radio. The title that was so promising to the reader in its very singularity proliferates in many different formats, raising new kinds of selection questions along the way.

It is these issues that I will explore further in this article: selection, singularity, proliferation, adaptation, and repetition, all in the context of bestsellers, blockbusters, and their many, many spin-offs – and all through the lens of reader behavior.

### One text, many re-workings

I want to begin with that idea of the singular text and its reworkings – and the implications for reader behaviors. Even a single bestseller title offers readers different ways of thinking about their reading priorities.

#### The linear approach

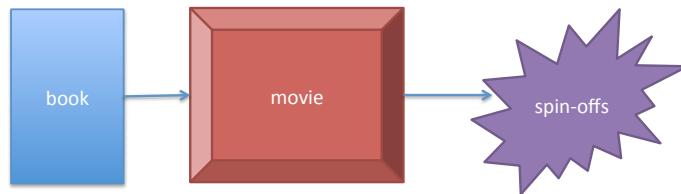
One option is to consider the originating text as the work of art and every subsequent adaptation as a dilution, a watering down, a weakening of the artistic value of the original. Some variation of this approach is often the default thinking even of people who assume they have more nuanced attitudes. It is certainly often the stance of large numbers of young people; over twenty-plus years of working with youthful readers and viewers, I have heard many, many variations of the statement that the first text to be produced or published is the “true” version, against which all other variants must be judged.

We may learnedly write off this attitude as a kind of fidelity fallacy, but its potency in the world is very strong. Many young people have rules for themselves, that they must read the book before they allow themselves to go see the movie, for example; I have interviewed numerous teens and adults who take this idea as a mantra for organizing their aesthetic experiences. Every experience after the initial encounter is comparative, so they select their initial encounter by paying attention to the sequence of initial publication and production, even when the first instantiation of a story does not appeal to them.

This purist approach to the multiplication of texts across a large range of media offers its advocates some relatively simple strategies for managing their media lives. You start with the original and keep moving through different layers of adaptation, stopping when

you feel you are getting too far away from the pure gold of the first text in the sequence. Thus, you might read the book, watch the movie, listen to the soundtrack, and maybe take a look at a trailer for the video game. You might glance at a couple of websites relating to the movie, or you might post a comment on the book on your own site at Library Thing or Goodreads. But you know when the mix is getting too thin for your own taste, and you are not interested in pursuing the text into, say, the regions of fan fiction. It is a relatively linear approach, with many built-in safety rails. It may radically simplify selection considerations. You can pick your title, go

## The default singular schema



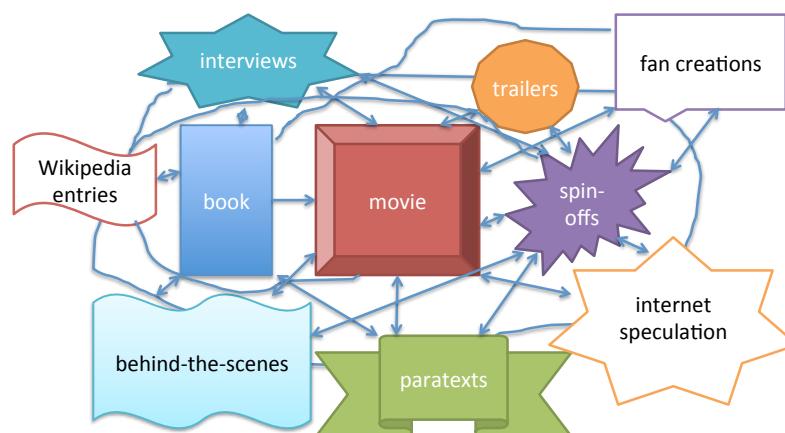
as far as you choose, and stop when this mix becomes too thin for your taste. One title can last a long time.

### The paratextual route

That is one paradigm. In his work on paratexts, Jonathan Gray (2010) offers a very different perspective on the multiplicity of texts available to us. A paratext is the apparatus that stands between a text and its audience: book cover, title, illustration, blurb, recommendation, author biography, and the like. Gray also includes the full machinery of advertisements, trailers, reviews, and the like in his definition. More often than not, he says, by the time we approach a text itself, we have already moved through a huge range of framing devices that shape how we see the story world before we ever set an imaginary “foot” inside its fictional doors. Gray’s aesthetic world is a very long way from linear. It is convoluted and

elaborate, winding back on itself in ornate ways. In Gray's account of the universe, you might see some references in the article that a new movie is to be made, you could read interviews with the actors and producers, perhaps you see television shows passing judgment on the movie, you possibly catch online trailers and maybe some behind-the-scenes insights on a website, and you know so much about this film before you ever lay eyes on it yourself that you could keep up an acceptable conversation about it even if you never bothered with the main event at all. Even if, at this point, you rush to read the book before you go to the movie theatre, so that you can start with the "original" version, your approach to the text has been shaped and framed by the marketing devices. The pure and unme-

## The paratext hypothesis



diated encounter with the originating text that is at the heart of my first description proves, by this accounting, to be completely impossible, a Platonic figment of wishful imagination.

### The culture of "unfinish"

You do not have to take sides between these clashing accounts to know that most of us move among the many possibilities surrounding a major new story with a sophisticated set of tacit skills for noticing and also for ignoring. The old idea that a narrative has a

beginning, a middle, and an end does not seem to be as straightforward as it once was.

Peter Lunenfeld speaks of a contemporary culture of “unfinish.” Between sequels, and spin-offs, and re-workings and remediation, and marketing opportunities, and fan fiction, and parodies, and memes, and ever-emerging online role-playing games, and so forth, he suggests, “Technology and popular culture propel us toward a state of unfinish in which the story is never over, and the limits of what constitutes the story proper are never to be as clear again” (2000, 14).

### **Whatever happened to the spin-off?**

Even in a world of paratextual sophistication, the spin-off does not have a good reputation. To many people, the spin-off is all about money; it exploits a popular title or character even as it moves further and further from the original.

It is not necessary to be a cultural throwback or a reader reactionary to subscribe to this rejection of the spin-off. Many schools continue to teach a version of the linear model of fidelity and diminishment that supports this kind of cultural interpretation.

This description, needless to say, is an over-simplification, but I think it is important not to underestimate its potency, even in 2013. At the same time, of course, the facts of contemporary bestseller-dom contradict it in a variety of ways, and it will not take us many examples to establish the complex nature of spinning off in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Some of the most sensationally successful titles demonstrate how Lunenfeld’s pairing of “technology and popular culture” is entwined in ways that exploit the affordances of new technological means to create popular texts that break all previous sales and readership records in developing new forms of franchise fiction. The original and the spin-off co-exist in complex relationships.

To pursue these issues, let us look at two very famous examples of blockbuster bestsellers and their associated spin-offs. Let us consider some of the intricate ways in which they enter and influence our cultural lives, and affect our behavior as readers. The *Wimpy Kid* series is aimed at children, and the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy is adult in content and marketing. This unlikely pair has points in common, among them the fact that, in each case, the novel itself is a spin-off of a prior text.

### The Wimpy Kid

In November 2013, Jeff Kinney published his eighth *Wimpy Kid* novel for children: *Hard Luck*. It had an initial print run of 800,000 copies, Penguin's biggest ever first printing of a children's book. By the November 2013 publication date, the publisher said the complete series surpassed 115 million books in print (Page, 2013, n.pag.)

*The Third Wheel*, the seventh title published a year earlier, instantly rose to the top of bestseller lists at the *New York Times* and Amazon, selling a million copies in the first five weeks ("New Wimpy Kid," 2012, n.pag.) It has been translated into 35 languages and published in more than 36 countries (MacDonald, 2012, n.pag.)

Such numbers make a powerful case that the paper book is alive and thriving. Yet the genesis of the *Wimpy Kid* saga is complex, and in fact a strong argument can be made that the book is actually the spin-off product in this franchise.

In May 2004, Jeff Kinney began to publish *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* on the educational website Funbrain.com, a site organized by the Family Education Network of the giant publishing conglomerate Pearson. The printed book version was not published until April 2007. During those three intervening years, the web version of the story was viewed by 20 million unique online readers. In 2007, as the advertising for the book began to heat up, the *Wimpy Kid* website was averaging 70,000 readers every day ([http://www.abramsbooks.com/Books/Diary\\_of\\_a\\_Wimpy\\_Kid-978081099316.html](http://www.abramsbooks.com/Books/Diary_of_a_Wimpy_Kid-978081099316.html), accessed December 22, 2012).

The online story and the first printed story contain many similarities but of course each version offers the story to the reader in a different way. The online version is easy to read in random order; an organizing calendar makes it simple to dip into the entry at any given date. Once you are "inside" a day, however, you must follow the linear arrows "next" or "back." And, as has been noted by many observers, there are numerous distractions on the screen: buttons to link to other sites, advertisements for the book versions, the ever-present invitation of the calendar to hop around the year.

The book version of this story, the spin-off that appeared long after the *Diary* had proved its popularity online, shares the format of the eponymous diary itself, a format that the original screen version merely simulates. It is easily open to browsing and skimming

in ways that are more laborious in the online edition (but, no matter how you flick through or turn back, the year remains secure in its linear order because the binding keeps the page order static). The text and illustrations of the diary, as seen online, are the main content of the book and the only content on most of its pages; no distractions, advertisements, invitations elsewhere. And of course, you hold a book in your hands differently from the way you establish tactile connection with a computer. Even where the contents are close to identical, the reading experience is different.

*Diary of a Wimpy Kid* has been called a comic, a graphic novel, and an illustrated novel, but its cartoon images of stick figures suggest a simplicity that is highly deceptive. With its unreliable narrator, Greg Heffley, and the subtle contradictions sometimes posed between the words and the pictures, the story is not as artlessly straightforward as it first appears. And any notion of an uncomplicated fictional world evaporates in the face of the multiverse of spin-offs that comprise the complete fictional territory of the Wimpy Kid.

To take a bite-sized sample, let us explore one paratext: the contents of a two-minute trailer for the first movie of the *Wimpy Kid* series. A major feature of this trailer is the mutation of cartoon characters into actors; we see the stick people images of all the major characters in the story; in a single fade, each morphs into the figure of the relevant actor. The trailer refers twice to the book (not at all to the website) and in its final reference (complete with visual of the book cover) to *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, we hear a voice-over from Greg, protesting, “It’s a journal” – so even the very title is suspect (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ZVEIgPeDCE>, accessed January 19, 2013).

The poster for the movie also emphasizes the links between stick boy and acting boy (the actor’s real-life body has a stick-person shadow), and reproduces the ontological joke about the title in a new format: “It’s not a diary, it’s a movie.”

The movie itself expands on this joke of the cartoon associations. Flashes to the lined pages of the diary and the stick figure drawings underline key moments of the live action drama. Director Thor Freudenthal explains this artistic decision in terms of audience sophistication:

“Kids today are just inundated with different forms of media all day long, and I felt the movie had to acknowledge that fact,” Freudenthal says. That often means that the cartoons suddenly fill the entire screen, offering a familiar touchstone to fans of books that combine words with cartooning (della Cava, 2010, 03d).

The official *Wimpy Kid* website offers a fairly standard potpourri of discourses and invitations: news items, author tour dates, book advertisements, an invitation to a cartooning class with Jeff Kinney, and a strip of buttons linking to “Fun Stuff” – links that further lead in a variety of directions.

For example, “Wimpy Kid Stuff” is a collection of relatively standard-issue commodities – it is slightly interesting to see the stick figures take on three dimensions as figurines, but there is little new or intriguing for sale on this branch of the official website.

The Poptropica link is a very different story. Kinney is one of the creators of this website, and he describes it as “a really immersive world where kids could come in and they could play as a character in a story.” The site, he says, merges “great storytelling with a truly interactive experience.” It is “a giant virtual world” with many islands, each featuring a different quest. Perhaps most tellingly, Kinney says, “In Poptropica, there’s a beginning, a middle, but the story never ends” – a concept that Peter Lunenfeld would recognize (all quotes from *Jeff Kinney Talks about Poptropica*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fXnz13p966Q>, accessed December 22, 2012).

The YouTube video from which these quotes were taken was posted on May 26, 2011, and it claims 150 million users for the Poptropica website, a number that will only have increased since that time. How many of these users are the audience the site actually addresses, children between 6 and 15, is not clear.

*Wimpy Wonderland* is a Poptropica game set in a snow day, with schools closed because of bad weather. All Greg’s friends are out having fun, but Greg’s little brother Manny is lost, and players of the game are invited to help Greg find him.

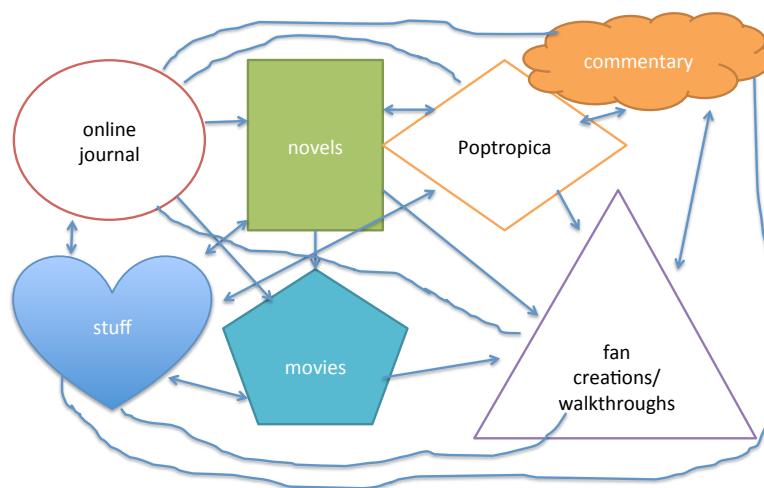
Young players take on the challenge of *Wimpy Wonderland*, and then they create spin-offs of their own in the form of walkthroughs for other players. This particular phenomenon seems to have peaked in 2012; Google featured 83,000 walkthroughs when I

checked at the end of 2012, but in late 2013 that number had shrunk to 28,400 – still a significant tally. No doubt many of them are duplicates or dead ends, but the residue, even of the lower number, offers very many options to lead a player through all the intricacies of the game. Undoubtedly some are plants, placed online by the Poptropica marketers, but many are created by enthusiastic amateurs.

This level of user participation is a bonus spin-off for Poptropica and Jeff Kinney. The game was initially launched as part of the publicity campaign for the first *Wimpy Kid* movie ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poptropica#Wimpy\\_Wonderland](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poptropica#Wimpy_Wonderland), accessed December 22, 2012).

So *Wimpy Wonderland*, by Jonathan Gray's definition, was an online paratext marketing the movie version of the book that was created out of the online story, and the walkthroughs offer one level more of spin (and a different kind of "unfinish"). It is a high-

### A very partial schema of the *Wimpy Kid* universe



ly complex universe, yet young readers traverse it with ease, and indeed create and post both videos and extended prose instructions in order to demonstrate their expertise in managing this multi-layered world.

### Fifty Shades of Grey

*Fifty Shades of Grey* shares at least two traits with *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*: startling sales figures and an online origin. Again, the paper novel is a spin-off, and the fictional beginnings are complex.

Famously, this erotic trilogy began life as a fan fiction based on *Twilight* (Meyer, 2005), and the relationship between the two main characters, initially at least, arose out of a different story. Just as children would find different ways of reading *Wimpy Kid* diary entries according to whether they appear on the screen or the page, so adults would approach Ana and Christian's relationship differently if they were reading it in light of the aura cast by *Twilight*'s Bella and Edward. Readers may well disagree about how completely the second story fledged itself out of the nest of the first; and, of course, readers of the first series may regard the sado-masochistic account of Ana and Christian as an unacceptable contamination of their beloved vampire story. Creating a new world out of the bones of an existing one, even before the metastatic sales levels are taken into account, is another kind of "unfinish," one that has always been privately possible but that takes on a whole new dimension in the Internet age.

The book first appeared as a self-published e-book. Initially, the title is thought to have benefited from being an e-publication, since readers could discreetly carry it around with them without public embarrassment. But once it appeared in paper format in early 2012, followed by two sequels, it became clear that embarrassment was not a hindrance to many readers. Between early April and May 22, 2012, the paper books sold 10 million copies, and the daily sales figures were equally staggering: "Vintage announced Tuesday reprints of the books have exceeded 900,000 copies in a single day - that includes paperbacks, e-books and audio books" (Mattson, 2012, n.pag.)

*Fifty Shades of Grey* then moved into the next stage of blockbuster-dom with rampant speculation, bets, and online votes concerning the actors who would play the main roles in the upcoming movie. The paratextual impact was considerable, as potential viewers get to imagine the story through the prism of different casts.

The fallout from the *Fifty Shades* phenomenon is far from completed. Some of the spin-off marketing, though not what we normally associate with famous books, is entirely predictable: the pur-

veyors of sex toys everywhere are grasping at lucrative links and there are many erotic websites claiming a connection to the series.

A more interesting spin-off absorbs centuries of other connotations, and colonizes an intriguing list of classical music as part of its lascivious universe. The CD soundtrack for *Fifty Shades of Grey* comprises a playlist of serious music:

1. Lakmé (Act I): Flower Duet (Mady Mesplé, Danielle Millet)
2. Bach: Adagio from Concerto #3 BWV 974 (Alexandre Tharaud)
3. Villa-Lobos: Bachianas Brasilerias #5 - Cantilena (Barbara Hendricks)
4. Verdi: La Traviata Prelude (Riccardo Muti / Philharmonia Orchestra)
5. Pachelbel: Canon in D (Sir Neville Marriner / Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields)
6. Tallis: Spem in Alium (The Tallis Scholars)
7. Chopin: Prelude #4 in E minor, Largo (Samson François)
8. Rachmaninoff: Piano Concerto #2 - Adagio Sostenuto (Cecile Ousset, Sir Simon Rattle / CBSO)
9. Vaughan Williams: Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis (Sir Adrian Boult / LPO)
10. Canteloube: Chants d'auvergne, Bailero (Arleen Auger)
11. Chopin: Nocturne #1 in B-flat minor (Samson François)
12. Faure: Requiem - In Paradisum (Choir of King's College, Cambridge / Stephen Cleobury)
13. Bach: Goldberg Variation - Aria (Maria Tipo)
14. Debussy: La Fille Aux Cheveux de Lin (Moura Lympany)
15. Bach: Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring (Alexis Weissenberg) ("Fifty Shades of Grey Classical Album," 2012)

Some of these pieces are favourites of mine, and I am not sure they are improved by thinking of them as music to spank by. But the impact (so to speak!) of the books' citation of works of music like these is clear: "EMI Classics, which is releasing the album, credits the books with the recent Classical music sales boost, citing Thomas Tallis' 16th century 'Spem in Alium' topping British charts after being referenced in *Fifty Shades*" (O'Connell, 2012, n.pag.).

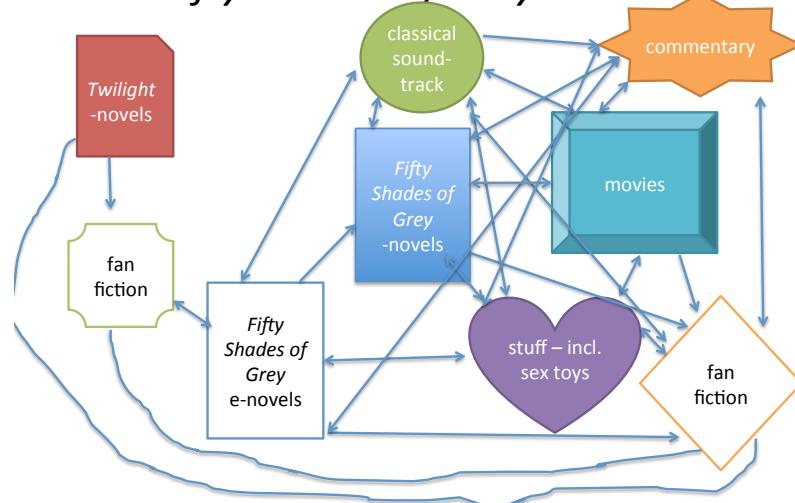
Peter Lunenfeld, in his fascinating discussion of the aesthetic of unfinish, does not address the issue of recorded music. He credits

the “universal solvent of the digital” (2000, 14) with much of the open-endedness of our culture. It seems to me, however, that as soon as recorded music became available, it transformed the finite nature of music performance once and forever. If I own a recording, there is no limit to the number of times I can listen to “Spem in Alium;” in that way, it does enter the zone of “unfinish.” If I decide to associate it with *Fifty Shades of Grey*, then that story also takes on some of this aspect of perpetual repetition – and perhaps does so in the way hinted at by Gill Sutherland:

and not just because it reminds us that super saucy episode in *Shades* when Ana has a blindfold on and Master Grey does some uber rude things to her (well, OK, that might have given us a frisson of associated delight) (2012, n.pag.)

Whether or not such “frissons” are inexhaustible, the music can certainly be recycled much more readily than a complete reading

### A very partial schema of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* universe



of the books, and if it evokes a kind of shorthand emotional and sexual punch (again, so to speak!), it extends the life cycle of the story’s immediate effects.

Turning full circle, there are hundreds of fan fictions, telling and re-telling this story.

## The impact on readers

In a world where spin-offs tidily diminish in importance the further away they get from the original, readers' selection choices and reading attitudes are relatively clear-cut. In a world marked by ever-circling reiterations, returns, and retellings, where a classical reference in a spin-off novel can send a piece of sixteenth-century religious music to the top of the British charts in 2012, the ways in which readers may approach their cultural options become more complex. My very incomplete graphics of *The Wimpy Kid* world and the *Fifty Shades* universe take on even more complexity if you consider every element in the drawing as a portal of entry for some readers.

In such a multivariate world, teaching only the straight-line, Puritanical, each-adaptation-is-a-diminution attitude does readers no favours at all. If the great untaught reading skill is the capacity to select, to find the right book, the contemporary proliferation of so many circuitous options may be as confusing as it is helpful.

In part, the mind-blowing numbers associated with *The Wimpy Kid* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* are a reflection of the fact that many people do not have more subtle selection skills than to read what everyone else is reading. In making this comment, I am not saying that these novels and other number 1 titles do not have something to offer to a very wide range of readers; clearly they do. But I think it is also true that many people enjoy reading bestsellers in part because they do actually like to read and a headline-hitting title that is being read by all their friends and relations provides a shortcut to finding the next book that will offer genuine reading pleasure.

People also, of course, like to talk about what they are reading, and again the bestselling novel provides shortcuts; you can be sure that other people will be reading the same book and be happy to talk about it.

Nevertheless, educators do their students a huge injustice if they do not equip them with more autonomous and sophisticated tools for locating titles that will suit their reading needs and pleasures. Some of the traditional routes to finding new books to read are shrinking or fading away altogether; in many newspapers, for example, the review section is a shadow of its former self if it still exists at all. On the positive side, however, informal readers' advisory activities online have taken off and there are many ways in

which readers can make contact with other readers and share their tastes and their recommendations.

Learning how to select from a culture of “unfinish,” in a world where a story may be endlessly recycled, is an art in itself. With more and more choices, selection may become broader; but it may also become narrower when it is so easy to cling on to something you already know, through ever more reiterations.

There used to be a simple dichotomy between intensive and extensive reading: intensive reading involved the repeated perusal of a few important texts: the Bible is the most commonly cited example; for English-speaking readers, *Pilgrim’s Progress* by John Bunyan would have provided another option. Extensive reading is commonly thought to have opened up with the invention of the printing press, the development of cheap publications, the democratization of education, and so forth. But it is possible to have a reading life intensively focused on, say, *The Wimpy Kid*, without doing very much actual repeat reading.

In a world of unfinish, extensive and intensive reading take on a new guise. In their most extreme versions, each offers a troubling caricature of a shallow reader. Extensive reading may involve skimming the web, hyperlinking across the surface, never being able to retrace your travels, contributing to an ongoing state of continuous partial attention. The extensive reader may be seen as a gadfly. But intensive reading in a digital age may also be extreme, with the reader circling the inexhaustible text world of a single title and becoming expert in one fictional universe, mastering reiterations and reworkings and commentaries and fanfics without ever moving on; such a reader might be perceived as obsessive. But both proclivities may sometimes simply represent the default results of poorly developed selection skills.

I do not want to denigrate either extreme surfing or intense focus on a single textual universe. On the other hand, I do not want to romanticize behaviors that may actually represent only the *least worst* option at the selector’s disposal. We need to consider the issues of selecting from abundance. With so many entry points, how do we learn to direct our attention most productively? What maps and aids may help us find our way in this ever-proliferating world? If we find ourselves mired in one of the options I caricatured, how do we learn to move on from massive investment in a single text

once we finally reach the point of exhausting it? Alternatively, how do we learn to settle when we are used to flitting?

One way of describing book selection processes is to say that they help us to dispose our reading attention in productive ways. We all know that our attention is easily distracted or consumed by the latest, brightest headline. Reading the bestseller may be the path of least resistance; at best, our reading attention may be more shaped and framed by commercial paratexts than we are happy to concede.

The decline of bookstores (Vinjamuri, 2013, n.pag.) and the threats to the collections budgets of public libraries (Coffman, 2013, n.pag.) mean that readers make less use of the kind of information gained by physically handling a book. A Literacy Trust study of British youth presented statistics of a drop in children's leisure reading, and stated that 35% of boys questioned said, "I cannot find things to read that interest me" (Bury, 2013, n.pag.) Such a statement indicates that "finding" is at least part of the "reading" problem.

Young people are shifting at least some of their attention to mobile platforms and apps. An American study by Nielson also found a rise in the number of occasional and non-readers among children under 17, and added:

The research shows that children's reading is being affected by alternative activities, such as playing games, watching videos on websites like YouTube, and texting. During the past year, children's access to tablets more than doubled over the previous year. The devices are being used for a range of activities, but reading is considered one of its least important uses (Farrington, 2013, n.pag.)

At the same time, a different American poll sponsored by *USA Today* and the website bookish.com found that owning an e-reader can lead to increased reading: "35% of those with reading devices say they're reading more books since they got their reading devices" (Minzesheimer, 2013, n.pag.) Yet e-book growth is slowing (Jones, 2013, n.pag.)

In short, we are in a situation of such ongoing flux that it is different to make many hard-and-fast predictions. Regardless of technological, social, and cultural changes, however, we know that

readers will stop reading if there is nothing interesting for them to read. Selection skills continue to be very significant.

### Issues of attention in times of “unfinish”

Cathy N. Davidson of Duke University has taken a serious interest in the subject of attention, how we are learning more about the mechanisms that make it function and how we need to learn to dispose our attention in the Internet age. In her intriguing book *Now You See It* (2011), she provides a checklist for 21<sup>st</sup> century literacies that has some useful things to say. Her complete list is 17 items long and is very well worth reading, but for my purposes at this point, I will focus on the first four entries, which she adapted from the work of Howard Rheingold. And rather than expound on these four qualities in detail, I will relate them directly back to the intricate world of bestsellers, blockbusters, spin-offs, and the challenges of selection.

Here are Davidson and Rheingold’s top four considerations:

- Attention: What are the new ways that we pay attention in a digital era? How do we need to change our concepts and practices of attention for a new era? How do we learn and *practice* new forms of attention in a digital age?
- Participation: How do we encourage meaningful interaction and participation in a digital age? How can the Internet be useful on a cultural, social, or civic level?
- Collaboration: Collaboration can simply reconfirm consensus, acting more as peer pressure than a lever to truly original thinking. [We need to cultivate] the methodology of “collaboration by difference” to inspire meaningful ways of working together.
- Network Awareness: How can we thrive as creative individuals and at the same time understand our contribution within a network of others? How do we gain a sense of what that extended network is and what it can do? (297)

Attention, participation, collaboration, and network awareness all have roles to play in the reception of *The Wimpy Kid* and *Fifty Shades of Grey*, even if they function in non-linear ways (attention to the Tallis Scholars singing “Spem in Alium” as a kind of soundtrack for abuse was not part of anybody’s cultural algorithm until E.L. James

put it in the spotlight, an enterprising recording company followed up, and a huge version of networked awareness did the rest).

It is easy to see mass phenomena, of which *The Wimpy Kid* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* are such stunning exemplars, as everywhere and amorphous and actually kind of simple in their vastness and ubiquity. But the routes into and out of these fictional worlds are many and various. The responses of readers are complex – shaped by an enormous commercial apparatus, intertwined with the reactions of other readers, and still deeply personal. The literate affordances of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, to which I have so briefly alluded, make the whole situation radically more complicated. Within a vast and complicated surround of paratexts, the spin-off begets the bestseller, the blockbuster begets the spin-off, and large numbers of people pay attention, participate in the phenomenon, collaborate in responding (think of all those *Wimpy Wonderland* walkthroughs), and throw up an enormous grid of networked awareness.

It is easy to find responses that denigrate *The Wimpy Kid* as a comic-book cop-out that distracts kids from better reading, or that dismiss *Fifty Shades of Grey* as badly written and unerotic soft porn. You do not even have to disagree with these views to find the massively popular phenomena associated with these titles to be fascinatingly intricate and textured. Something very intriguing is going on in these cases of mass enthusiasm. We need to explore what is happening with all the subtlety at our disposal – and making the best use we can of our own tools of attention, participation, collaboration, and networked awareness. It is important to address the full complexity of the circulation and re-circulation of these mass materials.

At the same time, we should think about developing selection skills that are not dependent on the reductivism of bestseller lists, even as platforms shift and change, and hype seems ever more powerful. Respecting mass choices but not being confined to them requires walking a fine line, but it is an important space to find.

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# Tent-Poles of the Bestseller

How Cross-media Storytelling can spin off  
a Mainstream Bestseller

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## Abstract

This article proposes a framework for understanding and analysing how the passive audience of a media event turns into active stakeholders. The starting point is the cross-media content quadrant (Jensen and Vistisen, 2012), which shows how the producer's control is distributed on social media platforms, while storytelling evolves around a tent-pole, for example, a bestseller or blockbuster. To further explain how the audience engages, a three-step rhetoric model largely based on Bitzer (1998) and Tolkien (1971) is developed and explained.

**Keywords** cross media, tent pole, fan fiction, cross media content quadrant.

## Background

The article draws on the study of several fan fiction sites (fanfiction.net, adultfanfiction.net, archiveofourown.org and livejournal.com) and related social media platforms (Twitter and tumblr) since 2011

with the BBC television series 'Sherlock' as its fulcrum. The methods employed to collect data were mainly virtual ethnography (Boyd, 2008; Hine, 2003) and autoethnography (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011). The autoethnographic part of the research is conducted by reading, commenting, reviewing, and creating fan art as well as writing fan fiction. At the same time, the development of a given fandom is followed by logging the numbers of stories written in relevant fandoms (the top ten television series on fanfiction.net, as well as the top two book titles); and migration from one fandom to another is looked upon by following writers (their relevancy is determined through popularity [hits/story] and own preferences) as well as following several bloggers on tumblr.

The notion of the tent-pole is defined by '[o]ne big media experience that is successive enough to support a lot of other related media experiences' (Davidson, et al., 2010). Here, the tent-pole is further defined as the narrative which sets a co-creation process (Prahala and Ramaswamy, 2000) into motion, rising a new tent-pole to create a space in which new narratives as well as transmedia storytelling evolves both on the institutional level (for example, broadcasting companies) and the individual level (people on social media platforms).

While the audience has been seen as more or less passive recipients of the media content, using its narratives as a way of coping with daily life by identifying with the personal problems of the audience shown in Byerly and Ross (2006), this article proposes a view of the audience as co-creators, in which traumas and problems are processed by actively creating their own narratives, as also argued by, among others, Zubernis and Larsen (2012), Gray, et al. (2007), Jenkins (2006; 2008), and Lunenfeld (2000). Earlier findings on the audience as co-creators can be found in Jensen and Vistisen (2012), and Jensen (forthcoming).

### **From fan fiction to mainstream**

When *Fifty Shades of Grey* became the 'best-selling book of all time' (Singh, 2012), it marked one of the first examples of a new media phenomenon. The book was originally written as a fan fiction of the *Twilight* series, a bestseller and blockbuster in its own right. *Fifty Shades* is the most prominent story to date which made the transition from the fan fiction world into mainstream publishing. It will not be the last since several

publishers have begun to search fan fiction sites for the next *Fifty Shades* (Morrison, 2012).

But fan fiction and *Fifty Shades of Grey* did not evolve in a vacuum. As a media phenomenon, the transition from fan fiction to mainstream publishing is the logical closing of a circle, starting with the ‘original’ story, here being *Twilight*, crossing media platforms by the help of an audience turned producer and finally developing into a new ‘original’ story, a new tent-pole to start the process all over. In other words, the audience turns into producers through cross-media, generating a spin-off tent-pole as a basis of a new blockbuster/bestseller phenomenon.

The cross-media content quadrant (CCQ) gives one possible clarification of the elements involved in the process as well as the amount of control and loss of control necessary to start and continue the transition.

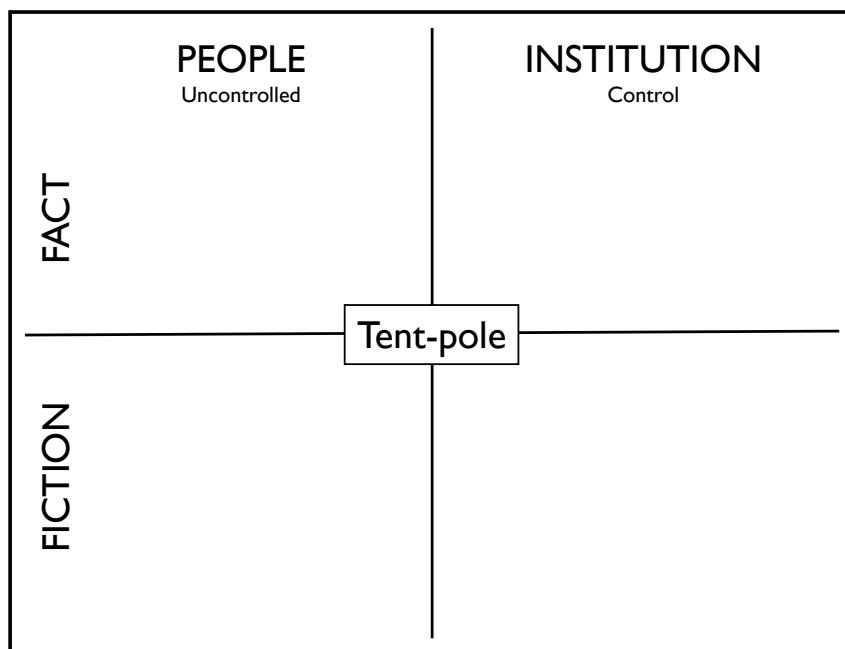


Figure 1: Cross-media Content Quadrant

The tent-pole in the middle of the model is the story. This is either a book, a movie, a television series, a poem or any other imaginable tale, which catches the imagination of the audience - as long as it can be defined as the primary focal point of the story universe (Davidson, et al., 2010). The tent-pole is necessary to start the process of transitioning the audience into producers. To create a tent-

pole, a certain amount of control is needed to ensure that the story is believable, with a possibility to cross over into the realm of sub-creation (Tolkien, 1971).

In the first place, this is ensured by the control exercised by the institution developing and distributing the original story. This institution can be a broadcasting company like BBC, a publishing company like Random House, or any given media company. Controlling the distribution and initial development of a given story guarantees both a return-on-investment, which, in turn, secures the development of new stories as well as a certain continuity of the storyline, and the distribution of the original material on different media platforms.

The institutional part of the model is divided into two quadrants: the factual and the fictional. Facts like airing dates, interviews with the actors, news from the set are to be found in the first. All of this is tightly monitored and controlled by the institution itself. The second quadrant develops the story further in a trans-media environment. The fictional quadrant makes it possible to develop the characters, explain potential plot holes, or lets the audience gain insight into the characters' thought processes. Even if the institution sometimes allows the audience to partake actively, for example, by way of surveys or through gamification, the control is kept by the institution, limiting possible interaction or relying on censorship.

If the tent-pole elicits a certain amount of engagement from the audience, the two quadrants under 'people' will come into use. Typically, the audience, people, will react to a given movie, television series, or the like by tweeting about it, blogging or sending updates about it. This will at first typically still be some kind of factual information about the tent-pole in question. Thus, the tweets will tell about the actors, airing time, and upcoming interviews. This part of audience participation is uncontrolled by the institution. The institution can ask the audience to not share certain information, which happened in relation to an impending leak from the Doctor Who set (BBC, 2013), but the institution cannot draw on laws or regulations other than what applies to copyright. If the audience wants to share information about upcoming set-locations or when the next episode will probably air, the institution cannot prohibit this.

While Facebook demands the use of the real name of the user, Twitter has the option to create an alias, thus giving the user ano-

nymity. With the possibility of anonymity, the user gets freedom to create outside of the boundaries of the institutionalised laws and regulations, at least to a certain degree. Thus, the alias can be used to create profiles which act like the characters in the tent-pole, giving rise to on-line role-playing games.

With this, the audience turns into co-creators, and the products become part of the fourth quadrant, the people-fiction. This quadrant is defined by the fictitious character of the products which, by and large, are created by the audience now turned producers. The social media platforms in use are typically tumblr, deviantart, fan-fiction, archiveofourown, and the like. These platforms allow ali-

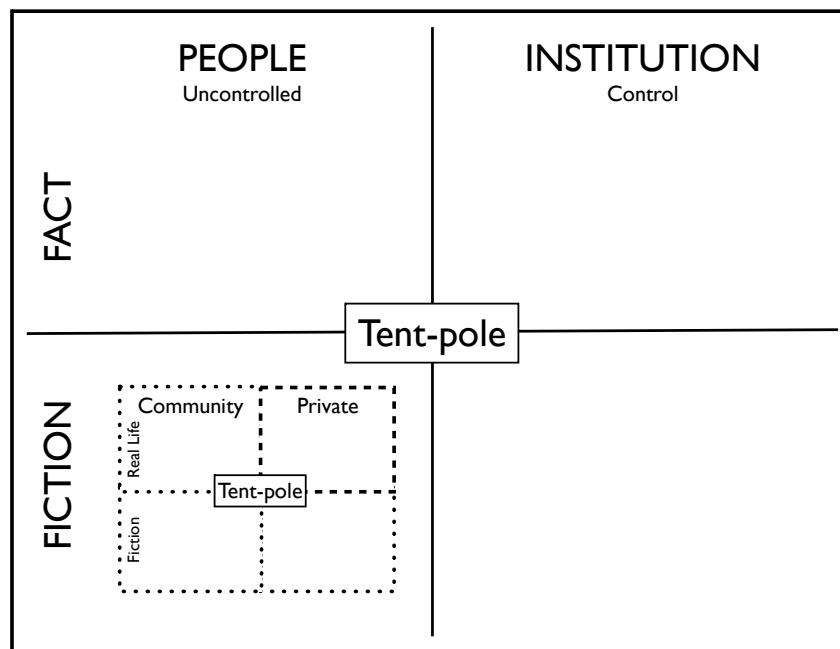


Figure 2: CCG model including the emerging tent-pole

ases, multiple profiles, as well as the creation of material which originates from a given tent-pole. Some of the platforms also allow links between the platforms, enabling the producers to co-create and mash-up different media types in the fan products. The quadrant is likewise defined by the relative freedom to use and re-use material from the original tent-pole, as well as create original material by using the tent-pole as a starting point.

While the people-factual quadrant can give rise to new fan groups and organisations, like Sherlockology in the case of the BBC's TV-series 'Sherlock' (Sherlockology), which started with a website and a Twitter-account, the people-fiction quadrant can give rise to new tent-poles, which in turn create a fan group or fan works in their own right. Such a tent-pole would give rise to a smaller cross-media content quadrant with slightly different quadrants. This tent-pole would create a private and a community space. The private quadrants would contain a private-fiction quadrant, in which the creator has her stories or fan works. Once published, the creator has a minimum of control over her products since they can be redistributed, downloaded, copied, and so on by other users of the different platforms. Some control is issued by some platforms, like [adultfanfiction.net](http://adultfanfiction.net) which does not allow plagiarism (adultfanfiction). Aside from that, the creator has to rely on other users conduct in regard to her creations and on the communities help if her copyright is violated.

The other quadrant under the private column is real life. The term 'real life' does not entirely cover the concept of this quadrant since its intention is to describe the relations between creators, readers, and users on the different platforms involved. Those relations are maintained outside of the actual tent-pole and can stretch beyond the virtual spaces on the Internet. This quadrant can re-enter the 'people fact' quadrant, for example, when the community decides to organise a meet-up or a conference. Likewise, the 'community-real life' quadrant can stay inside the 'people-fiction' quadrant, for example, when the community decides to organise an auction of fan fiction authors, who will be prompted by the winner of the auction to write a certain story.

The 'community fiction' quadrant consists of the communities reactions to a given fan work. This includes commenting, reviewing, recommending, as well as co-creating by co-writing, translating, beta-ing, podificing, or developing videos (see also, for instance, Karpovich, 2006). In this way the community reiterates the process which happened to the original tent-pole.

The tent-pole is embedded in the 'people fiction' quadrant, creating its own 'tent inside the greater tent of the original tent-pole'. Thus the process of creating a new tent-pole is not an instance of osmosis, that is, the content of the embedded tent-pole 'leaking'

through to the original tent-pole. The embedded tent-pole might be recognised by the producers or institution of the original tent-pole, but will not be put to use in the original tent-pole.

Yet, it is possible for a new tent-pole to emerge inside the 'people fiction' quadrant and through the support and feedback from the community enable the producer of the embedded tent-pole to transition into a new tent-pole. An example of this is *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which originated in the fan fiction universe of *Twilight*, where the author received feedback and support enabling her to publish the story as an original novel, which by now has created its own fan base including fan fiction and the like. The cross-media content quadrant shows how material is spread from the original tent-pole through different media platforms, creating new fan groups, organisations, and new stories and fan works in its wake. Ultimately giving rise to new original stories, which start the process all over again.

### The three-step rhetoric model

But why does an audience turn into co-creators, subsequently producers and stakeholders? The following three-step rhetoric model shows one possible explanation by taking the rhetorical situation as described by Bitzer (1998) and the notion of sub-creation and Secondary World as explained Tolkien (1971) into account.

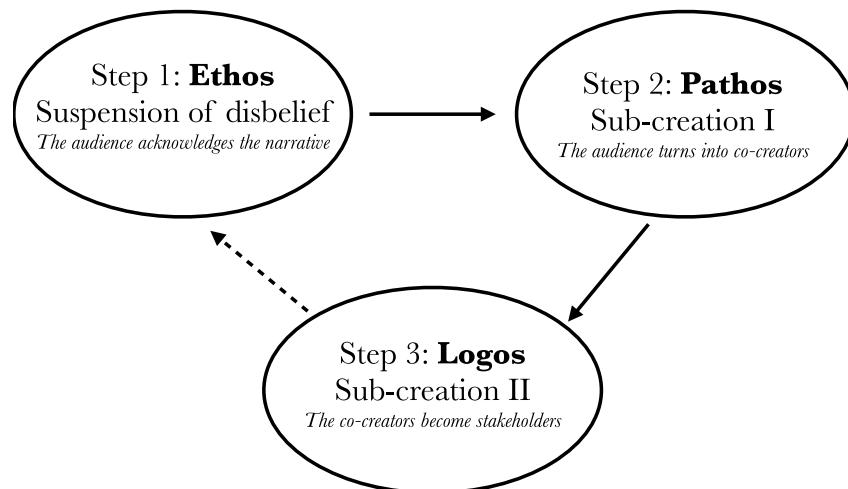


Figure 3: Three-step rhetoric model

The first step in the model takes its starting point in the suspension of disbelief on the part of the audience. To accomplish this, the mediated story must be able to draw the audience into the universe the story's producer has created. 'Suspension of disbelief' is the first step since the audience must allow itself to believe in the premises of the set-up. If this is accomplished, the audience lends the story ethos and credibility.

So far, the audience stays passive, merely acknowledging the story and its contents, and viewing or reading it. To take the next step, the audience must become co-creators. Taking Bitzer's rhetorical situation into account, a rhetorical situation demands a certain kind of response, rhetoric in itself always being persuasive (Bitzer, 1998, p. 219). Bitzer defines three contingencies for a rhetorical situation: exigence as an 'imperfection in the situation marked by urgency' (Bitzer, p. 220). It is something 'waiting to be done' (Bitzer, p. 220) and thus persuades the audience as the second step of the rhetorical situation into action. On account of the constraints (Bitzer, p. 222) given by the situation, the audience is urged to respond if the orator, entering the rhetorical situation, is able to present and create a discourse which is fitting to the presented situation. The constraints of the rhetorical situation ensure an appropriate action from the audience as well as the orator.

The discourse is presented as the tent-pole, the story, which is the fulcrum of the situation, in the three-step rhetoric model. Exigence should persuade the audience into engaging with the story. Fan fiction is thus just one way of expressing how the story could take different turns, how the characters could develop, or how any possible plot hole could be explained. It is the narration and its characters' relationship which prompts the audience into action, into co-creation.

Step two is entitled 'Pathos' since the transition from audience into co-creator involves a passion for the material presented in the tent-pole. This passion changes the passive audience into active co-creators, who try to express their passion through various means of products. The world-building which takes place through the widening of the original tent-pole means that the co-creator is involved in a form of sub-creation as described by Tolkien. He explains sub-creation to be more than merely a '*literary belief*' in the story (Tolkien, 1971, p. 36, original emphasis). Sub-creation is seen as a

'Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he [the story-maker] relates is "true": it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed' (Tolkien, p. 36).

By using the tent-pole as the origin for a fan work, the co-creator has to work inside given parameters. The worst review any fan fiction can receive is that 'the character is behaving out-of-character'. Changing Sherlock Holmes into a were-wolf, a vampire or zombie can be accomplished, as long as the world-building is credible and Sherlock Holmes is still in character, still believable as the original character displayed in the television series.

The passion arises because the co-creator sees the story as a secondary world in which she is able to express her feelings, her ideas, her traumas, and other elements of her life. If the 'magic' is broken, if the co-creator feels cheated by the producers or by the actors, the passion changes into more than just disbelief or disappointment (Zubernis and Larsen, 2012). With the rise of social media, the passion then turns into hatred and 'shit-storms', giving voice to disappointed fans that feel bereft of 'their' creations. Thus, the producer of a tent-pole always walks a fine line between giving the audience material to engage in without disappointing and creating new incentives to actively partake in the fandom and helping to spread material and passion for the tent-pole.

The problem of this passion is further intensified in the third step, entitled 'Logos'. As soon as the co-creator creates and publishes her product, she becomes a stakeholder in the original tent-pole. By publishing her creation, by becoming part of the surroundings of the original tent-pole and going public anonymously, she wants the tent-pole and her own product to succeed. Only the continued passion for the original tent-pole makes this possible, until the co-creator becomes the producer in her own right. When she publishes her first original story in an official institution, she herself tries to create an original tent-pole, leaving the first tent-pole behind - and probably tries to distance herself as far as possible from the original tent-pole. And the whole journey starts all over again, with a new set of audience, which has to suspend its disbelief to be able to give the story credibility.

## Conclusion

The abovementioned models show one of the ways the how and the why of the transition of a passive audience into active co-creators can take place. They also show how little control the producers of the original tent-pole have over the development of the story through the different contexts of social media. The producers must walk the fine line between passion and hate on behalf of their consumers to ensure a willing co-creation and through this a further dissemination of the original material. However, when balanced and nurtured the right way, these fan-created tent-poles, which draw new audiences and create new spaces for storytelling, can in the end produce high quality material, and even a spin-off to become a new mainstream blockbuster phenomenon in its own rights. This conclusion raises new research questions for further studies, especially with respect to how the fine balance between control, ownership, and collaboration can be managed when an institutional producer wants to spin off the user-generated content into a mainstream media.

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# “It’s such a wonderful world to inhabit”

Spatiality, Worldness and the Fantasy Genre

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## Abstract

The fantasy genre has proven to be extremely durable in creating blockbuster successes spanning mutable media platforms, such as books, film, television series, tabletop, and especially massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs). Currently 85% of all MMORPGs are situated in clearly defined fantasy universes (Van Geel, 2012). In other words: The fantasy genre seems to lend itself perfectly to the creation and distribution of vast, game-centric worlds in a way no other genres can. Why is that? This article explores the close connection between the fantasy genre and computer games, arguing that the fantasy genre's specific 'mode of function' is the utilization of space and spatiality thus creating specific kinds of spatial experiences for its users, be that readers, viewers, or gamers. Based on empirical data from focus group interviews with *World of Warcraft*-gamers, the article develops the concept of worldness as a means for opening up for an experiential, phenomenological understanding of player experience. I discuss how this way of framing a core quality of the fantasy genre (of world-building) functions across single media platforms and aims to grasp a specific fantasy experience of being in the world.

**Keywords** Fantasy genre, computer games, spatiality, worldness, player experience.

## Introduction

Successful computer games have shown to be unique in not just attracting players but also keeping them engaged over long periods of time. This is especially true when it comes to MMORPGs, where player engagement is expressed through various metaphors such as “moving into” and “losing oneself in” a virtual online world. Such metaphors are contributing to an understanding of computer games as a powerful affective medium and players as solely interesting in a media specific perspective, in-game. But if we zoom out and adopt a wide-angle genre optics, we see connections to other types of media also. I conducted three focus group interviews with twelve different European players of *World of Warcraft* (WoW). I was originally interested in the players experiences of and engagement in WoW as a fantasy genre game, but during the interviews, it became increasingly clear that their interest in the fantasy genre in no way was limited to the game itself: All informants had a thorough knowledge of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy either through Tolkien’s books, Jackson’s films, or both; they were interested in and sought the fantasy genre in books and films; they all had a gaming history involving old fantasy situated games, most of them had experience with tabletop games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*; they participated in Renaissance Fairs, Medieval re-enactments, and live action role playing (larp)s)<sup>1</sup> (Toft-Nielsen, 2012). The fantasy genre clearly formed a wider genre field of interest they all participate in and engage with through a wide array of different media. In the following, I focus on the transmedial qualities inherent in the fantasy genre, specifically in relation to space and spatiality and draw on WoW players’ reception of the game world in order to better elucidate the complex interactions between the fantasy genre, its media specific actualization in a MMORPG and the players’ experiences in engaging with this.

## Investigating player experiences

World of Warcraft thrusts you into a central role of an ever-changing story. You and your friends will be active

participants in events that are steeped in the rich lore of this fantasy universe. (Blizzard, 2012)

WoW is the largest Western MMORPG with over eight million paying players and belongs to a type of game that primarily is defined by its persistent game world: A virtual meeting place where thousands of players interact with another and with the game mechanics in a world that is “on” at all times. The actions and events in the game continue in a cumulative way, allowing players to develop a character and influence the online game space. Even though this game space is constituted by rules, structure, or systems, the *raison d'être* of games lies in our enjoyment in playing them, mastering them, and experiencing them. But investigating player experience is not an easy task, which the game studies literature clearly shows. Player experience has been gauged in terms of different *motivations* for playing (Bartle, 1996; Yee, 2006), *flow* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991; Chen, 2007), *presence* (Lombard, 1997), *enjoyment* (Klimmt, 2003), and plain *fun* (Koster, 2005). One central aspect in regard to player experience is the enjoyment of engaging with and being drawn into a virtual (game) world, which is often referred to as *immersion* (Calleja, 2011; Murray, 1997). Ermi and Mäyrä studied immersion in computer games and proposed a model describing how it is experienced while people are playing. More concretely, they understand immersion in terms of three different components: *Sensory immersion* (the extent to which the surface features of a game have a perceptual impact on the user), *challenge-based immersion* (the cognitive and motor aspects of the game that are needed to meet the challenges the game poses), and finally *imaginative immersion* which is “[a] dimension of game experience in which one becomes absorbed with the stories and the world” (Ermi and Mäyrä, 2005, p. 8). The imaginative immersion will in the following serve as a stepping-stone for investigating the transmedial experiential potentials of the fantasy genre.

### Fantasy and its mode of function

Fantasy is a notoriously elusive genre to define, and the term has been applied to basically any form of literature deviating from a realistic mode of representation, such as myths, legends, fairy tales, utopian allegories, science fiction, horror, and magical realism. Throughout genre history, fantasy has been theorized as both a

modality (Jackson, 1988), an impulse (Hume, 1984), formulaic fiction (Clute and Grant, 1997), and a trans-generic quality (Rabkin, 1976). Such an essentialist genre approach to fantasy, through a taxonomic definition, is problematic. But instead of asking what fantasy is, it is more fruitful to ask what fantasy does, that is, the *function* of the genre (Miller, 1984; Neale, 1980).

In 1893, the Scottish author George MacDonald wrote an introductory essay to an American version of his fairy tales, formulating what was to become one of the most fundamental principles of fantasy – the fabrication of a made-up world with its own system of internally consistent laws: “The natural world has its laws, and no man must interfere with them in the way of presentment any more than in the way of use; but they nevertheless may suggest laws of another kind, and man may, if he pleases, invent a little world of his own, with its own laws” (Boyer and Zahorski, 1984, p. 15). The Oxford philologist J.R.R. Tolkien’s epic fantasy *The Lord of the Rings* (1954) also owed much of its appeal to its logical rigor and empirical detail. Its maps, glossaries, chronologies, and other scholarly elements fostered an analytical mindset as well as a sense of wonder. His essay “On Fairy-Stories” is a manifesto for the modern practice of creating and inhabiting fantasy worlds. Fantasy is a rational activity, Tolkien insisted; “it does not either blunt the appetite for, nor obscure the perception of, scientific verity. On the contrary. The keener and the clearer is the reason, the better fantasy it will make” (Tolkien and Tolkien, 1983, p. 144). In the essay, Tolkien explicitly criticized Coleridge’s well-known formulation of how fantasy is apprehended as “the willing suspension of disbelief.” Coleridge’s view reflects the early nineteenth-century ambivalence about the powers and the pleasures of the imagination. He did not perceive that an individual could wholeheartedly believe in a fantasy world while at the same time being aware that it was fictional, a view that Tolkien deemed an inadequate description of a reader’s deep emotional and intellectual investment in worlds of fantasy. Building on both Coleridge and MacDonald, Tolkien refined and combined their ideas, applying them to the building of imaginary worlds. Tolkien insists that an imaginary world – what he calls the Secondary World – should be presented as true and exist in its own terms:

What really happens is that the story-maker becomes a successful ‘sub-creator’. He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is ‘true’: it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. (Tolkien and Tolkien, 1983, p. 132)

Sub-creation is Tolkien’s term for the building of an imaginary world through the use and recombining of existing concepts and ideas, so that they fit together in a coherent way, which ultimately makes us believe in the world being build.<sup>2</sup> Tolkien was not concerned with suspension of disbelief, but rather with active belief in a secondary world as if it was real, belief in the completeness and consistency of a given world, through the “inner consistency of reality.” This permits an emotional immersion in, and rational reflection on an imaginary world, a self-coherent and fully realized fantasy world that delights without deluding. Tolkien’s essay is an argument for a *poetics of space*, of creating a believable fantasy world. Such fully realized fantasy worlds can be viewed as a series of imaginative landscapes, spatially connected. Fantasy worlds, regardless of medium, can be mapped out. This spatial, geographical, consistent, and rule-bound nature of fantasy worlds are key features when the genre becomes playable and interactive in computer games.

### **Spatiality and world-building in computer games**

Space has been a central issue for the study of digital media since the introduction of cyberspace (Benedikt, 1992) and Multi-User Dungeons (Anders, 1999). Murray argues that spatiality is one of the core features of digital media (Murray, 1997) and Aarseth points to space when defining computer games: “Computer games are essentially concerned with spatial representation and negotiation” (Aarseth, 2001, p. 154). Fantasy creates worlds that can be explored by its users and this creates a strong interface between the genre of fantasy and the medium of computer games. Jenkins has argued that computer games, through “environmental storytelling,” can be understood as spatial stories, which unfold as the player moves through the game world (Jenkins, 2004). The central importance of both spatiality and the construction of a world are defining features in both the fantasy

genre and computer games. In an MMORPG like *WoW*, this world-building has a double function as both a frame and a space.

*WoW*’s success as a fantasy situated computer game does not originate from a literary ur-text whose narrative plot is played out (such as *The Lord of the Rings*), but rather a specific game world, which has been established through the real time strategy-games (*Warcraft I – III*), and later both consolidated and expanded upon through a wide range of other media products such as novels, comic books, trading card games, user-driven wikis, fan fiction, and the four expansions to *WoW* itself. Here the single text is replaced by a commonly-branded *storyworld* with a number of different media-specific points of entry (Jenkins, 2007), which has resulted in a fully described, detailed, and coherent universe with wars and conflicts. As it were with Tolkien, the world-building of *WoW* depends on the same ongoing compliance with a number of already established laws of the world. It becomes clear that these detailed, rule-bound worlds are formidable *playable* worlds. In computer games, all these elements become quantified and explicated through the game code. Hidden underneath the interface and the aesthetics of the virtual worlds, is the code, which in turn embodies the very rules and laws that are constitutive of and structure the game. The world-building of the fantasy genre has a double binding in both space and rules, which makes this genre perfectly suited for creating a playable world. The specific experience this affords the users of a given fantasy universe, I call *worldness*. Where world-building is concerned with the ontology of a fantasy world, worldness is a phenomenological and experiential quality of the former.

### **Worldness and the fantasy genre matrix**

Within computer game studies, worldness is one of the most central and at the same time most elusive qualities of virtual worlds:

The term is used to express a sense of coherence, completeness, and consistency within the world’s environment, aesthetics, and rules. To maintain a sense of worldness, a virtual world must create an aesthetic [...] a syntax, a vocabulary, and a framework that is extensible, sustainable, and robust. Every accessible location in the

world must be accounted for in order to create the sense of contiguous, explorable space. (Pearce, 2009, p. 20)

Worldness has commonly been theorized as a specific *textual* quality of virtual worlds (Krzywinska, 2008; Klastrup, 2009; Pearce, 2009), as “a number of distinguishing features of its universe” (Klastrup and Tosca, 2004, p. 1), but that runs the risk of mistaking it for elements of world-building. Instead I understand it as a quality of the users’ reception of the world, of being in the world, as an *experiential* quality. The experience of worldness is dependent on many aspects, of which I highlight two: The first one is the way the inner consistency of reality of a given world is constructed, that is the use and recombination of existing genre concepts and ideas in the world-building. Here game designers become sub-creators in charge of producing a consistent secondary world, a game world, players inhabit, as a kind of “coconspiracy between designers and players” (Pearce, 2009, p. 20). The second aspect of worldness concerns the individual player’s expectations and previous experiences: These expectations draw on the complete mental image and knowledge of a given world we as users have – our ‘repertoire’ of the world. Repertoire is here understood as “the familiar territory within the text” (Iser, 1987, p. 6) – like genres help shape our understanding of a specific text by transcending the individual text to a larger and boarder interpretative framework. This larger framework, which shapes our experience of worldness, forms what I call the *fantasy genre matrix*. The term ‘matrix’ means both ‘mold’ and ‘uterus’ and is used to illustrate a dynamic, interpretative framework, in which our knowledge of, commitment to, and understanding of past fantasy universes and texts operate as interpretative patterns in our meeting with new fantasy texts – not just as mental, cognitive schemas but one that also entails a sensory and emotional dimension. The fantasy genre matrix is a way of framing the different experiences the fantasy genre can offer its users, across different media, creating “a complex of interrelated meanings which its readers tend to interpret as a discrete, unified whole” (Couldry, 2000, pp. 70-71). In the following, we focus our attention on how WoW-players articulate their engagement in the game and in the overall fantasy genre through different aspects of worldness.

## Worldness articulated

The following empirical data is from three focus group interviews with a total of 12 WoW-players, six men and six women, age 21 to 40 years, from different European countries (Denmark, England, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Sweden). They all played on the same European server, in the same guild, and all were experienced players, participating in basically the same in-game activities. Since my project was exploratory, focus groups were chosen, as this form of interview is open for the informants own experiences and understandings (Halkier, 2008).

One of the first questions I asked was how important the fantasy genre is when choosing a book, a film or a computer game. 32-year-old Lykke answered: "It's such a wonderful world to inhabit." 21-year-old Tina backs her up by saying: "There *has* to be those creatures and those different landscapes... there just *has* to be." Both women are highlighting the spatial dimension (world, landscapes) as key in their experience of the genre. 30-year-old Martin supports their observations: "What makes it interesting is really the universe you are in... if it's just some random universe and you just have to go out and kill monsters, it's not interesting anymore... then there's no adventure. [...] And the adventure is only there because the back-story, the creation of the world and everything is in place." Martin here echoes Tolkien's notion of sub-creation; the cosmological anchoring of the universe, where every element fits within a larger mythological frame. Martin's polar opposite is 32-year-old Thomas: "*World of Warcraft* is... basically like pen & paper... it's *Dungeons & Dragons*. You have a sword, there's a mission, go kill stuff. It's hack'n'slash, straight forward." Thomas' comment clearly illustrates that worldness for him is pure game mechanics, hack'n'slash.<sup>3</sup> Game theorist Jesper Juul has argued that games consist of a level of rules and a level of fiction. The individual player can, depending on experience and preferences, choose to engage with the game as a fiction, a world, or simply as a concretization of the rules of the game (Juul, 2005). Where Martin engages the game as a world, as spatiality, Thomas is purely interested in the game as game mechanics, as rules – both of which are constitutive aspects of the fantasy genre.

The different media involved in a given experience also informs worldness. Mathias and Samuel, both 25, discuss the remediation of

already established fantasy worlds. They know WoW through the three RTS games, cartoons, board games, and novels, and these different media offer a particular kind of experience, as Samuel tells us in special regard to the novels: “[T]hey give you a nice background on... yeah like the quests in-game [...] Yeah if you know he's whole background and stuff, its... yeah quite cool.” This importance of a *storyworld* anchoring the gaming experience is an example of what Jenkins calls an “evocative narrative” of the narrative architecture of game space: “In the case of evoked narrative spatial design can either enhance our sense of immersion within a familiar world or communicate a fresh perspective on that world through the altering of established details” (Jenkins, 2004, p. 129). It is important to note that the experience of worldness is not necessarily limited to the specific universe or the specific fantasy franchise, but can operate at a genetic level – as a fantasy genre matrix: “[T]ake the whole Ulduar team in the north. It's full of references to Norse mythology, like Freya and Mimeron,” 34-year-old Dennis explains. Mathias likes to discover the different intertextual references to other fantasy franchises embedded in WoW, whereby the game as a fantasy text is interwoven with other fantasy worlds, fantasy tropes, and symbols. This creates a depth engagement with the game and the world of the game, which extends beyond the game itself, as well as enriching the experience of playing the game. The total experience of worldness is forming an *experiential emergence*, a surplus value to the particular world, by anchoring it in the wider and surrounding fantasy genre matrix. Martin described how a reference in WoW to a game he formerly played could re-activate the experience he formerly had with that game and that feeling would feed back into the current experience. This leads us to the finale example, which is worldness as kind of a personal and unique “lived space” (Lefebvre, 2005) for Mathias, based on emotions and memories:

I really like to go revisiting old places in the game. Like places that are very remote from where you normally go and you are the only one there. There is this one place, in Dun Morogh, where you can get up on top of Ironforge and there is this airfield up there! The place is just beautiful, I love the snowy landscape with the mountains and all [...] it's really amazing. It's like a small place only a

small handful of people have visited and you feel kinda... special being able to go there, you know. I think I still have the screenshots on my Flickr account of that place, it's really amazing.

What we see here is a transformation of the very game as space to the game as *place*. While space is an abstract collection of points separated by certain distances, place is a concrete and unique environment, with which people develop emotional bonds; while space is an empty container for discrete objects, infinite, and timeless, place is a network of interrelated things, finite, and shaped by history. In short, while space is a mathematical concept, place is a social concept (Tuan, 1997). The game space here becomes a place, personal and emotional and filled with memories. The emotional dimension is an important part of the fantasy genre matrix and can help us understand why this matrix can span so many single franchises: Because it draws on and works through our gaming memories and the previous engagement we have with the fantasy genre.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have explored the close relationship between the genre of fantasy and the medium of computer games and the effect of this in regards to the player's experience of engaging with playable fantasy worlds. Fantasy and computer games share functional elements: the main function of fantasy is the utilization of space and spatiality through world-building, whereby the success of the genre lies in the sub-creation of a world, where laws are established and followed throughout. This in turn has the ability to create a fantasy world, we as users, as players can enter. The spatial, geographical dimension of fantasy worlds and the self-coherent, consistent nature of them are key components when the genre becomes interactive and playable. The detailed, rule-based and internally consistent nature of fantasy makes for formidable playable worlds, due to the fact that the inner workings of fantasy are imbedded, quantified, and explicated thorough the game code. It makes for a fully-fledged world we can experience from within, through performance and agency, which makes for a particular kind of user experiences, when engaging with such fantasy worlds. In discussing the concept of worldness, I suggest we think of it in a new way. Whereas the con-

cept traditionally has been understood as text, structure, or consistency of rules, I conceptualize it as an experiential quality of engaging with and inhabiting a virtual world regardless of medium. I have shown how players articulate worldness as mythology, setting, generic intertext, and emotional gaming memories, and how they experience it across different media and across single franchises, anchoring the single fantasy world in a much larger and surrounding fantasy genre matrix it intersects with. The concepts of *worldness* and the *fantasy genre matrix* can help us frame some of the different experiences players have when engaging with and inhabiting vast online game worlds, and how these connects to other worlds in a wide array of media. All these different elements, emotions, and understandings inform each other and intersect to form a complete experience of worldness, a wonderful world to inhabit and to revisit.

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## Notes

- 1 Larp (live action role-playing) is a role-playing game where the participants physically act out the actions of their characters, often in costumes within a fictional setting represented by the real world.
- 2 Subcreation is the ability to create a world within a creation: Since human beings are created in the image of God, they also have the desire to create, and this kind of creation Tolkien named “subcreation.” Subcreation is opposed to *ex nihilo* (from nothing) creation that only God is capable of, thereby limiting human creation to the pre-existing concepts found in God’s creation.

- 3 Hack’n’slash is a mode of play that emphasizes combat and where the game play consists of killing monsters and moving through a dungeon, collecting treasures. This kind of game play has its roots in pen & paper RPGs such as *Dungeons & Dragons*.

# Blockbuster Remakes

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## Abstract

Like the term “blockbuster,” the phrase “blockbuster remake” can mean different things. Typically, blockbuster remake is an industrial term, one that refers to the production of large-scale movies adapted from previously filmed properties. In this definition, modest (cult) properties – such as, *Planet of the Apes* (1968, 2001), *King Kong* (1933, 1976, 2005), and *War of the Worlds* (1954, 2005) – are revived through massive production budgets as cultural juggernauts, with strong marketing campaigns and merchandising tie-ins. Less typical is a description that accounts for the way in which a blockbuster movie is *itself* remade: that is, a definition in which a blockbuster becomes the cornerstone for the entire architecture of a *blockbuster cycle*. This article explores the idea of a blockbuster remake, and blockbuster initiated cycle, in and through a case study of the prototype of all modern blockbusters: Steven Spielberg’s *Jaws* (1975). Specifically, the article interrogates the way in which “Bruce,” the great white shark of *Jaws*, initiated a rogue animal cycle consisting in the first instance of the *Jaws* franchise – *Jaws 2* (1978), *Jaws 3-D* (1983) and *Jaws 4: The Revenge* (1987) – and also a series of replicas that included *Grizzly* (1976), *Orca* (1977), and *Piranha* (1978).

**Keywords** Blockbusters, Film remakes, Film cycles, Rogue animal films, *Jaws*.

### **The blockbuster remake**

This essay assesses the contemporary phenomenon of the “blockbuster remake” in and through a case study of the industrial and cultural impact of Steven Spielberg’s blockbuster prototype, *Jaws* (1975), and its various official and unofficial remakings. Although *Jaws* is based on Peter Benchley’s best-selling novel (1975), the film occupies a broader discursive space with a cycle of 1970s disaster movies (and sub-set of “revenge-of-nature” films), and additionally invites comparison with *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (Jack Arnold, 1954), a film that it loosely remakes. Attending in the first instance to blockbuster-scale remakes of existing film properties, the essay is mainly concerned to demonstrate the way in which a blockbuster movie – specifically, *Jaws* – is *itself* remade, not only in its licensed sequel and series – the *Jaws* blockbuster cycle – but also through its many unauthorized replicas and imitations.

Like the term “blockbuster movie” the phrase “blockbuster remake” can mean different things (see, for example, a “multidimensional” definition of blockbusters in Neale, 2001, pp. 47–60). Typically, blockbuster remake is an industrial term, one that refers to the production of large-scale movies adapted and / or remade from previously filmed properties. In a commercial context, blockbuster remakes are *pre-sold* to their audience because viewers are assumed to have some prior experience with, or knowledge of, the original story – an earlier film, literary or other property – before engaging in its particular *re-telling* (see King, 2002, p. 55; Wyatt, 1994, pp. 113–17). Remakes of cult movies such as *King Kong* (Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933; John Guillerman, 1976; Peter Jackson, 2005), *Godzilla* (Ishiro Honda, 1954; Roland Emmerich, 1998), and *Planet of the Apes* (Franklin J. Schaffner, 1968; Tim Burton, 2001) are revived through massive production budgets as cultural juggernauts, with strong marketing campaigns and merchandising tie-ins (see Verevis, 2006, p. 3). Existing properties, such as *Godzilla*, are selected for blockbuster remaking not only because of their cultural circulation, and currency in local and international markets, but also because they are inherently spectacular and so suited to the developing technological powers of digital film. Roland Emmer-

ich's 1998 *Godzilla* remake is said to be as "huge and relentless" as the creature itself (Medhurst, 1998, p. 42), but – as in other instances where a small cult property has been "supersized" – critics lament that the digital makeover immediately departs from the aesthetic and iconographic tradition of Toho Studio's 1954 *Godzilla* and the series of almost 30 films that have followed (see Hollings and Newman, 1998, pp. 20–23). As one reviewer describes it: "The onslaught of exploitative digital effects effectively removes *Godzilla* from the world of juvenile pleasure" (Solman, 1998, p. 27). *Godzilla*'s \$120 million plus budget demands a gargantuan audience, leaving nothing of interest for any age: "[*Godzilla* is] not a good adult movie; it's not a good kid's movie; it's not a good movie; it's not a [even] movie. It's an Event" (Solman, 1998, p. 27).

Like *Godzilla*, Steven Spielberg's massive \$128 million version of *War of the Worlds* (2005) invests in elaborate set pieces and extravagant digital effects to deliver big on spectacle and genre, but it additionally provides a vehicle (and reunion) for Hollywood's number one star (in Tom Cruise) and director (in Steven Spielberg). Spielberg states that his long-term desire to remake *War of the Worlds* was put on hold with the appearance of Emmerich's *Independence Day* (1996) – itself a modernized version of *War of the Worlds* – but then revived in the shadow of September 11. Spielberg says: "post 9/11 it [a *War of the Worlds* remake] began to make more sense to me, that it could be a tremendous emotional story as well as a very entertaining one, and have some kind of current relevance" (Baughan and Sloane, 2005, p. 64). Cruise's conflicted, every-guy lead (Roy Ferrier) and complicated family situation in *War of the Worlds* recalls the nature and milieu of Spielbergian types (Chief Brody from *Jaws*, Roy Neary from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* [1977]), helping establish *War of the Worlds* as a type of authorial remake (see Newman, 2005, p. 83). At the same time, Spielberg's version echoes the dynamics of H.G. Wells's book (which it sometimes closely follows) while making necessary changes (consolidating characters, altering period and location, updating the story's technology) and alluding to Byron Haskin's 1954 film version (see Vest, 2006, pp. 67–71). In these ways, Spielberg "re-imagines" Wells' apocalyptic story – and overt critique of British colonialism – filtering it through auteur themes to reach an American (and international) audience still dealing with the events of September 11, 2001.

## The era of postproduction

If one accepts Thomas Elsaesser's suggestion that global Hollywood has entered a digital or franchise era of *post-production* then a blockbuster – like Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* – can be understood as a “signature product,” an instance in which a pre-existing film or property no longer provides a (closed) narrative model but rather functions as a blueprint for “remediation,” and the blockbuster remake becomes (ideally) a prototype and basis for the generation of serial forms (sequels, series, and cycles), the production of tangible objects (DVDs, soundtracks, and books), and the occasion for commodity experiences (exhibitions, rides, and theme park attractions) (see Elsaesser, 2011, pp. 283–85, Thompson, 2011). Extending this line of argument, one can describe the way in which new millennial filmmakers – not only new Hollywood auteurs such as Spielberg, but *post-auteurs* such as David Fincher, Christopher Nolan, and Steven Soderbergh (in examples such as *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* [2011], *Batman Begins* [2005], *Ocean's Eleven* [2001]) – seek to insert themselves into the innumerable flows of global film and media production, not by setting out to create something that is new (original) but rather by re-making that which exists: revising it, inhabiting it, and *putting it to use* (see Bourriaud, 2002, pp. 13–20). In a global marketplace, available forms are remade and remodeled, and then “serialized” and “multiplied” – in sequels, series, and cycles – across expanding territories and media platforms.

More could be said about blockbuster remakes adapted from previously filmed properties – *Godzilla* and *War of the Worlds*, *King Kong* and *Planet of the Apes* – and about blockbuster themes – “world war, disaster, end of the planet, monster from [beyond], holocaust, death-battle in the galaxy” (Elsaesser, 2011, p. 276). Another approach, however, examines the way in which the blockbuster *itself* is “remade”: that is, those cases in which a blockbuster movie becomes the cornerstone for the entire architecture of a blockbuster cycle. This type of approach attends to the way in which the blockbuster is positioned within a larger marketplace through strategies of *serialization* and *multiplication* (see Lewis, 2001, p. 66). This is not simply the case – as in the example of *Godzilla* – of the movie spinning out through an animated TV series, video games, and additional installments in the Japanese film series – but also the way in which blockbuster remakes – for example, *The Mummy* (Stephen Sommers, 1999;

Karl Freund, 1932) and its sequel, *The Mummy Returns* (Stephen Sommers, 2001) – can be positioned in a series (or *cycle*) that reaches back, through *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (Simon West, 2001) and *Lara Croft: The Cradle of Life* (Jan de Bont, 2003) to *Romancing the Stone* (Robert Zemeckis, 1984) and *Jewel of the Nile* (Lewis Teague, 1985), and then on back to the Indiana Jones series that was initiated by a key blockbuster and genre prototype in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Steven Spielberg, 1981) and culminates in *Indiana Jones and Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008). To consider this phenomenon of blockbuster sequelization it is instructive to turn to the “prototype of all modern blockbusters” (Elsaesser, 2011, p. 278) – that is, *Jaws* – and to the idea of a *blockbuster cycle*.

In *American Film Cycles*, Amanda Ann Klein writes that cycles are like film genres in so far as they are “a series [a set] of films associated with each other through shared images, characters, settings, plots, or themes” (2011, pp. 3–4). But, she adds, “while film genres are primarily defined by the repetition of key images (their semantics) and themes (their syntax), film cycles are primarily defined by how they are used (their pragmatics)” (2011, pp. 3–4). In work foundational to Klein’s, Rick Altman describes the role played by film cycles in the process of genre formation. Taking Hollywood studio era films as his example, Altman argues that by analyzing and imitating their most lucrative films, studios seek to establish cycles (sets) that are proprietary and exploitable, and exclusive to that studio. He writes, when conditions are favorable, single studio cycles can become sharable industry-wide patterns, and play a role in exhibition and reception, but this movement toward genre (sharability) works against the economic interests of the studio that initiated the cycle (1990, pp. 59–61). This description – that cycles are a *set* of films associated with a single studio and which contain easily exploitable characteristics – is consistent with Altman’s assertion that generic claims have never really constituted a substantial portion of studio publicity campaigns (unless seeking to capitalize on another studio’s success), and that this strategy (of exclusivity) continues into the post-classical (or post-*Jaws*) period in and through the legally sanctioned use of proprietary characters and brands that initiate series-oriented production (or franchises) (1990, pp. 115–21).

In his account of a “momentous,” decade-long period of (new) Hollywood filmmaking – the years 1975 to 1985 – Jim Hoberman

begins by describing a particular type of set. He says that June 1975 offered up two “key movies,” each of which in its own way was a “brilliant modification of the current disaster cycle that had its real-world equivalents in Vietnam and Watergate” (1985, p. 35). The first of these – *Nashville* (Robert Altman, 1975) – “exploded” the “multi-star, mounting-doom, intersecting-plot format” of disaster films such as *The Poseidon Adventure* (Ronald Neame, 1972), *Earthquake* (Mark Robson, 1974), and *The Towering Inferno* (John Guillermin, 1974) to elaborate and politicize the cycle. By contrast, the second film – Steven Spielberg’s *Jaws* – “imploded” the disaster film, paring the narrative and effects of the disaster cycle back to “pure mechanism,” and – as the (then) top-grossing movie of all time – ushered in a new era of high concept, Hollywood blockbusters and franchises (Hoberman, 1985, p. 35).

### **The high concept blockbuster**

*Jaws* can be seen as part of a specific set – the disaster movie (genre or cycle) – in which Vietnam and Watergate were the real life disasters (see Heath, 1976; King, 2000, pp. 143–73; Roddick, 1980), but at the same time it is part of a larger set (or periodization): the films of the 1970s. As identified in the sub-title of David Cook’s *Lost Illusions*, *Jaws* is representative of a cycle of American films made “in the shadow of Watergate and Vietnam”: a set of films that is either implicitly or explicitly critical of American society (*Nashville* is probably the limit case), and one that “expresses a fear of powerlessness or loss of control … at a time when leadership at every level of society [was] believed to be wanting” (2000, pp. 251). As described by Cook, the disaster film of the 1970s was a commercial form “rich in possibilities” – one that remained popular throughout the decade (and beyond) and that translated well into international markets – but the cycle “mutated in 1975 (like everything else in American cinema) with the appearance of Universal’s *Jaws*” (2000, pp. 255).

The massive commercial success of *Jaws* is typically attributed to what Universal Studios (and its boss, Lew Wasserman) described as the establishment of a “*Jaws* consciousness” (Cook, 2000, pp. 41–43; Gomery, 2001, pp. 74–77), one facilitated through a saturation advertising campaign and a wide opening pattern of theatrical release (see also Andrews, 1999, p. 114; Schatz, 1993, p. 18). Although *Jaws* was a multi-million dollar summer blockbuster based on Peter

Benchley's best-selling novel, produced at a negative cost of around \$12 million and with a promotional budget of more than \$2.5 million (Cook, 2000, p. 41), the film was distributed and marketed *as if it were* exploitation product: that is, it was "hyped for a quick weekend's profit (*Jaws* grossed \$7.061 million in its opening weekend) and sold on the basis of a single sensational image" (Cook, 2000, p. 43). A film crucial to the blockbuster mentality, *Jaws* is at once a landmark and an *aberration* in the disaster movie cycle because it combines motifs from *several* sets to create a *new kind of disaster film*. *Jaws* is an *event film*, one that associates new types of material with an existing genre: an *action-adventure* film and a *conspiracy thriller*, a film that combines elements of monster movies (with a revenge-of-nature subtext), high gore slasher films, homo-social westerns, and so on (see Cook, 2000, p. 256; Schatz, 1993, p. 18).

*Jaws* is a prototype or blueprint for a new set – the high concept blockbuster or event film. The property was later extended through its 1976 theatrical reissue and several official sequels, and has been maintained (decades beyond its initial release) through such events as the thirtieth anniversary "Jaws Fest" (June 3–5, 2005), during which Martha's Vineyard (location of the original shoot) once again displayed Amity signage and welcomed back over 25 members of the original cast and crew – including Peter Benchley, screenwriter Carl Gottlieb, and production designer Joe Alves – for a weekend of celebrations (Jaws Fest, 2005). The most *immediate* "sequel" to the blockbuster *Jaws* was, however, *The Deep* (Peter Yates, 1977), an action-adventure story about a couple, David Sanders (Nick Nolte) and Gail Berke (Jacqueline Bisset), who – with the help of local expert Romer Treece (Robert Shaw, from *Jaws*) – find Spanish treasure when diving near Bermuda. Based on Peter Benchley's first post-*Jaws* novel, *The Deep* was produced by Peter Guber for a *rival* studio in Columbia Pictures, released to coincide with the paperback publication of the book, and promoted through its merchandising and a \$3 million advertising campaign that featured a vertical poster design (modeled on the one for *Jaws*) which depicted a near naked female diver rising up through deep blue sea toward a horizontal surface logo (see Cook, 2000, pp. 45–46; Combs, 1977, pp. 257–58; Hall and Neale, 2010, p. 213). Although unable to sustain the record breaking (\$8.124 million) takings of its opening long weekend – that is, it was a film whose "marketability" exceeded its "playability"

(Lewis, 2001, p. 69) – the example of *The Deep* nonetheless begins to demonstrate the way in which strategies of serialization position a blockbuster in the marketplace.

### Family resemblances

*Jaws* is an aberration and a mutant: an A-list action-adventure film which goes on to have an enormous impact on films of the later 1970s and beyond (see Cook, 2000, p. 256), but *generically* and *genetically* speaking *Jaws* also has much in common with B-movie sci-fi/horror and exploitation films of the 1950s (see Hunter, 2009). As a Universal Studios picture, *Jaws*' family resemblance leads most directly back to Universal International's 1954 release, *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (and its sequels), and before that to its structural analogue in *King Kong* (Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933) (see Verevis, 2012, p. 85). The identification of *Jaws* as part of a creature-feature or revenge-of-nature cycle (set) is consistent with its position in disaster movie sub-sets – natural attack and ecology of the elements (see Roddick, 1980, pp. 247–49) – and is, for instance, further supported by a *New York Times* review headline – “*Jaws* and *Bug* – The only Difference is the Hype” – which equates Spielberg's film with producer William Castle's low budget swarm film, *Bug* (Jeannot Szwarc, 1975) (see Andrews, 1999, p. 117). This type of remark enables some commentators to draw a line from earlier 1970s “revenge-of-nature” films – titles such as *Frogs* (George McCowan, 1972), *Night of the Lepus* (William F. Claxton, 1972), and *SSSSnake* (Bernard L. Kowalski, 1973) – through *Jaws*, and on to later 1970s films such as *Squirm* (Jeff Lieberman, 1976), *Empire of the Ants* (Bert I. Gordon, 1977), and *Kingdom of the Spiders* (John ‘Bud’ Cardos, 1977) (see Cook, 2000, pp. 255–56; Yacowar, 2003, pp. 277–78). Again, this classification is consistent with disaster cycle sub-sets, but it ignores *Jaws*' co-producer David Brown's comment (itself a part-paraphrase of the prologue to *Creature from the Black Lagoon*) that: “The fear in *Jaws* is [not just] of being eaten.... The phobia [of] *Jaws* ... goes right back to the moment when marine life left the sea and grew legs to stand on land.... It is a very primal fear and you don't need to be in a country with a shark-infested coastline to feel yourself involved in *Jaws*” (qtd. in Andrews, 1999, p. 63).

*Jaws'* most exploitable feature – a primal fear of being eaten – was immediately taken up in *Grizzly* (William Girdler, 1976), a *calque* or

replica which opens with two young female campers eaten alive by a mammoth grizzly bear. For viewers of *Jaws*, the scenario is familiar: Park ranger Michael Kelly (played by Christopher George) is called in to investigate the girls' disappearance and when he discovers the teenagers' half-eaten remains Kelly is joined in his investigation by naturalist Arthur Scott (Richard Jaeckel) who explains that the bear is the survivor of a prehistoric breed. Kelly's endeavor to track and kill the bear is, however, hindered by park supervisor Kittridge (Joe Dorsey), whose refusal to close the park to holiday campers leads to further attacks. One of the first in a set of *rogue animal* films to follow *Jaws*, *Grizzly* was immediately recognized as an obvious rip-off of *Jaws* – "Jaws with Claws" – but was a film whose semantics differed substantially enough from *Jaws* to avoid incurring the wrath of Universal's legal department. A knock-off from Atlanta-based Film Ventures International, a production house which specialized in "cheap, ineptly-executed imitations" of blockbusters (Sege, 1976, p. 18), *Grizzly* was directed by William Girdler, who had already made *Abby* (1974), a version of another graphic and sensationalist blockbuster in *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973). Girdler later extended the "nature-on-the-offensive" theme through *Day of the Animals* (1978), a film in which veteran guide Steve Buckner (Christopher George, again) leads holiday makers through the High Sierra's where they are attacked by wolves, birds of prey, coyotes, rattle snakes, and – again – grizzlies (see Pulleine, 1977, pp. 166–67).

The French-language title for *Jaws* – *Dents de la Mer* (*Teeth of the Sea*) – understands the *Jaws* prototype perfectly, as does Nigel Andrews when he writes: "Sharks have teeth [as] do aliens, gremlins and werewolves.... *Jaws* started it all. The role of teeth as a Vietnam-inspired guerilla war symbolism – deadly weapon concealed behind soft beguiling body part" (1999, pp. 105–07). This comes into sharper focus when *Jaws* is understood as a prototype for a calqued set, the *proprietary series*: *Jaws 2* (Jeannot Szwarc, 1978), *Jaws 3-D* (Joe Alves, 1983) and *Jaws: The Revenge* aka *Jaws 4* (Joseph Sargent, 1987). The first of these – *Jaws 2* – is often described as a *virtual remake* of *Jaws*, a film in which the community of Amity Island is threatened – again – by a great white shark. In the film's climactic sea chase, Chief Martin Brody (Roy Scheider) comes to the rescue of his sons and (once again) dispatches the rogue shark,

this time by causing it to bite through a high voltage underwater cable. However (as noted by reviewers at the time), the fact that the events – the shark attacks – of the first film are acknowledged (sequelized) makes the refusal of Mayor Vaughan (Murray Hamilton) to act on Chief Brody's warning a second time around appear idiotic to a degree that sabotages any real dramatic interest (Pulleine, 1982, p. 330).

As the official sequel to *Jaws*, and (with rentals of \$50.4 million) the fifth-highest grossing film of 1978 (Cook, 2000, p. 501), *Jaws 2* demonstrates that the process of *continuation* (of sequelization) is always also one of *repetition*: of characters and actors, plots and scenarios, themes and styles, and importantly title terms (see Perkins and Verevis, 2012, pp. 2–3). More pointedly, the *Jaws* set (*Jaws 1–4*) constitutes a *restricted blockbuster cycle*: it is “identified with only a single studio” and “retain[s] one or more apparent money-making features from [the] previous success” even if *Jaws 2* and (especially) subsequent sequels immediately fall into so “fully imitable [a] pattern” as to limit the cycle’s commercial sustainability (Altman, 1990, p. 59). *Jaws* and its progeny constitute a set, advertised as a proprietary cycle – the famous tagline for *Jaws 2*: “just when you thought it was safe to go back in the water...” – and based on characters, plot and stars of the blueprint. This set overlaps with a second, *unauthorized set*, one that, “anxious to benefit from the success of the proprietary cycle,” produces similar films – a *generic rogue animal set* – and seeks to advertise or have the films associated with the success of the *Jaws* prototype and set (Altman, 1990, p. 59). The limit case would appear to be *The Last Shark* (*L’Ultimo Squalo*) aka *Great White* (Enzo G. Castellari, 1981), an unacknowledged remake and “carbon copy” of *Jaws* that Universal Studios insisted be withdrawn from theaters for breach of copyright (see Combs, 1982, p. 138). Specifically, the Italian-produced *The Last Shark* follows local shark expert Peter Benton (James Franciscus) and veteran fisherman Ron Hammer (Vic Morrow), whose endeavor to capture a great white shark that is menacing a resort town in a lead up the town’s centennial celebrations is retarded by local politician William Wells (Joshua Sinclair). If *Jaws*’ success for Universal exemplifies the strategy of producing a “signature product” through which to sell a set of films (a *cycle*) and associated merchandise (a *Jaws franchise*), then Utic/ Horizon Productions’ *The Last Shark* exemplifies that instance in

which it is “more lucrative simply to steal a [blockbuster] property already developed by another studio” (Altman, 1990, p. 121).

*The Last Shark* is (arguably) no less a “cod homage” than a film such as *Bacalhau* (Codfish, Adriano Stuart, 1975), the Brazilian movie (hastily released to cash in on the *Jaws* consciousness) which re-imagined police chief Brody (Roy Scheider) as the distinctly unheroic Breda, Matt Hooper (Richard Dreyfus) as the Portuguese oceanographer Matos, and Quint (Robert Shaw) as the Brazilian fisherman Quico, who attempts to kill the codfish with an archaic bow and arrow (see Vieira and Stam, 1985, pp. 31–36). Another was *Tentacles* (Tentacoli, 1976), an American International Pictures-Esse Ci Cinematografica co-production, produced and directed (under the pseudonym Oliver Hellman) by Ovidio G. Assonitis, an exploitation filmmaker who had already made a version of *The Exorcist – Beyond the Door* (*Chi Sei?/Who Are You?* 1974) – and would follow *Tentacles* with another “nature-on-the offensive” production in *Piranha II: The Spawning* (James Cameron, 1981). Variously described as a “post-*Jaws* opus” (Pit, 1977, p. 20) and “devastatingly silly rehash of the *Jaws* formula” (Milne, 1977, p. 129), *Tentacles* follows reporter Ned Turner (John Huston) and marine specialist Will Gleason (Bo Hopkins), who find themselves drawn into the investigation of several mysterious deaths at a Californian harbor-side town. Turner believes the deaths are related to testing for an underwater tunnel and Gleason gradually realizes they are dealing with a giant (prehistoric) octopus that has been disturbed by accelerated underwater tunneling authorized by wealthy industrialist Whitehead (Henry Fonda). Later – in a scene apparently gifted to *Jaws 2* – the octopus attacks a sailing regatta in which Turner’s young nephew is a participant. In the final confrontation, Gleason – whose wife Vicky (Delia Boccardo), along with her sister Judy, husband Don, and friend Chuck have all been taken by the giant octopus – implores his two trained Orcas (killer whales) to help him destroy the monster.

The revenge motif of *Tentacles* is drawn out most evidently in *Jaws 4* – sub-titled, *The Revenge* – in which Chief Brody’s son Sean, the survivor of shark attacks in both *Jaws* and *Jaws 2* – is killed by a great white shark, convincing Chief Brody’s widow Ellen (Lorraine Gary) that the creature has a grudge against her family which leads her finally (like her late husband, and with the help of eldest son, Michael) to confront and kill the shark. The revenge motif is in turn

*inverted* in Dino De Laurentiis' epic production (and follow up to his 1976 *King Kong* remake), *Orca: Killer Whale* (Michael Anderson, 1977), a film headlined in *Variety* as a "pizza version of *Moby Dick* out of *Jaws*" (Murf, 1977, p.18). At the start of *Orca*, Newfoundland boat captain Nolan (Richard Harris) realizes the commercial value of a killer whale when he witnesses one repel a great white shark that threatens the life of a diver. Although marine biologist Rachel Bedrod (Charlotte Rampling) tries to dissuade him, Nolan undertakes to capture a large male orca for a marine park, but in the process Nolan accidentally harpoons its mate, killing both the female and the unborn calf. The male orca recognizes Nolan as the aggressor and begins to seek vengeance, assailing the local fishing village until it can lure Nolan out to sea, and then north where they duel to death on the frozen ocean. *Orca* has been described as "another entry in the *Jaws* stakes," but unlike the low rent examples of *Grizzly* and *The Last Shark*, *Orca* is a film "that attempts to go one better, at least or bigger," not only by centering its action around a killer whale, but also by investing in international stars (Harris, Rampling), a swelling Ennio Morricone soundtrack, and – in and through its portentous prologue – themes that are "both epic and ecological" (Glaessner, 1977, p. 171).

Perhaps the most enduring recalibration of the *Jaws* formula – maybe also the point at which the cycle exhausts (or reinvents) itself – is the example of Roger Corman's (\$676,000) production of *Piranha* (1978), written by John Sayles and directed by Joe Dante (see Alexander, 2010; Warren, 1999). Like *Grizzly*, *Piranha* begins with the investigation of the disappearance of two teenage hikers. Private detective Maggie McKeown (Heather Waxman) enlists recently divorced recluse Paul Grogan (Bradford Dillman) as her guide, and discovers that the teenage couple has gone missing at a disused military facility. At the site, they find Dr Robert Hoak (Kevin McCarthy), who explains that he was employed during the Vietnam War to develop a man-eating strain of piranha to pollute North Vietnam's waterways. It transpires that the fish have been accidentally released into local waters where – in part due to the failure of local officials to heed the warning – the killer fish attack a children's summer camp, which Grogan's own daughter is attending. Like other films in the rogue animal set, *Piranha* shadows the plotline of *Jaws* – investing in a vicious cycle of marauding sea borne creatures, in this case small

and multiple – to deliver another *knowing* entry into the exploitation movie set from which *Jaws* itself emerged. *Piranha* does this right from the outset, with one character referring to the Creature from the Black Lagoon, and another playing a video game labeled “*Jaws*.” The film’s humor mediates both *Piranha*’s horror-science fiction elements and its social commentary of corporate greed and aggressive militarism to produce a film that – again, like *Jaws* – is “a family film inexplicably floundering with an ‘X’ certificate” (Forbes, 1976, p. 224). The only *Jaws* imitation endorsed by Spielberg,<sup>1</sup> *Piranha* did well enough commercially to initiate a *new set*: a sequel, *Piranha II: The Spawning* aka *Flying Killers* (1981); a \$24 million theatrically-released, remake *Piranha 3D* (Alexandre Aja, 2010); and a sequel to the remake, *Piranha 3DD* (John Gulager, 2012).

### Conclusion

To conclude, twenty-five years after *Jaws*, Renny Harlin’s (estimated) \$78 million blockbuster, *Deep Blue Sea* (1999), looks in on an underwater research center off the coast of Mexico, where experiments on three Mako sharks have seen them grow to forty feet in length and demonstrate intelligent behavior. A violent storm floods the facility trapping a team of researchers led by Dr Susan McAlister (Saffron Burrows) three stories under the surface and unleashing the sharks which undertake to stalk and kill their makers. The fact that the scientists must descend through the compound’s submerged levels before ascending to surface safety is a return to the *disaster movie* realm of *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972), and the genetic engineering and digital effects make *Deep Blue Sea* a post-*Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg, 1993) rogue animal film. Curious then that one reviewer writes: “It is inevitable that any film featuring giant man-eating sharks will be compared to *Jaws*,” but then – somehow failing to recognize *Jaws*’ genealogy and intertextual relay – goes on to say: “*Deep Blue Sea* is ultimately more of a disaster movie teetering on ‘B’-movie legs than a *Jaws* rip-off or bizarre slasher-film hybrid” (Graham, 1999, pp. 41–42).

Like *Piranha* before it – or the contemporaneous *Godzilla* remake which takes its bite from *Jaws*, *Aliens* (James Cameron, 1986), and *Jurassic Park* – *Deep Blue Sea* dips into its gene pool, not only through its “*Jaws* prologue” (with the twist that the shark *doesn’t* get the bikini-clad girl), but also the fact that the three Mako sharks are killed

in the same ways as the sharks in *Jaws*, *Jaws 2*, and *Jaws 3*: that is (respectively) blown up, electrocuted and incinerated (see Koehler, 1999, p. 18). Poised at the tip of the millennium, the example of *Deep Blue Sea* seems to indicate once again the way in which Spielberg's prototype, *Jaws*, functions not just as a cornerstone for a revenge-of-nature or rogue animal set but also as an "operational manual" (Elsaesser, 2011, p. 287) for all modern blockbusters. As this essay has sought to establish, *Jaws* and its progeny – legitimate and otherwise – suggest the way in which the blockbuster property is positioned – serialized and multiplied – in a global marketplace and media-sphere. Ultimately, *Jaws* is not a closed set of image-sounds to be repeated, but – as is evidenced in the recent example of the tsunami-shark movie, *Bait* (Kibble Rendall, 2012) – an open whole, one that is endlessly remade and remodeled.

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### Notes

- 1 The Swedish poster for *Piranha* quotes Spielberg: “the best film inspired by *Jaws* [Hajen].”

## ***Brødre vs. Brothers***

### The Transatlantic Remake as Cultural Adaptation

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#### **Abstract**

Remaking Nordic television series and cinema has become a popular endeavor in the US. This article explores the remake as a category and sheds light on the specific choices that are deemed necessary to make something entirely Danish work in an American context. The article seeks to contribute to the understanding of a remake trend that, on the one hand, is inspired by all things Nordic, but on the other hand, actively engages in removing the Nordic feel from the remade productions. Using Susanne Bier's *Brødre* (2004) and Jim Sheridan's remake *Brothers* (2009) as cases and drawing on Danish and US war movie genre history, the article argues that the comparative analysis of original and remake can be used as a tool for contemporary cultural studies and shows that while stories travel, they might be stripped of humorous lightheartedness, local detail, and moral values in the process.

**Keywords** Transatlantic remakes, cinematic and televisual adaptations.

## Introduction

The transatlantic remake has appeared in various forms throughout film history. Hollywood has remade French cinema as documented by Durham (1998) and Mazdon (2000). While France seemed to be the best place to look for inspiration in times past from Hollywood's point of view, the North is currently rising: *Brothers* (2009), *Let Me In* (2010) and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011) are all recent examples of Hollywood remakes based on Scandinavian originals. This trend has also made its way into television as exemplified by the television series, *The Killing* (2011 - 2013) and *The Bridge* (2013 - ). Current research on the success of Nordic cinema primarily adopts a wide, historically based approach on the matter, drawing on many films and discussing production form. In *Transatlantic Cinema in a Global North*, Ib Bondebjerg argues that the Danish cinema, on account of new production forms, among other things, has become a player in an international context (Bondebjerg, 2005, p. 111). Mette Hjort argues that the emergence of strong networks for the circulation of ideas, people, money, and films is a vital key for understanding Nordic globalization today (Hjort, 2005, p. 210-211). While this broad scope has its merits, the trend of remaking Nordic cinema and its techniques are overlooked since there are only a few remake case studies. Constantine Verevis has published and edited books on remakes (2006, 2012). I draw on his works, but with the caveat of his own admission that his studies have their limitations when it comes to the specific cultural contexts: "more and different work needs to be undertaken through comparative studies that reach across other historical monuments, national cultures and cross-cultural transactions" (2006, preface, p. vii-viii).

In this article, I shall revisit one of the few case studies already done on US remakes of Nordic cinema, namely, a comparison of *Brødre* (2004) and *Brothers* (2009) (Shriver-Rice, 2011). The fresh take on this case is warranted because my focus is entirely different from Shriver-Rice's, whose article is an introduction to New Danish Cinema and is primarily concerned with the differences in the Afghanistan part of the movies and the moral dilemmas of the main characters. While Shriver-Rice's article makes convincing points about the aesthetics of the movies, their link to New Danish Cinema, and the psychological differences between their respective protagonists, this

article argues and shows that Shriver-Rice's argument about the difference in the war scenes is somewhat flawed and that comparing other parts of the movies is just as illuminating, if not more so. This article also elaborates on the US history of war movies that the remake has to acknowledge, arguing that the history and culture of the remaking country is essential for understanding the remake process and for exploring what is translated, what is not, as well as why; as Beeden and de Bruin point out: "adaptations work through articulations of national identity and [...] the success of an adaptation may be linked to its ability to reflect and interpret its new context" (2010, p. 5). I begin with a brief outline of *Brødre*, the original movie, followed by an introduction to remaking as a concept, and finally, I intend to delve deeper into the different national and cultural contexts that the movies are a part of.

### **Brødre: Context, narrative and reception**

When *Brødre* premiered in 2004, it marked a revival of a Danish movie genre that had not been seen by Danish audiences for many years: The Danish war movie. Denmark had not been in a real war since the German occupation during WW2, and while movies about the Danish resistance were made after the war, only a few appeared in the 70's and 80's, and not one had been made since 1991 (Villadsen, 2000, p. 22). In *Brødre*, the Danish soldier, Michael, lives a gratifying life with Sarah, his pretty and loving wife, adorable, smart kids, and a decent house. He has to leave for the war in Afghanistan, where he is presumed dead after a helicopter crash. In reality, Michael is held captive by an Afghan militia, who forces him to kill a fellow soldier with an iron bar. At home, Michael's misfit brother Jannik assumes the responsibility for his family. He helps fix the house, takes care of his brother's kids, and wins the confidence of Sarah, the presumed widow in the process. However, Michael escapes Afghan imprisonment and returns home. Traumatized by war and driven mad with jealousy of his brother's and Sarah's newfound intimacy, he slowly degenerates before going on a violent rampage, thrashing his house and making his wife force him to face what he did in Afghanistan. *Brødre* was a domestic success<sup>1</sup> and also garnered some international acclaim as it won the audience award at the Sundance Festival 2005 for best dramatic foreign

film and the Film Music Award in Cannes 2006, among other wins and nominations.

### Remakes as category

One could argue that 'remake' is an odd conception because all movies are the same stories told in slightly different ways. Michael Eaton suggests that "there are only two possible premises for stories: The Odd Couple and The Fish Out of Water. . . Although Oedipus, if you think about it, is a bit of both" (Eaton qtd. in Verevis, 2006, p. 10, original ellipsis).<sup>2</sup> While Eaton writes about stories in general, it is possible to categorize and theorize more thoroughly when the scope is narrowed to focus on American movies. 30-year-old accounts like *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, 1985) and *Hollywood Genres* (Schatz, 1981)<sup>3</sup> still offer valid theoretical frameworks that can be applied to most Hollywood cinema of today: recent multiple Academy Award-winner *The Fighter* (2011) is still the same old David vs. Goliath story that we have seen many times before. Mazdon remarks, "Since the earliest days of its cinematic production Hollywood has adapted, copied, plagiarised, and been inspired by other works" (Mazdon, 2000, p. 2); and Quentin Tarantino openly admits: "I steal from every single movie made . . . If my work has anything it's because I'm taking from this and from that, piecing them together" (Tarantino qtd. in Verevis, 2006, p. 173, original ellipsis). The point here is that Danish *Brødre* also by and large fits into these accounts of *American* movies. It obviously borrows from US war movies and, seen in this light, is a bit of a remake in its own right. I shall elaborate on this ensuing.

Adopting a stricter definition of remaking, one might distinguish between 1) Remaking as Industrial Category; 2) Remaking as Textual Category; and 3) Remaking as Critical Category (Verevis, 2006). Seen from an industrial perspective, a common conception about remaking movies is that "Remakes reflect the conservative nature of the industry; they are motivated by an economic imperative to repeat proven successes" (Stern qtd. in Verevis, 2006, p. 4). But from a producer's point of view, remaking a movie like *Brødre* is not a "sure thing" as far as marketing goes. As Verevis writes: "In a commercial context, remakes are 'pre-sold' to their audience because viewers are assumed to have some prior experience, or at least possess a 'narrative image', of the original story – an earlier film, liter-

ary or other property – before engaging in its particular retelling” (Verevis, 2006, p. 3). Although a quick glance upon the user-made reviews of *Brothers* at IMDb.com actually reveals that many of the users compare *Brothers* to the original,<sup>4</sup> the general American audience of 2009 cannot be expected to have any prior knowledge of a Danish movie made in 2004. Considering that IMDb.com is an international website, in principle all comments on the original could have been written by Danes. Still, *Brødre* was a commercial success in Denmark and to a certain degree also in Europe. The success of the original could be seen as a form of insurance to the producers. The industrial category seems to overlap with the textual category – Verevis discusses the issue of foreign films being stripped of local detail and political content in the remakes to exploit the English-language markets (Verevis, 2006, p. 3). Is this the fate of the Scandinavian cinema as it is remade overseas? The in-depth case study might be able to reveal more about the intercultural dynamics of remakes. Accordingly, I examine the narrative in *Brødre* to show how it works – and how its dynamics mimic those of several US war movies, as mentioned previously.

### **The narrative in *Brødre***

Most of the Western cinema is built upon well-known story-telling techniques that can be traced back to traditional fairy tales and Greek tragedies. Above I mentioned The Odd Couple and *Fish Out of Water*-dynamics. To this, we might add the *three-act structure* – a development from *set-up* to *conflict* to *resolution* – and from *ordinary world* to *special world* and back to *ordinary world* (Breum, 2004, p. 133), along with the idea that the characters function as dramatic devices that move the narrative forward (Breum, 2004, p. 49).

Behind every movie is an idea, and this idea, for the most part, is conveyed through the change of central protagonists (Breum, 2004, p. 49; Harms Larsen, 2003, p. 29). When Michael and Nick in *The Deer Hunter* (1978) are changed by the terrors of war, their transformations reflect the movie’s message: War does terrible things to human beings in both the short and the long run, and the United States has paid a tremendously high price for the Vietnam War.

Both *Brødre* and *The Deer Hunter* follow this three-act structure and work their way from the ordinary world (home) to a special world (war) and back again. Moreover, the idea in *Brødre* is also

somewhat similar to that of *The Deer Hunter*: That war will change a man. This is reflected in the change of Michael, the protagonist in *Brødre*. In the beginning of the movie, he is in complete control of his life. War makes him paranoid, awkward in social situations, violent, and a liar. But while *The Deer Hunter* offers no real way out for the emotionally scarred men, *Brødre* leaves them with an opportunity: Confession is the key to salvation. If you are willing to talk about your wrongdoings, and if you repent, you can be forgiven, and perhaps move on. Michael is transformed by war, but his brother Jannik is also “damaged goods.” Jannik is a convicted felon accustomed to the shady parts of life. He recently got out of prison, he drinks, and he is a constant disappointment to his dad. Jannik learns that you have to shape up if you want anything worth having in this world. The movie ends with Michael’s confession, without which he would lose his wife and kids, but this is, in fact, preceded by his brother Jannik’s confession: he has also confessed his crimes and apologized to the banker he assaulted. Thus both brothers take responsibility for their actions, confess their sins, and presumably get back on track.

One could argue that this theme of main characters undergoing change is to be expected; for example, the same change is made by Simba in the *Lion King* (1994), Derek in *American History X* (1999), and Phil in *Groundhog Day* (1993): In the beginning of these movies, they are all cowards in their own way, running away from commitment and responsibility. However, in the end of the movies, they all shape up and assume responsibility for their actions and lives – quite a conventional point to make in American cinema. But while the changes are the same, *the way they change* is different, and this is what makes “remakes” of the same moral stories interesting.

Through different stages in *Brødre*, different characters can be seen as antagonists. In the first act of the movie, Jannik and his father are antagonists. Their conflict threatens the otherwise stable environment. The enemies in Afghanistan are antagonists in the second act – and their inhumanity and harsh ways are internalized in Michael, who becomes the antagonist in the third and final act. *Brødre* does little to explain the psychology of the Afghan militia. Its members are depicted as hateful and ruthless brutes, whose idea of a good time is to watch Western soldiers beat each other to death with an iron bar.

Michael's change raises many moral and political questions: Would you kill an innocent man to save your own life? How far are we willing to go to save ourselves? What does war do to soldiers? As a society, are we willing to pay the economic and emotional tolls that (this) war exacts on us? We have seen such themes explored in American war movies before, but it was a fairly new theme in Danish cinema in 2004. Denmark simply does not have the war history that the US boasts – especially the Cold War and the Vietnam War have been sources of inspiration to Hollywood. And where movies like *Platoon* (1986) and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) are quite unanimous and clear in their message that the Vietnam War was too expensive in lives and suffering, *Brødre* has a more ambiguous response to the issue. On the one hand, Michael's post-war collapse tells us that our soldiers pay an extremely high emotional price for our warmongering. On the other hand, the enemy is depicted as brutes worth fighting against – the audience can probably imagine how rebuilding a country can prove difficult if paramilitary fanatics with bazookas set the agenda. This analysis so far shows how *Brødre* is massively inspired by existing US war movies and by traditional ways of telling stories, placing itself somewhere between the Danish Occupation film tradition waging that the Liberation Movement did the right thing (cf. Villadsen, 2000), and the American critical attitude. Ironically, the comparison with the remake will show how it is also inherently Danish in its mood and feel.

### ***Brothers* as a cultural adaptation**

In the critical category, the American remake *Brothers* (2009) by Jim Sheridan was nominated for two Golden Globes and grossed \$43,318,349 worldwide,<sup>5</sup> which is decent for a Hollywood movie, albeit not impressive.<sup>6</sup> In the taxonomies of Greenberg, *Brothers* is somewhere between “the acknowledged, close remake,” in which “the original film is replicated with little or no change to the narrative” and “the acknowledged, transformed remake” with “substantial transformations of character, time and setting” (Verevis, 2006, p. 9). On the one hand, there is very little change to the fundamentals of the original narrative. On the other hand, the change in setting is substantial, as I aim to demonstrate in the following where the remake as a textual category is explored.

As stated above, the war themes explored in *Brødre* are partly inspired by American cinema. I have already mentioned *The Deer Hunter*, *Platoon*, and *Born on the Fourth of July*, but the list is longer and can be expanded to include *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), and so forth. The remake has to account for these somewhat similar movies by, on the one hand, acknowledging its predecessors and on the other hand, by bringing something new to the table. A quick glance at the war movie classics above reveals that they are all about the Vietnam War. Movies about the war in Afghanistan are fewer, even though the US still has many troops deployed in Afghanistan. Furthermore, *Brothers* also has to account for the political situation in the US about the war in Afghanistan, which is no small task – presently the Wikipedia-article on the opposition against the war in Afghanistan is 36 pages long.<sup>7</sup>

*Brothers* adopts the Danish take on the war in many – but not all – ways. In both versions, the war is questioned in the beginning of the narrative. In the American version, Isabelle states: “They only shoot the bad guys,” and Tommy asks: “Who are the bad guys?” No one is able to explain this to the kids, so Maggie’s stereotype answer is accepted: “The ones with the beards” (*Brothers*, 8 min, 22 sec). Ironically this proves to be true as all the inhumane Afghan captors sprout impressive beards. And they *are* inhumane and sadistic in both movies, but in *Brothers* they also have more of an agenda: They want the Americans out of Afghanistan. American soldier Joe Willis is tortured and forced to denounce the American presence in the country. Furthermore, his death is recorded on camera and is presumably seen as a weapon of war: In the 2009-version, the Afghan militia has become aware of the media. Whether this makes them appear better or worse is open for debate. Shriver-Rice (2011, p. 15) argues that the camera adds an “element of torturous intentionality and humiliation.” One might also argue that the camera sheds some light on their motives – letting one enemy execute another with an iron bar is terrible by any standard, but in *Brothers*, at least, it serves more of a purpose: the media war; which contrasts with *Brødre*, in which the execution might just seem a cruel form of amusement, challenging the moral values of the captives and breaking their spirits. In general, my reading of the war scenes is different from Shriver-Rice, who argues that “In contrast with the Hollywood version, it is not precisely defined or conclu-

sive that Michael would have no other choice but to murder his fellow soldier. Had he taken another course of action or had any patience, other options may have presented themselves" (Shriver-Rice, 2011, p. 16). Seen from my perspective, this is a misreading of the scene. I cannot fathom what options might have presented themselves with half a dozen armed Afghans surrounding Michael, pressuring him into murder.

Another way in which *Brothers* deals with the American history of war and preceding war movies is by making Hank, the father, a Vietnam War veteran with strong patriotic feelings. Hence, when Tommy greets his dad for the first time after getting out of prison, he addresses him "sir" (*Brothers*, 7 min, 17 sec). In *Brødre*, only one brother is transformed by war, but in *Brothers*, Tommy's failures as a son are indirectly explained by the father's traumas in Vietnam: "After I got back from 'Nam you know, I couldn't talk to your mother. I guess I took it out on you and Tommy, you know, I ... I don't know why" (*Brothers*, 1 hour, 7 min, 21 sec). *Brothers* takes the idea that the terrors of war are internalized and uses it not only on Sam, but makes it a point that this is something that haunts a family through generations. We can easily imagine how Hank was a terrible father after he got back from Vietnam because we have just seen what war did to Sam, and we have seen all the classic movies about soldiers being changed by the war in Vietnam. *Brothers* also draws on previous war movies by means of various references: The opening shot in *Brødre* with marching marines is very much like the various shots of marines marching in *Full Metal Jacket*. "I don't know who said: Only the dead have seen the end of war. I have seen the end of war. The question is: Can I live again?" (*Brothers* 1 hour, 40 min, 5 sec); this voice-over by Sam at the end of *Brothers* makes you think back to the voice-over of Chris in *Platoon*: "Somebody once wrote: Hell is the impossibility of reason. That's what this place feels like. Hell" (*Platoon*, 10 min, 1 sec).

### **American family values and carefree, drunk Danes**

While *Brødre* is set in the big city with all its lights, bars, and public transportation, *Brothers* is set in a small-town American environment in Minnesota. The traditional family values are highlighted in *Brothers*: When Sam leaves for war, he removes his wedding ring, and thus his only trinket is the army tag he is wearing around his

neck. Symbolically, Grace takes the wedding ring and attaches it to a chain that she puts around her neck. He is carrying the weight of duty to his country on his shoulders, and she is entrusted with the love, trust, and family values for safekeeping. While Michael and Sarah broke up at some point early in their relationship, Grace and Sam's marriage is depicted as the ideal American cliché: The cheerleader who dated and at some point married the successful football player. We do not learn about any fallout in their relationship. The respect for marriage and the family as an institution is higher in *Brothers*. When Tommy learns that his brother is alive, he suspends his advances on Grace. Danish Jannik also desists, but he struggles more than his American counterpart. After Michael's rampage, we see Jannik standing at the door to the bathroom, considering walking in on Sarah in the shower. The family values are also expressed in the brotherly bond in *Brothers*. "You are my brother" is spoken out loud by both Sam and Tommy throughout the film, and when Sam almost kills himself, the phrase is used as the convincing argument to put down the gun: "Sam, look at me for a second. You're my brother. You're my family. Do you hear me?" (*Brothers*, 1 hour, 33 min, 30 sec).

The American version is more serious and politically correct on most accounts. In *Brødre*, when the helicopter is shot down, a brawny recruit is joking around and complaining about the lack of prostitutes in Afghanistan. Likewise, when Jannik has an outburst at the dinner table in *Brødre*, the family just laughs, whereas Tommy's comparable outburst is handled with grave silence. In the same scene, Henning makes some pretty harsh generalizations – bordering on racist remarks – that are only somewhat replicated by the kids in *Brothers*. Both the Tommy and Grace characters are more serious than their Danish counterparts – Sarah simply smiles and laughs more than Grace does, as in the situation above, but also when Jannik makes jokes about the trashed kitchen after Michael's incident or when the handymen arrive to fix the kitchen. *Brødre* is certainly not a comedy. The tragedies are just as sad and the drama is just as dramatic. Jokes and laughter are simply used to handle all the chaos and grief.

Alcohol is treated differently in the two versions, which reflects the different cultural attitudes towards alcohol: Danes consume more alcohol than Americans. It is not that there is no drinking in

*Brothers*. Both grandfathers are fond of alcohol and use it as a way of dealing with their grief. But Michael becomes extremely drunk before he goes berserk, while Sam snaps all sober. Tommy drinks, but he is less of a drunk than Jannik. When Tommy comes to bring the car back and learns of his brother's death, he is not as visibly drunk as Jannik in the same situation – in which Sarah also accuses Jannik of drunk driving.<sup>8</sup> And while an inebriated Jannik manages to make Sarah laugh with his intoxicated ramblings when she picks him up at a bar at four o'clock in the morning, Grace is not at all amused by a drunken Tommy in the remade version of the scene. Drinking, apparently, is no laughing matter in the US.

The attitude towards guns is also entirely different in the two movies. As a matter of course, Sam has a firearm, and when he hears a dog bark, he whips out his gun. This is unheard of in a Danish context, in which Michael, a commanding officer in the military, has to steal a gun from the police to be able to threaten anybody – which might seem unlikely or perhaps even comical in the US.

### **The inspired narrative remake**

This article has illustrated a circular, globalized process in which a Danish movie clearly draws on an American tradition of war movies, but is still based on an original story with local Danish detail, Danish cultural norms and the aesthetics of New Danish Cinema. In *Brothers*, the original narrative, in general terms, stays the same in terms of acts and dramatic devices. If we recall Verevis's discussion on foreign films being stripped of local detail and political content in the remakes to exploit the English-language markets, my analysis has shown that *Brødre* is indeed stripped of local detail, and American local detail is added instead. Furthermore, most of the carefree, sometimes politically incorrect Danish lightheartedness is simply not remade. Perhaps it was deemed inappropriate; perhaps it is just very difficult to remake humorous lightheartedness. An argument in favor of the latter is that local detail is kept in other recent remakes: the television series *The Killing* (2010 - ) takes place in the US but is kept in the "Nordic noir" of the original and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011) is actually set in Sweden.

In the case of political content, however, the remake of *Brødre* is hardly stripped – in fact, more political content is added in *Brothers*. My analysis has revealed a clear-cut example of a remake that sac-

rifies local detail to interact with its new country's political present and cultural history – something that the remakes with intact local detail will probably have a harder time doing.

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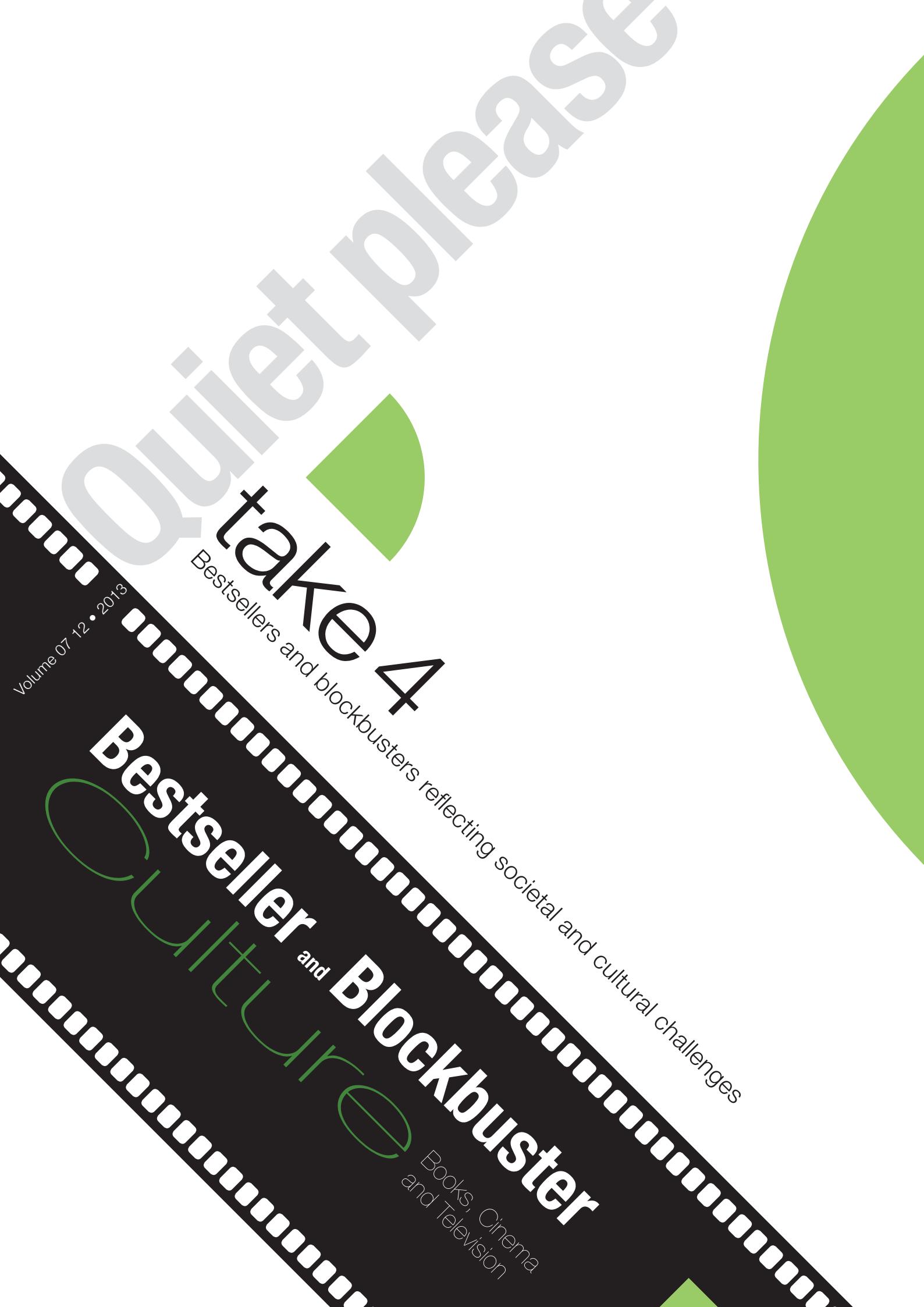
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## Noter

- 1 With 424,479 tickets sold, *Brødre* was the 149th best-selling picture in Danish movie theaters of all time, and along with *Kongekabale* the most successful Danish film of 2004. Source: <<http://www.scope.dk/solgtebilletter>> [Accessed 27 November 2013] and <[http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0386342/trivia?ref\\_=tt\\_trv\\_trv](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0386342/trivia?ref_=tt_trv_trv)> [Accessed 27 November 2013].
- 2 This holds true for *Brothers* as well: The two brothers are The Odd Couple and both are, at different stages in the movie, the Fish Out of Water.
- 3 *Hollywood Genres* is actually built upon genre studies of American cinema during the period 1930-1960.
- 4 Source: <[http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0765010/reviews?ref\\_=tt\\_urv](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0765010/reviews?ref_=tt_urv)> [Accessed 27 November 2013].
- 5 Source: <<http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=brothers09.htm>> [accessed 27 November 2013].
- 6 In comparison, Clint Eastwood's *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), a comparable drama, grossed \$216,763,646 worldwide. Source: <<http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=milliondollarbaby.htm>> [Accessed 27 November 2013].

- 7 If 2400 characters with spaces equals a page. Source: Wikipedia.com, <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opposition\\_to\\_the\\_War\\_in\\_Afghanistan\\_\(2001%E2%80%93present\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opposition_to_the_War_in_Afghanistan_(2001%E2%80%93present))> [Accessed 27 November 2013].
- 8 According to the Internet Movie Database, Nikolaj Lie Kaas *was* actually drunk when they shot the scene. He thought it would be more convincing that way. Source: <[http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0386342/trivia?ref\\_=tt\\_trv\\_trv](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0386342/trivia?ref_=tt_trv_trv)> [Accessed November 2013].



# Bestseller and Blockbuster

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# take 4

Bestsellers and blockbusters reflecting societal and cultural challenges

# The Role of History in Bestseller and Blockbuster Culture

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## Abstract

History provides an infinite supply of dramatic events, stories, characters and conflicts. The article provides a brief overview of prevalent conceptions and ideas of history that can be applied to the wide-spread historical fictions of the bestseller and blockbuster culture. On the background of the current alliance between history and media, I propose a methodological distinction between three levels: 1) a historiographical level, concerned with overall considerations and reflections, 2) a user-orientated level focussing on the uses and functions of history, and 3) a genre-orientated level considering historical films and TV drama productions within a frame of genre traditions, including hybrids. The insights are applied analytically using the case of the Danish bestseller biography and blockbuster film *Marie Krøyer*.

**Keywords** Historical cinema, Bestseller biographies, Biographical blockbusters, History and media culture, Marie Krøyer.

## The challenge of abundance

It is striking that our Western societies are currently confronted with a huge dose of history ubiquitously presented in all genres and on all platforms. Representations of historical events and people are an integral part of the prevailing bestseller and blockbuster culture. Bestseller lists are usually divided into 'fiction/crime', 'non-fiction' and 'biographies/autobiographies'.<sup>1</sup> In all of these categories, diverse genres connected with history and memory are popular – from the historical (crime) novel to new studies of WW II and memoirs or biographies. The attraction of factual genres connected with the past is indisputable.

Historical films of all subgenres aspire to blockbuster status. As the widespread tie-in phenomenon indicates, connections between bestsellers and blockbusters are tight (cf. Feather and Woodbridge, 2007). Historical TV drama series are important to national identity and generate extraordinary ratings, even when repeated (Agger, 2005). When these series are exported, their production design and dramatic attitudes to historical narration often appeal to international audiences, as in the case of Ken Follett's novels and their adaptations as TV series – *The Pillars of the Earth* (2010) and *World Without End* (2012).<sup>2</sup> Ann Gray and Erin Bell (2013) have thoroughly documented and analysed the growth of factual historical productions and the emergence of new genres in the UK since the mid-1990s.

These facts point to one simple answer to the question of the role of history in bestseller and blockbuster culture. History provides an infinite supply of dramatic events, stories, characters and conflicts, and all categories of historical representations in all subgenres play a vital role in the development and maintenance of this culture. They are vital to development because new genres and genre blends are constantly being created. They play a key role in their maintenance because these events, stories, characters and conflicts can be interpreted again and again in renewed versions, seen from new contemporary perspectives. For instance, the biographies of historical characters such as Elizabeth I or Abraham Lincoln have been reinterpreted in remakes<sup>3</sup> – and most certainly will be again in the future. Biographies seem to have a special appeal not only in books, but also on television and in films. According to Robert Burgoyne, the biographical film is by far the largest subgenre (Burgoyne, 2008, p. 16).

The purpose of this article is twofold. Firstly, I aim to provide a brief overview of prevalent conceptions and ideas of history that can be applied to the historical fictions of the bestseller and blockbuster culture. Secondly, I want to apply the theoretical insights analytically in order to test their implications. I limit myself by using only one case. In examining the Danish bestseller biography and blockbuster film *Marie Krøyer*, I draw attention to the different choices made, in order to focus on their consequences. I have chosen this case because it is representative of current bestseller and blockbuster culture. However, the definition of these terms cannot be directly transferred from an American to a Scandinavian context because of the obvious differences in scale and consequently budgets, domestic and international promotion strategies. My definition is pragmatic: a Danish bestseller must have figured on the current Danish bestseller lists for a period; often it has appeared in several issues. A Danish blockbuster must figure on The Danish Film Institute's yearly top 10 list and must have made a considerable impact in the public sphere (advance publicity, posters, interviews, reviews and blogs).

During the last thirty years, increasing public interest in the so-called Skagen painters, their artistic milieu and their biographies has been manifested in large exhibitions and a number of books.<sup>4</sup> *Baldaden om Marie Krøyer* by Anastassia Arnold (1999) is a typical, popular biography published in five issues including a book club edition.<sup>5</sup> In 2012, Bille August's film *Marie Krøyer* was released, crediting Arnold's biography. Ticket sales in Denmark in 2012 amounted to 296,206, making it number 6 on the Top 10 list of Danish films in 2012. *Marie Krøyer* was one of three major biopics in 2012, the others being Nicolaj Arcel's *A Royal Affair* and Anne Grethe Bjarup Riis's *This Life*. The reception of these releases confirms the biopic to be a steady love affair between producers and audiences.<sup>6</sup>

### **The alliance between history and media**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Friedrich Nietzsche was already dealing with the challenge of the surfeit of history. In *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life* (1874), he issued a warning. Advancing oblivion as a precondition for happiness, Nietzsche claimed that the overdose of history prevalent in his time could be potentially dangerous, in that it might damage the creative instincts of individuals as well

as whole populations. Accordingly, the original title was "The Historical Disease" (Kristensen and Schmidt, 1994, p. 8). For Nietzsche, the surfeit of history depended first and foremost on the close alliance between education ('Bildung') and the widespread influence of historical knowledge, science and method that characterized the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In the current situation, the alliance between history and media has radically transformed this diagnosis. History is not so much connected to our educational systems as to our media culture, where it is treasured by large audiences: the popularity of mediated history culture is shown in data such as numbers of printed books, box office returns, and TV ratings and reviews. In particular, memory studies research has demonstrated that mediated representations of historical events are highly influential (Erll and Wodanka, 2008, p. 140).

It is a general assumption today that most people receive their basic historical education through films and TV series: 'Blockbuster history films, mini-series, documentaries, docudramas – all these genres are increasingly important in our relationship to the past and our understanding of history' (Rosenstone, 2006, p. 4).<sup>7</sup> To a large extent, however, what still remains to be explored is the exact impact this may have on real audiences. To my knowledge, limited interest has been displayed in more clear-cut reception studies of historical films or TV series.<sup>8</sup>

Another intriguing question concerns how the role of mediated history is assessed by history and media scholars. Here, several approaches compete. The conceptualisations and understandings of historians and media researchers appear to differ. Historical research (Bryld 1999, Jensen 2003, Karlsson 2009, Warring 2011) acknowledges the significance of history conveyed by fiction, but typically downplays the aesthetic level. However, there is a growing awareness that the criteria of evaluation *should* vary. As Pierre Sorlin puts it, 'Most books and reviews on the subject of history in film compare the events shown in film with a written description of the same events, but such an approach is ineffective. What should we compare?' (Sorlin, 1980, p. 32). According to Sorlin, as well as Rosenstone and Zander (both 2006), it is crucial to explore the inter-relationship between history and aesthetics to understand the appeal of all types of historical representation. The past is not just the

past, but 'a past that fits within the demands, practices, and traditions of both the visual media and the dramatic form' (Rosenstone, 2006, p. 38, original emphasis). The claim of creativity can be extended to historical documentaries: 'To paraphrase John Grierson's famous definition, a historical documentary is a film characterized principally by the *creative treatment of past actuality*' (Ludvigsson, 2003, p. 63, original emphasis).

During the last decades, genre based studies of historical film and TV drama have asserted themselves as means of better understanding the impact of history in films. Burgoyne summarises the fact/fiction discussion by underlining the feasibility of the plot-driven genre definition of the historical film genre: 'the [historical] genre is composed of dramatic feature films in which the primary plot is based on actual historical events, or in which an imagined plot unfolds in such a way that actual historical events are central and intrinsic to the story' (Burgoyne, 2008, p. 2).<sup>9</sup>

In the vast, expanding field of study roughly delineated above, I find it useful to distinguish between three levels: 1) a historiographical level, concerned with overall considerations and reflections, 2) a user-orientated level focussing on the uses and functions of history, and 3) a genre-orientated level considering historical films and TV drama productions within a frame of genre traditions, including hybrids. In the following, my task will be to briefly illustrate the scope of each level by using the case of *Marie Krøyer* – the film and the book.

### **The historiographical level**

On this level, I shall briefly refer to three impressive representatives of historiography – Hayden White, Paul Ricoeur and Friedrich Nietzsche. This may seem grandiose considering the scope and spatial limitations of this article; however, in this case they serve to illuminate that even the historiographical level has a mundane utility value.

The relationship between history and fundamental narrative patterns has been thoroughly analysed by Hayden White in *Metahistory* (1973) and Paul Ricoeur in *Temps et Récit* (1983-85). Hayden White's subtitle is "The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe", and this title is symptomatic of White's aim and of the well-known 'literary turn' in historiography. His basic assumption is that history is a narrative, and that the narrative is shaped by the imagination. This is a radical departure from the traditional view of history as a discipline based on facts and figures, and it has had a profound impact on the way history is studied and taught.

tion is that 'a chronicle' is transformed into 'a story' 'by the characterization of some events in the chronicle in terms of inaugural motifs, of others in terms of terminating motifs, and of yet others in terms of transitional motifs' (White, 1975, p. 5). In history, chronicles are transformed into stories. Inspired by Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), he distinguishes between four 'modes of emplotment' that can be applied to the story: 'Romance, Tragedy, Comedy and Satire' (White, 1975, p. 7). This explains why the transfer of historical events to history books or to any kind of historical narration or fiction tends to follow certain patterns. Historical stories are formed by the need to fit these narrative patterns.

In accordance with the demands of the biographical genre, Arnold's biography registers the life of Marie Krøyer from her birth to her death. In great detail, Arnold interprets her dilemmas as a result of the prevalent conditions at the time, such as the pressure of a paternalist society obstructing the professional ambitions and active sexuality of women. In contrast, August's film deploys the tragic mode of emplotment by focussing on a certain narrative pattern – the transition from a life of great expectations to a life of dissolution in her relationship to two men. This is represented by a limited period of transition in Marie Krøyer's life when her marriage to P.S. Krøyer is breaking down, due to his mental state and her response to his problems. It is also the period when he bluntly makes it clear to her that she herself is not an artist: she does not render the light in her paintings. At the same time, she is helplessly attracted to Hugo Alfvén, the Swedish composer. Highlighting this fundamental narrative pattern – the play about the eternal triangle – the film allows itself more liberty than the printed biography, adhering to rules that are artistically motivated.

In his comprehensive work *Temps et Récit*, Paul Ricoeur analyses the relationship between history, time and narration, basing his theory on Augustine's concept of time and Aristotle's concept of mimesis. According to Augustine, the present always includes the past – and inaugurates the future. Ricoeur shows how these categories combine with his three forms of mimesis to determine the way in which factual or fictive historical narration is carried out.

With the simultaneously inaugural and terminating motif of Krøyer's coffin drowning in rainy water in the windy Skagen churchyard, the story in the film is precisely framed from the begin-

ning, just as the dominant mode is presented – revolving around Marie's personal tragedy in spite of all her success. In this way the beginning represents the end: this scene includes the past in the present and forebodes the future. The keynote of *ending* is present in the film from the beginning.<sup>10</sup> The biographical genre as such presupposes the whole life of the protagonist, and this often (but not always) includes death as well. In this case, however, we witness the death of Marie's husband. This emphasises the main point of view of the film – P.S. Krøyer's gradual decline assumes a defining role for her life. The contrast with Arnold's biography is striking: Arnold records the death of P.S. Krøyer in detail, but the event is not ascribed so much significance as in the film.

In spite of his warnings on the abuse of history in *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life*, Nietzsche also stresses its uses:

In three respects history belongs to the living person: it belongs to him as an active and striving person; it belongs to him as a person who preserves and admires; it belongs to him as a suffering person in need of emancipation. This trinity of relationships corresponds to a trinity of methods for history, to the extent that one may make the distinctions, a monumental method, an antiquarian method, and a critical method. (Nietzsche, n.d., p. 7)

Nietzsche goes on to expand on the advantages and drawbacks of the three methodological approaches. Monumental history teaches us that greatness is possible, but the danger is that history might be idealized. Antiquarian history is useful, as it is primarily aiming at piously preserving, not creating. However, there is the risk that by way of the same piety, an equalizing attitude is attributed to phenomena of a different status. The monumental and the antiquarian approaches should therefore be supplemented by the critical, analyzing and challenging approach to history. Nietzsche's conclusion is that history can be useful, but only in the right 'dietary' proportions; otherwise it is harmful.

In her introduction to *The Historical Film* (2000), Marcia Landy argues that Nietzsche's overall categories are still valid for identifying and analysing prevalent forms of historicizing in film. Cinema is obviously attracted to monumental history. Its narration is

characterized by 'a vision of the past during moments of crisis and heroic conflict, and it reveals a penchant for the actions of heroic figures' (Landy, 2000, p. 3). Historical Hollywood productions provide ample illustration. Antiquarian history also plays an influential role. Its inherent tendency to overemphasise the reverence of the past becomes evident in the many nostalgic Heimat-films produced for national audiences in Germany and Denmark. In contrast, critical history re-examines the values and angles of former representations, thus clearing the way for new approaches as seen in Edgar Reitz's TV drama serial *Heimat* (1984) that formed a challenge to nostalgic Heimat-films.

The dominant approach in both the film *Marie Krøyer* and the written biography is *critical* representing a late rebuttal of the gossip in Skagen and Copenhagen which accused Marie Krøyer of causing her husband's death by leaving husband and daughter in favour of her lover. Arnold's as well as August's contribution are part of an on-going re-evaluation of the conditions and options of women in the milieu of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Both suggest that Marie Krøyer is richly endowed by nature, but caught in dilemmas typical of society at that time. She is not an artist, but an artisan. She ought to possess all the chances for happiness, not least in a milieu characterized by the artists' liberal attitudes to the dominant conservative society. She ought to be able to combine the role of wife and mother with her work as an artisan.

The critical attitude is illuminated by inextricable dilemmas that her husband, her lover and the rules of society kept presenting to her. She cannot cope with P.S. Krøyer's manic-depressive state of mind – she does not want to leave him, but his uncontrollable threats and rage force her to do so. A parallel is drawn to her second relationship: while she is pregnant by Alfvén, he leaves her. Finally, she is let down by Lachmann, the lawyer, representing the conservative trend in society, as he prepares her fatal break with her daughter, who subsequently chooses her foster mother instead of Marie.

To focus on the bigotry of society, the film enhances the role of Lachmann. In an intense scene vis-à-vis Marie Krøyer, we witness Lachmann's shift of attitude from sympathy to antipathy when he realizes that she has been unfaithful to Krøyer, that she is pregnant, and that he cannot hope to possess her himself.

In their critical approach, the film and the written biography emphasise different aspects, but both clearly side with Marie Krøyer. A slight antiquarian touch might be ascribed to the film in the obvious pleasure that it takes in displaying the costumes and the interiors, showing Marie's talent for arts and crafts. Seen as a commentary to women's conditions, however, the film is by no means nostalgic.

### **The user-orientated level**

During the 1980s and 1990s in particular, historical research and related areas within literature, media studies, and anthropology addressed questions of the uses and functions of history. In her survey of the concepts connected to this turn, Anette Warring (2011) points out that it was founded in cross-disciplinary research, and that consequently the concepts applied within the field derive from different traditions. Hence, we find more or less synonymous concepts designating the same phenomenon, namely that history can be used in various ways and serve several functions, dependent on the identity of the users and the purposes they pursue.

Some of these concepts are 'history culture' ('Geschichtskultur'), 'historical consciousness', 'didactics of history' and 'uses of history'. The affinity of the terms is illustrated by Ludvigsson: 'History culture is our term for that which includes and represents all the various uses of history that exist in society' (Ludvigsson, 2003, p. 12). Referring to Ricoeur's understanding of the relationship between time and narration, Ludvigsson defines historical consciousness:

The historical consciousness of a people in a society is the instrument whereby those people make meaning of the past. Involved is the process of linking the past to an understanding of the world. More specifically, it is the process of remembering the past, and understanding the present, and of creating perspectives for the future. (Ludvigsson, 2003, p. 8)

In his survey "Historiedidaktik: begrepp, teori och analys", Karlsson draws on work by Rüsen (1992) and Jensen (2003), among others, to expound an elaborated typology of the uses of history. Karlsson's distinction between the categories 'need', 'uses', 'users' and 'function' (Karlsson, 2009, p. 59) makes it clear that everybody can-

not be expected to have the same needs and to use history in the same way, and it certainly highlights the different intentions that may lie behind any use of history, including its use in historical films and TV series. To the question of whether the misuse of history exists or not, Karlsson gives an answer which resumes the thread from Nietzsche: 'Use of history develops into misuse in the case when the use of history either directly or indirectly violates common human rights and values' (Karlsson, 2009, p. 69).

In *Clio på bio* (2006), Ulf Zander more explicitly draws attention to the various functions of history in cinema, illustrating some of the positions in Karlsson's typology.<sup>11</sup> According to Zander, representation of history in visual media must be assessed by other criteria than those strictly related to science of history. In many ways, Zander's position is similar to Rosenstone's, the essential question being: 'How do films construct a historical reality? Which rules, codes and strategies bring the past to life on the silver screen?' (Zander, 2006, p. 14, my translation).

Zander points out that *existential* need and the *moral* use of historical films are highly significant factors in the use of history. He emphasizes that the inherent feature of almost all historical films is their *mirroring* of the past in the present. Voluntarily or involuntarily, every historical film bears the mark of the time in which it is produced. Very often it serves as an open or hidden comment on contemporary events. Both *The Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind* were a comment on their own time, asking crucial questions about the dichotomy between civil rights and segregation.<sup>12</sup>

In a different context, I have observed a similar mirroring phenomenon in historical crime novels and crime documentaries, which adds a special flavour to them. I distinguish between three functions attached to crime genres: 1) history as a mirror in combination with a moral scale enhancing similarities and differences between past and present, 2) history as a forum in which national self-understanding finds its popular expression when asking questions about crucial aspects of national history, and 3) history as a catalyst for the consciousness of time, a function that matches the interplay between 'sujet' and 'fabula' in these genres (Agger, 2013, pp. 38-45).

In the discussion of the uses of history, memory (or oblivion) is an influential category. Although it is difficult to define exactly what 'memory and popular film' is, it represents an expanding

field (Grainge, 2003; Erll and Wodianka, 2008). German researchers have coined the term 'Erinnerungsfilm'. But when does a historical film turn into a 'memory film'? The most precise definition of this necessarily imprecise term is offered by Astrid Erll, who defines it by the process it involves. The way in which a film is used determine its status as a 'memory film': 'Nicht der Gegenstand des im Film Erinnerten, sondern das durch den Film 'um den Film herum' Erinnerte macht seinen Status als Erinnerungsfilm auf' (Erll, 2008, p. 8). If a film has an impact on the area that Erll considers to be 'the collective memory', if it is debated in the media, discussed by the critics, or debated via the internet, it can assume the status of a 'memory film'.<sup>13</sup>

At least two needs and corresponding functions (in Karlsson's and Zander's sense) can be attributed to *Marie Krøyer*: 1) The need to remember the struggle for women's emancipation a hundred years ago, to verify what happened in the daily entanglement of work and priorities, marriage and divorce, individual and societal choices and consequently the function to re-evaluate that part of history as a whole; and 2) the need to rediscover the appalling dilemmas of personal, professional and societal conditions and consequently the function of rehabilitating *Marie Krøyer*. To this, we should add 3) the function of mirroring and negotiating the present in the past. *Marie Krøyer* certainly mirrors the current tendency among young women to wish for perfection as wives, mothers and professionals along with the persistent inability to live up to their own high standards.

### The genre level

The term 'historical film' is an overall category; it merely indicates that a given film is set in a period of the past. However, it does not convey anything about the genre or genre blends of the film. As Higson points out, history can be adapted in various ways, each with its own label: as 'heritage cinema' adapting literary classics or plays, as 'bio-pics' concentrating on biographies or 'true stories', as 'costume drama' enhancing the appearance and interiors of the period in question (Higson, 2003, pp. 13-22), or as a combination of the above-mentioned genres. Proximity to literary sources is characteristic: 'Very few of the 'British' period films made in the 1980s and 1990s and set before the Second World War were

developed as original screenplays, as opposed to adaptations from another source' (Higson, 2003, p. 20). The categories 'heritage cinema' and 'costume drama' are rather broad, but in any case, the proximity to well-known literary predecessors tends to influence the ways in which the genre of the concrete cinematic adaptation is implemented.

On the basis of his plot-driven genre definition (cf. above), Burgoyne rejects 'heritage cinema' and 'costume drama' as historical genres and makes the following claim: 'The great majority of American films that take the past as their subject can be classified into one of five variant groups: the war film, the biographical film, the epic, the metahistorical film, and the topical film' (Burgoyne, 2008, p. 3). This taxonomy determines the structure of his book. In my view this standpoint is too limited. No doubt the five genres are part of popular mainstream cinema, but so too are 'heritage cinema' and 'costume drama'. Is it meaningful to dismiss *Gone with the Wind* (1939) or *Titanic* (1997) as historical films for their excessively melodramatic handling of history? Basically all main genres can ally themselves with historical films, and in doing so (cf. Agger, 2005, pp. 125-128) they produce an even greater variety of subgenres. Consequently, the awareness of genre and genre blends in the study of historical films must be just as sensitive as in the case of contemporary films.

The impact of new genre combinations is illustrative. According to Paul Grainge, the postmodern pastiche has a mode 'that has the potential to be critical and transgressive, but that can also suggest an awareness about the constructed nature of feelings and emotions while allowing them to be experienced and enjoyed' (Grainge, 2003, p. 10). The recent contrafactual films of Quentin Tarantino constitute good examples of this. *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), in particular, is a meta-film. The characters are constructed as genre-stereotypes: the hero from a spaghetti-western, the gangster hero, the villainous nazi-antagonist, the beautiful female double agent, the melodramatic victim, and the femme fatale (cf. Woisnitza, 2012, p. 260). A similar set-up is constructed in *Django Unchained* (2012). Although objections to this form abound, it is beyond doubt that Tarantino's two most recent films do contribute to the ongoing discussion of the role that history can play in historical films. Options and consequences are discussed by McGee (2012) and Woisnitza (2012).

Relating the film *Marie Krøyer* to the genre level is uncomplicated, yet illuminating. It does not aspire to any remarkable renewal of genres or interesting genre combinations but follows the conventions of mainstream biopics. The film constitutes a traditional adaptation of a bestselling biography into a classical biopic. In the wake of Arnold's biography, it does renew the interpretation of Marie Krøyer's personal biography and her role in the art and lives of her two husbands. It conveys its point of view by focussing on the social and personal limitations of a gifted woman, making use of a realistic style which enters into a dialogue with the well-known paintings and the preconceptions on which the story is based.

### Conclusion

The popularity of history in media culture is highlighted by the many bestsellers and blockbusters currently feeding on historical events and characters. As a result, scholarly attention to the many ways in which history and media culture can be combined is much more acute now than it was just a few decades ago. The abundance of historical representations in fiction presents a challenge: How can we explain this development and in which ways can we analyse the overwhelming stream of productions in the bestseller and blockbuster culture? As always, it is important to distinguish between different levels of enquiry.

Methodologically, I propose to distinguish between the historiographical level, the user-orientated level and the genre-orientated level. The questions asked at the historiographical level can lead to interesting discoveries of fundamental patterns and attitudes in narration. The analyses of the uses and functions of history help determine the intention and purpose of the analysed production, and not least its attitude to current issues by its function as a mirror or a commentary. Here, the genre level is indispensable. Even in the bestseller and blockbuster culture where genres deliver the vehicle of development, the overall category 'historical fiction' is far too broad; genres constantly merge and new subgenres develop, demanding new approaches.

As demonstrated by my single case, one can combine these approaches, and the combination will often yield new insights. Further, the case of *Marie Krøyer* represents a written biography as well as a film, highlighting the relationship between a bestseller and a

blockbuster. The concept of time is expanded chronologically in the book, whereas the mode of narration in the film can be ascribed to the historiographical level and is combined with the functions of remembrance of the past and reflection of the present. This is executed in the biopic, a traditional cinematic genre that has kept up its popular appeal without conspicuous innovations.

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*A Royal Affair*, 2012. [Film] Directed by Nikolaj Arcel. Denmark: Zentropa Entertainments.

*This life*, 2012. [Film] Directed by Anne-Grethe Bjarup Riis. Denmark: Regnar Grasten Film.

*Titanic*, 1997. [Film] Directed by James Cameron. USA: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox.

*Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter*, 2013. [Television miniseries] By Stefan Kolditz. Directed by Philipp Kadelbach. Germany: TeamWorx.

*World Without End*, 2012. [Television miniseries] By Ken Follett, John Pielmeier. Directed by Michael Caton-Jones. Germany, Canada, UK: Tandem Communications.

## Notes

- 1 Cf. the Danish bookseller chains Arnold Busck and Bog og Idé: <<http://www.arnoldbusck.dk/bestsellerlister?gclid=CJL8-bmMuLUCFYlb3godjmUABw>>, <<http://www.bog-ide.dk/?ID=2>> (Accessed 12 July 2013).
- 2 Cf. <<http://ken-follett.com/filmography/>> (Accessed 12 July 2013).
- 3 Andrew Higson (2003) analyzes the specificity of *Elizabeth* (1998) in

relation to its time of production. Ulf Zander (2006) draws attention to the impact that the interpretations of the role of Abraham Lincoln has had on films of American history as a part of a nation-building process.

- 4 Important representatives being Michael Ancher and Anna Ancher, Peder Severin Krøyer and Marie Krøyer, Viggo Johansen, Carl Locher, Holger Drachmann, Hugo Alfvén.
- 5 According to <<http://www.skagensmuseum.dk/shop/show/produkt/dansk/balladen-om-marie-kroeyer-br-af-anastassia-arnold/>> (Accessed 15 August 2013), it has sold 170,000 copies in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. The interest in Marie Krøyer is confirmed by Mette Bøgh Jensen, 2012, focussing on her artistic works.
- 6 Cf. The Danish Film Institute: <<http://www.dfi.dk/FaktaOmFilm/Tal-og-statistik/Billetsalg/Billetsalg-for-danske-film-2012.aspx>> (Accessed 15 August 2013). The three films figure on the top ten-list of Danish films 2012. With 528,425 and 764,516 admissions respectively, *A Royal Affair* and *This Life* were very successful at the box office. *Marie Krøyer* also figures on the top 10 list of DVD-sales (Nielsen, Quarter Top 100, first quarter 2013), as did *A Royal Affair* and *This Life* in 2012. *A Royal Affair* and *This Life* are not based on bestselling novels or biographies to the same extent as *Marie Krøyer*, but they are not without written foundations either, that is, Bodil Steensen Leth's *Prinsesse af blodet* (2000) and Axel Holm's *Hvidstengruppen* (1945, 2012), respectively.
- 7 Cf. Edgerton, 2001.
- 8 Cf. Gray and Bell's statement: "Relatively little is known about who actually watches history programmes and even less is known about what they glean from their viewing" (2013, p. 158).
- 9 Here, Burgoyne echoes Natalie Zemon Davis's *Slaves on Screen* (2000).
- 10 Marie Krøyer came to Skagen for the funeral; the local population blamed her for Krøyer's condition after their divorce, and she was advised not to participate and did not (Arnold, 2012, p. 291). This is visualized in the film by her isolated presence at the funeral.
- 11 The original typology is from a previous version of *Historien är nu*, edited by Karlsson and Zander.
- 12 In the same way, Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln* (2012) conveys a timely commentary to the first period of Barack Obama's presidency. The film was based on Doris Kearns Goodwin's *Team of Rivals* (2005), number 10 on the nonfiction bestseller list of *New York Times*, February

10, 2013, representing another example of the tie-in of biography and blockbuster.

- 13 This was the case with *This Life*. Another example rooted in the same period is the German TV drama *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* (2013), which prompted a veritable wave of memory about life in Germany during WW II.

# When the Ocean Strikes Back

Frank Schätzing's Eco-thriller *The Swarm* and the Pop-cultural Imagination of Global Environmental Disaster

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## Abstract

The disaster scenario is one of the predominant settings we find unfold in the pop-cultural imagination, namely in films and novels. In recent years, as increased awareness of environmental issues affect the agendas of public debate, we also see local and increasingly global environmental disasters depicted in fiction. The most outstanding example of this tendency in German literature is Frank Schätzing's internationally bestselling eco-thriller *The Swarm* from 2004, published in English in 2006 and planned as a Hollywood production in 2015. In Schätzing's book, a global environmental disaster is evolving caused by an intelligent life form of the deep sea striking back at mankind. This article aims at discussing in what ways *The Swarm* uses elements and patterns of the pop-cultural disaster imagination, specifically the disaster and science fiction movie of the 1990s. Furthermore, it investigates how the 'alieness' depicted in the book differs from representations in pop-cultural tradition, challenges the position of the human species in the order of nature, and questions the capacity of humankind to prevent self-extinction. In concluding, a parallel to contemporary cultural theory (Dominic Pettman) problematizing the concept of humanity is drawn.

**Keywords** Frank Schätzing, global environmental disaster, eco-thriller, science fiction, German literature.

### A literary Roland Emmerich

With Frank Schätzing's voluminous page-turner *Der Schwarm* from 2004, published in English as *The Swarm* (2006), and planned as a Hollywood production in 2015, the genre of the global eco-disaster thriller entered the arena of German literature. *The Swarm* offers a catastrophic scenario and a pending apocalypse emanating from the deep sea. When Schätzing's book was published in 2004, its fictitious scenario of nature striking back at mankind still appeared mainly as the scientifically informed fantasy of a gifted bestseller writer. Also, at the time, a tsunami, a natural phenomenon depicted in the book, was unfamiliar to most people. Only months later, as is well-known, a devastating tsunami struck Southeast Asia, and thus in terrible ways converting a part of Schätzing's fictitious scenario into reality.<sup>1</sup> For some scientists, this tsunami already prefigured what could await mankind as a consequence of climate change. In the following years, climate change came, more than ever, on the public agendas. The Copenhagen climate summit failed to accomplish what it set out to do and was followed by disillusion and pessimism, somehow anticipated and mirrored in apocalyptic films such as Roland Emmerich's 2012, John Hillcoat's *The Road* based on Cormac McCarthy's novel (both 2009), and Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011).

Following the publication of *The Swarm* and the raised awareness on climate change, Schätzing has been treated as an environmental expert in the German debate. However, by emphasizing that he writes to entertain people, and that he writes books which he wishes to see on screen (see among others, Körte, 2009), the author is positioning his work explicitly in the bestseller and blockbuster culture. Due to the lack of similar examples in German literature, Schätzing has been compared to authors such as Michael Crichton and Dan Brown and has even been called a literary Roland Emmerich (Körte, 2004). However, when Schätzing's texts are discussed in the German Feuilleton, a dignified cultural institution traditionally confined to "highbrow literature," often the lack of adequate categories becomes visible as the author's books are measured in regard to traditional literary criteria, once even called "surrogate lit-

erature for technocrats" (Detje, 2004, my translation). Nevertheless, in recent years, as in the humanities and cultural studies environmental and eco-critical perspectives have gained interest. *The Swarm* has been treated increasingly by literary and cultural scholars (see for instance, Horn, 2009; Dürbeck, 2010; Otto, 2012).

In this article, I would like to follow the path which the author, both outside and inside his book, has laid out, by highlighting the influence of the pop-cultural disaster and science fiction imagination on *The Swarm*. Specifically, disaster and science fiction movies, mainly from the nineties, are name-dropped and partly discussed critically in the *The Swarm*. It seems worthwhile to ask to what extent this book uses elements and patterns of the genre which it, on a meta-level, refers to. Also, I discuss the problems attached to the use of the blockbuster genre as a platform on which to discuss environmental issues. Here, the main issues are the framing of environmental issues as disaster and the representation of "aliensness."

### **Popularizing environmental issues: (Natural) science as thriller**

If one takes a closer look at *The Swarm*, the impression given to the reader might be one of elaborated, popular scientific essays in the guise of a suspense-packed, but in many regards conventional thriller: "The real strength of *The Swarm* is its science. The author spent four years researching his material, and it shows" (Spencer, 2006). The action within the novel is often interrupted by lengthy digressions providing the reader with detailed knowledge from different domains. These digressions are so predominant that Schätzing's writing has been called "explain-telling" (Matzig, 2009, my translation) and even "Wikipedia in 3D" (Rosenfelder, 2009). In the acknowledgements of his book, a long list of names refer to the experts of many and manifold knowledge fields, mainly of natural science and technology, who provided the author with background information.

Among other fields, the reader is exposed to specific and detailed knowledge on marine biology, offshore oil drilling, microbiology, and geophysics. Only on this background will the reader be able to follow the plot, in which a tsunami destroying Northern Europe is caused by the dissociation of methane hydrate layers in the under-water continental slope near the Norwegian coast. The dissociation

of methane hydrate is caused by numerous methane-eating, mutated worm-like archaeabacteria. Altogether, the protagonists in the book are often non-human and even non-multicellular organisms, protozoa, like the intelligent species from the deep sea. The mysterious antagonist in the thriller, called the yrr, forms well-organized swarms of single-cellular organisms. But *The Swarm* is also populated by many other marine species used by the yrr as killer machines, such as mutated zebra mussels, deadly crabs contaminated by a highly poisoning form of *Pfiesteria*, and aggressively acting orcas. In this way, it is fair to say that Schätzing “achieves the unlikely task of converting geophysics and microbiology into blockbuster material” (Spencer, 2006).

Schätzing’s novel can be subsumed under “hard science fiction,” a genre which widely abstains from fantasy elements, as all the killing sea animals and plants are based on reality, only slightly changed by mutations or occurring more numerous than usually. Clearly, the ambition of the novel is to represent risks and dangers which in some ways could become reality. Apparently, one of Schätzing’s main goals is to inform and maybe even to enlighten readers, and he does so in a, for most of his readers, entertaining way. The author’s narrative technique of “explain-telling” seems to meet the knowledge needs produced by the current climate change debate, also called a “new age of enlightenment” (Hastrup, 2009). One of those needs is to make expert knowledge accessible to the mainstream.

While some find it “hard to think how a calculated blockbuster might intervene in eco-politics” (Branston, 2007, p. 218), for Schätzing, the bestseller and blockbuster culture seems an excellent platform on which to popularize scientific knowledge and to raise the public’s awareness on environmental issues. At least, this is suggested in a non-fiction book which followed *The Swarm* in 2006, *Nachrichten aus einem unbekannten Universum. Eine Zeitreise durch die Meere* (“News from an Unknown Universe. A Time Travel through the Oceans”). Here, the author expands on the science used in *The Swarm* nearly relating the entire history of life on the planet, although mainly focusing on water life. In the beginning of the book, the author explicitly refers to the thriller, the preferred genre of blockbuster culture:

This is no teaching book. No manifesto. It does not mean to impose messages on anybody. This is a thriller, because the history of this planet is nothing else than an enormously exciting story full of unexpected turns and surprises. Nothing in this story is really complicated, let alone boring. [...] *News from an Unknown Universe* only wants one thing: to entertain and to whet the reader's appetite for more (Schätzing, 2006, p. 19, my translation).

In Schätzing's pleading for the democratization of knowledge, the readers are called on to take possession of knowledge, and they are enabled to do so by usurping this knowledge in the framework of popular culture, namely the genre of the thriller. While in postmodernity, there has been much talk of the end of grand narratives, apparently, Schätzing suggests that we again are in need of such a narrative. Many environmentalists would probably agree with this view given recent developments in global efforts to deal with climate change. However, inherent to bestselling thrillers and ever more spectacular "event cinema" (Branston, 2007, p. 211) are rules and conventions that might influence the perception of the represented issues in problematic ways.

### **The aesthetics of the disaster**

Environmental problems have been represented for many years in popular genres, namely in science fiction and disaster literature and movies. In contrast, "realistic" art has been slow to deal with these issues. In his enlightening study on eco-thrillers and environmentalism from 2000, Richard Kerridge explained this absence by the vagueness of environmental issues which "poses problems of representation":

For readers in the West, environmental issues are much more the stuff of potentiality than of actuality: tomorrow rather than now, elsewhere rather than here, a crisis building rather than a crisis reached. Because of their intangibility, such matters can always be postponed; set aside, for now, in the face of more pressingly immediate and familiar demands. Their very reality is constantly in question. (Kerridge 2000: 244).

Looking at popular cultural representations one could argue that the problem of “representability” (Branston, 2007, p. 215) of environmental issues and climate change here is solved by framing these issues as disasters such as in Emmerich’s blockbuster *The Day after Tomorrow* (2004). Sometimes these disasters are depicted in a dystopic future where former eventualities have become realities such as in Kevin Reynolds’ movie *Waterworld* (1995).

These films can be subsumed under the genre of the disaster movie, which in Hollywood had its most formative years in the seventies and the late nineties where the depiction of disaster was “given a spectacular new sheen by recent advances in computer-generated special effects” (Keane, 2001, p. 74). The eco-disaster movie is thus part of a genre where the focus on the aesthetics of the disaster potentially overrides the real background or phenomenon. In the extreme, it might be seen as an interchangeable requisite, be it pollution of the environment, earthquakes, meteorites, volcanos, or an alien invasion in the sci-fi-branch of the genre. As Susan Sontag has stated in her famous essay “The Imagination of Disaster”: “Science fiction films are not about science. They are about disaster” (Sontag, 1965, p. 213).

In the most predominant pop-cultural disaster narrative, the world before the disaster is not identical with the world after it, “things are different,” and the characters exposed to the disaster often have learnt from the experience (Roddick, 1980, p. 259). Kerridge draws attention to this teleology of the crisis represented in eco-thrillers in a clearly criticizing way, in which it is as if “some sort of providence is controlling the experiment and will not permit the wrong ending” (Kerridge, 2000, p. 245). Also Roddick notes, that the catastrophe in the disaster movie functions as “an elemental endurance test imposed on a group of people” (Roddick, 1980, p. 253). In this way, the disaster brings out the best qualities in man providing “an opportunity for heroism and Edenic rebirth” (Kerridge, 2000, p. 245).

As already touched upon, the fictitious disaster does not only do good things for (some of) the characters dealing with it, but also functions as a source of pleasure for the spectator or reader. This ambivalent meaning of the disaster, according to Kerridge, may set “a pattern for our responses to real ecological crisis.” It already does so in terms of the means of representation insofar as news broadcast-

ing often makes use of the same narrative devices and similar “spectacular images” (Bransons, 2007, p. 215) as fiction: “Styles and structures continually cross from fiction to non-fiction” (Kerridge, 2000, p. 246) – and this crossing, one might add, includes the inverse movement as well since the representation of disaster media coverage is an obligatory element in disaster fiction. The very notion of the disaster, meaning an event which suddenly and unexpectedly erupts upon man, is deceptive, as Schätzing points out in *Nachrichten aus einem unbekannten Universum*: Many disasters of today are avoidable considering the level of knowledge and the means humankind has reached, but often it is neglected to make necessary provisions out of ignorance and short-sighted thinking (Schätzing, 2006, p. 285ff.). Thus, disaster fiction in popular culture comes with the underlying ambivalence that what looks very good on screen is in reality often based on severe human failure.

Still, literature provides examples which in many ways deviate from the problematized features of the pop-cultural genre. Looking, for instance, at recent eco-thrillers such as the French author Jean-Marc Ligny’s *Aqua TM* (2006) or British Stephen Baxter’s *Flood* (2008), and its sequel *Ark* (2009), the environmental crisis represented in the books is no temporarily limited incident, but develops over a longer period of time. In these eco-thrillers the experiment is out of control and the pop-cultural “flirting with catastrophe” (Kerridge, 2000, p. 246) turns into a serious relationship. The author of *The Swarm*, as shown in the following, tries to both capture much of the glamor of blockbuster cinema and, at the same time, to distance himself from problematic features of this genre.

### ***The Swarm* and the pop-cultural imagination of disaster**

*The Swarm*’s affinities with the blockbuster culture, namely the disaster and science fiction movie, is not only a matter of styles and structures. Similarities and differences to the respective movies are explicitly debated in the book. A whole range of films are mentioned, and some of them are discussed by the characters, such as *Armageddon*, *Deep Impact*, *The Birds*, *Godzilla*, *Contact*, and *The Abyss* thereby establishing a meta-fictional level, which is used both to reinforce the affinities with the blockbuster genre and to point out the differences.

Book reviewers who have considered *The Swarm* along the criteria of “highbrow literature” have blamed the novel for simplicity, flat characters and an all too straightforward plot. However, if one considers the generic context to which the text itself refers, the disaster movie, the novel becomes anything but simple. Until the middle of *The Swarm*, the very nature of the disaster is unclear; and given the conjectures of terrorist attacks, the reader entertains the possibility that the book could end up as a political thriller. Also in the course of the book, the reader is actually exposed to multiple disasters. Following Roddick who roughly distinguishes between disasters in open spaces with a more or less infinite range such as earthquakes or meteorites, and disasters in closed spaces such as air planes, buses, and ships (the latter being the predominant type in the disaster movie of the seventies, as Roddick (1980, p. 249) points out), one could claim that in *The Swarm*, these two types are combined: In the first part of the book, curious and increasingly worrying incidents occur in the oceans and around coastal areas. At first, little boats disappear, transient killer orca fail to return from their seasonal wanderings as expected, later they return but attack boats and even larger ships as do mussels. Mysterious mutated worms appear on the methane hydrate layers in the underwater continental slope near Norway. Around the world, the coastal areas are being invaded by deadly crabs and jellyfishes. A first climax is reached when a major tsunami hits Northern Europe and a task force is established. In the second part of the book, the catastrophic events in the open do not stop, but the narrative focuses on the task force of scientists and military under U.S. leadership assigned to end the crisis. They are collected on an aircraft carrier floating in the Greenlandic Sea trying to establish direct contact with the maritime enemy and to end the attacks on humankind. On this “floating city” (Schätzing, 2006, p. 567) they experience their own catastrophic showdown.

With the depiction of the disaster on big scale or rather of multiple disasters, Schätzing builds on tendencies of augmentation and exaggeration present in event cinema from the late nineties where the world has been destroyed several times (Keane, 2001). Besides these tendencies of amplification, combination and genre-crossing seem central principles of *The Swarm*. Firstly, the motif of the local or global disaster and the contact with alien life forms are combined as was done in films such as James Cameron’s *The Abyss* (1989) and

Emmerich's *Independence Day* (1996) with roots going back to sci-fi literature such as – the most classical – H.G. Well's *War of the Worlds* (1898) and John Wyndham's maritime version of this theme *The Kraken Wakes* (1953). Secondly, Schätzing borrows from the monster movie, hereby picturing the ocean as a classical locality of the exotic and uncanny. Apart from whales and sharks changing behavior in an aggressive way, the book depicts monster swarms: mutated worms, crabs, deadly jellyfishes and of course the swarms of the yrr. In contrast to the monster movie, the fantasy element here is reduced, as all phenomena are thoroughly explained. Only at first glance, *The Swarm* shares the message of the monster movie, in which "we find that humans, despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary, are the endangered species" (Alaimo, 2001, p. 279). While representations of "monstrous natures" (Alaimo, 279), as Stacy Alaimo put it, "undertake a kind of border work, dramatically distinguishing 'man' from nature" (Alaimo, 280), in *The Swarm*, humankind itself is singled out as the most monstrous of natures.

Roddick mentions in the title of his article, "Only the Stars Survive," an important generic rule of the disaster blockbuster: The teleology of the disaster is noticeable to the extent that it is not arbitrary which characters will lose their lives and in which way they do so. For instance, in Michael Bay's *Armageddon* (1998), the character of Bruce Willis dies the most meaningful death thereby saving the world and, on a more personal level, preventing his future son-in-law from dying. *The Swarm* tries to deviate from this rule with caution. Many of the most important and all dislikeable characters die, but a certain few characters are spared symbolizing hope and the continuation of life. Some of the early victims, Tina Lund and later the student Alicia Delaware, are not the typical casualties of disaster fiction as they are young, likable, and about to establish relationships with other characters. Obviously, *The Swarm* tries to be somewhat more realistic than Hollywood films. Nevertheless, some of the most likable characters do not die before the end of the novel after they have "finished their job" in helping save the world. The mean characters mostly have terrible deaths, while the good ones such as the idealistic environmental activist, Jack "Greyhound," die in dignity. A young couple "in the making," the whale expert Leon Anawak and the science journalist Karen Weaver, both survive.

On the one hand, *The Swarm* stays relatively close to the genre formula with some romantic entanglements and funny, off-hand dialogues, with which we are familiar from recent self-ironical action and disaster movies. On the other hand, the scientific standard of the book is very high and the reader gains many and manifold information on how a global disaster scenario unfolds, and what it means on different levels of modern society and in different parts of the world. Another, however, crucial aspect in which *The Swarm* differs from more conventional disaster fiction is the eco-criticism inherent in the depicting of the catastrophe.

### **The disaster as mystery**

Roddick notes as fundamental phases of the disaster movie narrative "the world before the disaster, the disaster itself, and the world after the disaster" (Roddick, 1980, p. 250). By contrast, in *The Swarm* things are not at all as they should be from the beginning and a critical approach to the status quo is hard to overlook. In fact, the disaster gradually arising in the book is merely a "disaster in the disaster," the latter disaster being normalcy: In the prologue, the reader meets a poor Peruvian fisherman, member of the indigene population, riding his little boat, his "caballito" at sea. He is presented as an example for those who lose in the process of globalization. The "environmental mess" (Schätzing, 2006, p. 4) is about to destroy the fisherman's home and threatens his living through modern overfishing: "the nets that robbed the Pacific of its riches were wide enough to capture twelve jumbo jets at once" (Schätzing, 2006, p. 5). As the young fisherman once was told by his father: "Now we've got two deserts – the plains and the ocean beside them" (Schätzing, 2006, p. 8). The thorough description of how the fisherman, determined to resist the new developments, still fishes the same way as his forefathers did more than a thousand years ago shows an alternative concept to the paradigm of uncontrolled growth. However, very symbolically, he becomes one of the first victims of the incidents leading up to the global disaster scenario.

As mentioned above, the first signs of the disaster in *The Swarm* are various incidents and abnormalities. The connection between these single incidents and local catastrophes remains unclear for a long time and the suspense intensifies as the unknown global disaster evolves. Catastrophic incidents fueling the action alternate with

attempts to solve the mystery around the strange occurrences emanating from the oceans. Lengthy scientific digressions slowing the narration down enable the reader to follow the considerations of the scientist-detectives such as the Canadian Whale expert of Indian origin, Leon Anawak, or the Norwegian scientist, Sigur Johanson, who both join the task force established in response to the global crisis. In the wake of September 11, the lack of clarity, gives, of course, room to speculations about a terroristic attack and the use of biological weapons. As soon as the yrr are identified as the cause of the incidents and most answers are found, speedy action takes completely over leading to the conventional showdown.

The very analysis of the nature of the threatening total disaster – of which the tsunami in Northern Europe only gives a foretaste – is part of its prevention. It requires a perspective which reconsiders the human role on the planet Earth and acknowledges the laws of ecology. As one character, Anawak, has to make peace with his origin, humankind has to understand its own very nature and position in relation to other living beings. This positioning is elaborately discussed in *The Swarm* in relation to the intelligent species of the yrr, the mysterious antagonist of the human.

### **The earthly aliens in *The Swarm***

In science fiction, outer space is traditionally represented as the place where the aliens, the paradigmatic figure of foreignness, reside. However, in *The Swarm*, the typical sci-fi-situation of the “war of the worlds” (Schätzing, 2006, p. 493) is evolving with no interfering from outer space. Still, as this phrasing voiced by one scientist in *The Swarm* suggests, classical science fiction is evoked in the text, especially in the second part when the adversary gains contours. To establish the contact with the other species no other than SETI(‘Search for Extra Terrestrial Intelligence’)-astronomer Jill Tarter, also the role model for the character of Jodie Foster in Robert Zemeckis’s science fiction blockbuster *Contact* (1997) is headhunted to join the task force. In the book named Samantha Crowe, she states that an intelligence race “developed *in parallel* to us,” thus an alternative evolutionary model of earthly intelligence such as the yrr, threatens the positioning of humankind at the “top of terrestrial evolution” (Schätzing, 2006, p. 502).

In most pop-cultural representations, this position of humankind is never challenged by the depicted aliens, and their very alienness which would qualify them somehow as beings independent from human imagination seems questionable. In *The Swarm* considerable space is used to discuss the anthropomorphic way in which extra-terrestrial life forms are depicted in blockbuster movies. In films such as “*Close Encounters of the Third Kind, E.T., Alien, Independence Day, The Abyss, Contact and so on*” (Schätzing, 2006, p. 580), the expert in extra-terrestrial intelligence, Crowe, states, aliens are depicted as “monsters or saints,” they are better than humans (for example in *The Abyss* or *Close Encounters*), or they are far more evil (*Independence Day*), but they are rarely really different. According to Crowe, no serious effort is being made to break free from humanoid navel-gazing and “science fiction never engages with the true alienness of non-human civilisations” (Schätzing, 2006, p. 580).

Schätzing has certainly a point regarding Hollywood event cinema, which is only underpinned by movies shown after the publication of *The Swarm* such as Steven Spielberg’s *War of the Worlds* (2005) or more recently Peter Berg’s *Battleship* (2012). However, a serious engagement with alienness in terms of foreign cultures can be traced back to the finest examples of science fiction literature such as Stanley G. Weinbaum’s short story “*A Martian Odyssey*” (1934). This is also true for other examples of sci-fi literary tradition, which, in addition, share other similarities in themes and motifs with *The Swarm*, such as Stanislaw Lem’s novels *Solaris* (1961) and *The Invincible* (1964), Isaac Asimov’s *Nemesis* (1989), Michael Crichton’s *Prey* (2002), and Alan Dean Foster’s *Cachalot* (1983) and Karel Čapek’s political parable *War with the Newts* (1936) (among others mentioned by the German Wikipedia article on Schätzing’s book).

Returning to the main focus of this article, the relation between *The Swarm* and blockbuster imagination, it becomes clear that the earthly alien protagonists, the yrr, differ from what readers are used to from the genre: In *The Swarm*, we find a “morally neutral” representation insofar as the yrr’s attempts to exterminate human race is based on the instinct of self-preservation and is not a variation of doomsday where humans are punished for their badness. Rather, in a much more “businesslike” way, the reasoning of the yrr is simply that humans have to go because they destroy the living environment of the yrr. To achieve this goal, the yrr use other animals with-

out scruples, for instance, they manipulate orcas to attack boats: "They had been subjugated by a species that was as ruthless as mankind" (Schätzing, 2006, p. 801).

While they are not considered morally superior to man, Schätzing still tries to make the case that the yrr might be the real height of evolution, thereby contradicting the common perception that the evolutionary path with necessity conducts from the simple to the more complex organism. Commonly, other intelligent life forms are imagined similar to humans, complex multicellular beings, conceiving of themselves as individuals. By contrast, the yrr are protozoa whose intelligence only is effectuated in the form of the swarm where they constitute a multicellular life form. The "hypermating DNA" (Schätzing, 2006, p. 755) of every cell allows them to store knowledge biologically, in this way they have a "Memory via mutating DNA" (Schätzing, 2006, p. 751), and they learn speedily as the information of a certain value of every single cell is synchronized with all other cells of the collective. The sheer enormity of the yrr's intelligence is hard to grasp for humans: "Let's say they gained consciousness at the beginning of the Jurassic era. That's two hundred million years ago, and they've been storing knowledge ever since" (Schätzing 2006: 755). The image of this flexible and highly potent life form makes the human species appear almost as clumsy and outdated as dinosaurs:

Humans aren't endowed with genetic memory. For our culture to survive, we need words, written accounts and pictures. We can't transmit experience directly. When our body dies, our mind goes with it. We talk about not forgetting the lessons of the past, but we're kidding ourselves. To forget something you have to be able to remember it. None of us can remember the experience of earlier generations. We can record and refer to other people's memories, but it doesn't alter the fact that *we weren't there* (Schätzing, 2006, p. 755).

While humans, based on the notion of the individual, struggle with their finiteness, "don't have a clear view of the past and [...] don't pay attention to the future" (Schätzing, 2006, p. 756), the yrr act and conceive of themselves as a collective and thus are in a way

immortal and not entangled in personal aims or fears. As the scientists guess, the yrr know about this human condition and that there is no point in negotiating: "Trying to get along with humans is a pipedream. The yrr have seen that" (Schätzing, 2006, p. 757).

This perspective turns common notions on the relation of nature and culture upside down. Inherent to the modern Western concept of culture is the dichotomy between culture and nature. Culture, often roughly understood as human symbolic activity and traditions based on this activity, is also commonly conceptualized in opposition to genetics. Still predominant is the notion of culture as advancement or even something completely new and different compared to "biology." Undoubtedly, one point of *The Swarm* is, that "culture is part of our evolution" (Schätzing, 2006, p. 679). But what more is, in the light of the comparison between humankind and the yrr, culture even appears as a mere prosthesis compensating for poor biological skills. The yrr outcompete humans on their very own field, culture, and in this view, one could even ask, whether human culture is even "biological enough" to supply for what is needed for survival: a reliable memory, long-term planning, and a sense of community. In contrast to man, self-preservation of the species is inscribed in the yrr genetically, so to speak. Still, the alienness of the yrr does not qualify them as real role models for humans: The existence of the collective overrules the right of the individual, and defective members of the collective are destroyed (Schätzing, 2006, p. 756). In this way, the depiction of the yrr is nuanced which only strengthens the "scientific realism" of the representation.

Despite the hopeless possibility of talking the yrr out of attacking humanity, a trick based on the newly gained knowledge on how the yrr communicate prevents total disaster. Of course, this surprising solution in a desperate situation fits well with the disaster thriller. Still, it is a somewhat open ending by granting humankind a delay in which it might, hopefully, make the necessary changes.

### The human factor

As my reading of *The Swarm* has shown, Schätzing achieves two very different things: On the one hand, by sticking to the genre formula of pop-cultural global disaster fiction in several regards – such as the gradual progression of the disaster scenario, the speedy action, and the "economics" of the characters saving the most likable

of them until the very end – the book might appeal to the average moviegoer. In addition, the affinity with the blockbuster genre is made clear by numerous meta-fictional references. On the other hand, representations of the blockbuster genre are criticized based on the very high scientific level which the book is based on. Also, the plot implies a fundamental criticism on the pollution of the environment and a serious challenge for anthropocentrism.

The earthly alien protagonists, the yrr, are to a much higher extent based on scientific knowledge than what the blockbuster imagination has to offer and must be considered as original also in the context of sci-fi literature. According to an influential definition of science fiction there must be a novum in every sci-fi narrative. In *The Swarm*, there is no technical innovation or the assumption that humankind is able to colonize other planets. Rather the novum is an evolutionary alternative, the invention of the yrr. This idea seems impressive in its simplicity and metaphorical truth: aliens have been there all along, they are omnipresent. There is no need to search far away to experience alienness.

By depicting the alienness of the yrr as a single-cell and yet collective existence, a swarm-intelligence, Schätzing draws attention to a field which formerly mostly attracted the interest of natural and computer scientists and only sporadically the attention of authors of science fiction. As formerly mentioned, examples are Lem's *The Invincible*, Vinge's *A Fire Upon the Deep* and Crichton's *Prey*. But differing from other swarms, the yrr are no result of technology (such as the swarms by Lem and Crichton), nor are they foreign life forms inhabiting other planets (such as by Vinge).

Recent developments, namely the internet and the kind of social action that it facilitates, such as awareness- and fund-raising or plagiarism-hunting based on a collective of mutual anonymous internet users, have drawn public attention to the swarm phenomenon. In Schätzing, the swarm appears, on the one hand, as "a threat and the other in opposite to human being, an amorphous being – still a fundament of human existence" (Horn, 2009, p. 102, my translation). On the other hand, the swarm is shown as a "superorganism" characterized by "self-organization and networking" (Dürbeck, 2010, p. 213), features which in certain regards might function as inspiration of how to organize human society.

Challenging the self-conception of humankind in this way in *The Swarm*, Schätzing also enters a debate which is more and more present in philosophy and cultural theory. Recently, Dominik Pettman has discussed human “species-making” thereby questioning the very category of humanity as something given by nature, and in contrast to this, characterizing it, by referring to Judith Butler, as actively “scripted, prompted, blocked and performed” (Pettman, 2011, p. 15). The exceptional position of humankind in the order of nature has been founded on exceptional features and abilities such as intelligence, self-consciousness, cultural production, sense of aesthetics, and so on. But, as detailed research has shown, all those traits are to some degree found in the repertoire of other creatures. In the end, self-reflection and the ability to ascribe certain features and conditions to one self – among them to conceive of oneself as human and thereby to establish a border between oneself and other animals seem to be the one exclusively human feature left: “*man is the animal that must recognize itself as human to be human*” as Giorgio Agamben has stated (qtd. in Pettman, 2011, p. 9).

Schätzing has used the platform of a highly popular genre to highlight very fundamental issues regarding human existence. To a certain extent, the criticism that has been directed at representations of environmental issues in disaster movies and eco-thrillers is also true for *The Swarm*. Still, the meta-fictional layer introduced in the book leaves no doubt about the fictional character of the depicted and the generic frame of the book. It is the high scientific level and yet the clarity with which urgent questions concerning humanity are asked which make them irrefutable.

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## Notes

- 1 It has even been claimed that tourists in the region were saved by reading Schätzing's book, because they could decode the signs of the coming natural occurrences, namely that the ocean retreats before the all destroying flood wave hits the land (Banz, 2013).

# The Climate Catastrophe as Blockbuster

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## Abstract

Modern disaster films constitute a specific cultural form that speaks to the anxieties of the “risk society.” This essay looks at how risks like climate change is presented and constructed in popular culture. It regards blockbuster representations as part of a wider discourse of “catastrophism” within the realm of public climate change communication. For that reason, the essay centers on the interplay between news media and entertainment. It argues that blockbuster disaster films represent an inversion of traditional risk and disaster news.

**Keywords** Climate change, disaster films, catastrophism, risk society.

## Introduction

The idea that modern society produces its own risks (Beck, 1992; 2007) is perhaps nowhere as evident as in the discussion of anthropogenic climate change. While human actions frequently involve some sort of risks, the sum of human activities has recently become so massive that it now influences the entire eco-system. Consequently, it has been suggested that we have entered a new period in

the history of the earth, the so-called *anthroposcene* (Crutzen and Stoermer, 2000). Climate change may be the best illustration of this fundamental shift in which man now has the capacity to influence the destiny of its natural surroundings, for better or worse.

Because of this, climate change has been surrounded by a host of discourses ranging from the dystopian to the optimistic. Dryzek has identified close to ten environmental discourses (Dryzek, 2005), most of which are also to be found in relation to climate change (Eskjær, 2014). Recently, ideas of ecological modernization has again become popular as a consequence of the economic crisis, suggesting that the risks of climate change provides the impetus for an economic transition to green and climate friendly technologies.

Thus, climate change is far from representing a monolithic discourse. In fact, it has been suggested that it is exactly this diversity which hampers any coordinate effort to mitigate and adapt to climate change (Hulme, 2009). Climate change has become a vehicle for all sorts of environmental, economic, or energy-related issues and concerns that a comprehensive answer to all these problems seems increasingly unlikely.

Nevertheless, John Urry suggests that three discourses dominate the debate on climate change (Urry, 2011). These are (a) skepticism, which denies that climate change is a problem; (b) gradualism, which considers climate change a "calculable probabilistic risk" that can be averted; and (c) catastrophism, which argue that major changes in the social and economic system will have to take place to avoid catastrophic climate change.

This essay focuses on the latter, looking at how popular culture, represented by blockbuster films, contributes to the discourse of catastrophism. The aim, however, is not only to investigate popular representations of climate, but also the interplay between climate change news and entertainment. Thus, a central question is how the climate catastrophe is presented in popular culture compared to news media.

The surge in disaster films since the 1970s suggests that the blockbuster disaster film represents a specific cultural form that speaks to the anxieties of the "risk society" (Beck, 2007). Disaster films may be considered a cultural equivalent to social risk calculation producing its own cultural imaginations of risks and disasters. As

such, it participates in generating and sustaining public preoccupations and social anxieties.

What is important, however, is less that popular culture reflects social anxieties (almost a truism) but how these social fears and concerns become articulated and find a particular cultural form. What are the visions of climate change in cinema? How are we solving, surviving, and fighting climate change in blockbuster representations of contemporary risks and disasters? And to what extent is disaster films repeating or challenging dominant ideas of climate change?

### **Between popular culture and political communication**

This approach suggests that political communication cannot be restricted to news media. After all, most of our ideas of gender, politics and law enforcement, to take but a few examples, probably derive from commercials, motion pictures and entertainment as much as from news programs and public debates. The tendency to equate political communication with news is a consequence of academic compartmentalization, but also the result of a limited interpretation of political communication. The latter is often defined as informing, educating, providing platforms for discussions, and a channel for political views and monitoring the authorities (McNair, 2011, pp. 18-20).

Popular culture, however, also educates, informs, and so forth, but based on myths, narratives, and identification rather than facts, arguments, and discussions. In that respect, the following assessment concerning disaster coverage may be equally true of popular culture: "Media and communications [...] increasingly *constitute* disasters, conditioning how they become known, responded to and politically aligned" (Pantti, et al., 2012, p. 13).

Considering popular culture an instant of political communication may challenge academic categorizations. Public opinion research and political actors, however, rarely question the political influence of popular culture. Prior to the release of *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), there were numerous predictions and investigations of the film's impact on public risk perceptions (Leiserowitz, 2004). Pundits like the Danish climate skeptic Bjorn Lomborg warned against the film, claiming that "It is wrong - I would even

say amoral - to overplay the case for combating climate change" (Lomborg, 2004).

The aim of this article, however, is not to assess the influence of popular culture on public opinion, but to look at how risks and disasters like climate change is presented in popular culture in contrast to news media. The assumption is that entertainment offers a virtual side of news. Whereas news is structurally orientated towards the actual, entertainment is concerned with the virtual (Görke, 2001). Entertainment offers visions of that which have not yet occurred, but might take place if things were to unfold as suggested in the news.

It is this virtual side of risks and disasters that is the subject of the present essay. It looks at how visions of climate change are constructed in blockbuster cinema. Moreover, it argues that we are not only presented with a virtual side, but rather an "inverted" vision of climate change compared to how climate change information is presented in the press.

The discussion primarily draws on Hollywood films. Not all of them are directly related to anthropogenic climate change in the sense defined by UN institutions. Nor are they all typical blockbuster films. So far, *The Day After Tomorrow* may be the only box-office hit about "a change of climate that is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere" (IPCC, 2007, p. 30). There are, however, a larger group of films alluding to a changing climate (for example, Roland Emmerich's 2012 [2009]), frequently as a consequence of human activities such as war (*The Road* [2009]), exploitation (*After Earth* [2013]) or fights against aliens (*Oblivion* [2013]). In this context, blockbuster films refer to a loosely defined commercial strategy of spectacular "high concept", big-budget films (Wyatt, 1994) rather than a well-defined narrative alternative to classical cinema (Thompson, 1999; Bordwell, 2006). Nevertheless, these films embody what appears to be an emerging popular culture on the climate catastrophe.<sup>1</sup>

### **Disasters as entertainment: imagining catastrophes**

The catastrophe has always had a firm grip on cultural imaginations, whether it is eschatological ideas of the end of the world (Wagar, 1982), news about natural disasters (Pantti, et al., 2012), or popular fascinations with catastrophes and calamities (Keane, 2001;

Sontag, 1966). The Lisbon earthquake in 1755 has been called “the first event to become major news” (Murteira, 2004), and today disaster reporting has become a stable feature of most news media.

Cinema, considered as the most representative art form of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Hauser, 1979, pp. 463-464), has been particularly important in placing the catastrophe at the center of cultural imaginations. The list of “end of the world” films and cinematic depictions of natural and historical disasters is remarkable. It represents an unbroken continuum from early silent films (for example, *The Last Days of Pompeii* [1913]) to the most recent releases (*World War Z* [2013]; *After Earth*; *Oblivion*; *Elysium* [2013]).

The catastrophe contains many of the essential features of popular narratives: spectacular events, patterns of identification, heroic deeds, nail biting deadlines, and so on. Early, classical, and so-called post-classical cinema has all taken advantage of popular fascination with disasters and catastrophes (Gunning, 1999; Wyatt, 1994; Keane, 2001). Early blockbusters repeatedly centered on “post-industrial disasters,” including modern means of transportation (periled airplanes, capsized ocean liners, runaway trains), ways of living (burning skyscrapers), or leisure activities (avalanches, stadium and amusement park terror). However, cataclysms inflicted on post-industrial societies by natural disasters (volcanoes, meteors) also featured frequently.

Disaster films entail a number of elements associated with blockbuster culture. First and foremost, there is an emphasis on spectacular settings and actions, sometimes at the expense of traditional narrative virtues such as character development and psychological realism. Spectacles often require elaborate special effects, which lead to high production costs. To diminish the resulting financial risks, film stars are frequently engaged to secure popular appeal (further raising the financial stakes). The intimate relations between disaster films and blockbuster films make it somewhat difficult to separate the two phenomena. As a consequence, the list of blockbusters and disaster films frequently overlap (for example, *Titanic* [1997]).

The blockbuster catastrophe draws on both diachronic and synchronic elements. On the one hand, there is a deep-seated cultural fascination with “terminal visions,” whether of a religious or more secular nature (Wagar, 1982). Visions of cataclysm and doomsday

are an integral part of our cultural register. It represents a script that can be activated in relation to different social and cultural phenomena. Thus, in most cultural imaginations of disasters, there is a contemporary dimension that “taps into a national trend or sentiment” (Wyatt, 1994, p. 15).

The popularity of disaster films follows a cyclical pattern, in which the genre appears to have experienced a surge every second decade (Keane, 2001). Looking at recent disaster films, two lines of development can be discerned. First, the 1970s disaster film was typically about man-made disasters such as runaway trains, blazing high-rises, periled airplanes, ocean liners turned upside down, and so on. In the 1990s, when the disaster film experienced a sort of revival, there was a shift towards natural hazards and disasters such as volcanoes, meteor impact, weird weather phenomena, pandemic threats, and so forth. Recently, the two tendencies have merged into a greater interest in man-made, or anthropogenic, natural disasters; what has elsewhere been called “(un)natural” catastrophes (Cottle, 2009).

The concern with man-made disasters has been a regular sub-theme in disaster films. It draws on well-anchored cultural figures like the mad scientist, the notion of hubris, or the Frankenstein myth. Modern cinematic expressions of this tradition include *Arachnophobia* (1990) or *Jurassic Park* (1993). However, man-made disasters have taken on new meaning as they have become increasingly global (for example, *Waterworld* [1995]). And that is the second line of development in recent blockbuster catastrophes. The disaster is no longer particular or regional, limited to a single burning skyscraper or crashed airplane. Rather, the modern disaster involves worldwide catastrophes and global apocalypse (*The Day After Tomorrow*; 2012; *The Road*).

According to Mike Hulme, climate change is loaded with fundamental cultural assumptions about the world (nostalgia, fear, pride and justice). So far, cinema has mainly employed a disaster vocabulary, sustaining a vision or “myth” about global climate change as “presaging Apocalypse” (Hulme, 2010).

### Global disasters and traditional narratives

Disaster news and disaster fiction are sharing a common concern. Both are increasingly dealing with disasters in a globalized con-

text. A recent study suggests that “In an interconnected, globalized and mediated world, disasters are often best conceptualized [...] in relation to endemic and potentially encompassing global crises” (Pantti, et al., 2012, pp. 32-33). In a similar manner, recent blockbusters seem to speak to anxieties of global disorder and a planetary system out of control.

The global orientation in mediated disasters (news as well as fiction) implies what has been called the “geopolitics of disaster.” The concept refers to how media disasters “construct narratives that allow citizens to make sense of disasters within the framework of the nation state and its relations to global power relations” (Pantti, et al., 2012, p. 35).

Two episodes from *The Day after Tomorrow* may illustrate the point. At the beginning of the film, we witness a UN conference on climate change in which the traditional image of global climate change positions and power relations are reproduced. Whereas representatives of the global south appear concerned, the US is skeptical, and apparently blocking any action. Later, as the catastrophe unfolds and threatens to engulf the Northern parts of the US in a new ice age, global power positions are redefined. Thus, in order to open the Mexican border for North American climate refugees, the US has accepted to remit all Latin American debts.

While the latter may suggest that *The Day after Tomorrow* contains somewhat subversive episodes, it could also be considered a fleeting side story in an otherwise traditional narrative about (white) male heroism and restored love relations acted out in a modern flood myth (Salvador and Norton, 2011). Nevertheless, it does indicate that recent blockbuster disaster films increasingly imply some sort of global framework, which may or may not reflect, question or negotiate global power relations. Moreover, the film’s visualization of climate change as a global disaster is reinforcing a perception of climate change as a “mega-problem,” something that increasingly appears to be a problematic approach to the complex interdependencies of climate change (Hulme, 2009, p. 334).

### **From facts to fiction: narrativizing disasters**

While blockbuster disaster films both draw on and articulate social anxieties and/or contemporary risk perceptions, it rarely offers any realistic picture of (un)natural disasters based on scientific or his-

torical facts. *Titanic*, for instance, omitted the fatal details about the nearby ship, The Californian, which turned off radio contact. As a consequence, it did not receive the SOS calls from *Titanic*. However, according to the director James Cameron, this crucial historical fact would have been a sort of epic noise: "If *Titanic* is powerful as a metaphor, as a microcosm, for the end of the world in a sense, then that world must be self-contained [...] Ultimately, it [The Californian] wasn't important" (Schulz, 1997). While this historical inaccuracy in *Titanic* created little stir, a film like *The Day After Tomorrow* met considerable criticism for distorting scientific facts regarding climatic shifts, meteorology and basic rules of physics (AP, 2004; Climatesight 2012; DMI 2013).

The latter critique is rather symptomatic. It illustrates the prejudices that still govern cultural attitudes towards popular culture. Just as politicians warn that the film may influence public opinion on climate change, so scientists fear that the film misinforms the public regarding scientific evidence. The irony is, of course, that no one criticizes science for the lack of narrative coherence or *belles-lettres*. Science is concerned with the distinction truth/false, not cultural expressions of popular anxieties. Thus, while politics is regarded as the quest for legitimate power, and science as bound by truth, popular culture is obliged to observe *both* scientific facts and political neutrality, while doing so in a spectacular and entertaining manner based on cultural norms and conventions.

It demonstrates two things. First of all, it is a token of the cultural asymmetries that exist between different social fields. In principle, social systems are functionally autonomous (Luhmann, 1997). However, in the social realm of competing individuals and interests they become subject to social distinctions and institutional power relations. Thus, the art system has traditionally been able to impose its norms and values (innovation, formal autonomy, ambiguity, contingency, and so on) on other cultural expressions, while the opposite is rarely the case. Who would criticize art-cinema disaster films like *Stalker* (1979), *The Element of Crime* (1984), or *Le Temp du Loup* (2003) for lack of realism or narrative fragmentation? In a similar manner, scientific knowledge is regarded as belonging to a higher social order than commercial entertainment based on popular myths.

Secondly, it reveals the typical fear of popular culture and its assumed influence on the (uneducated) masses, which tradition-

ally has surrounded cinema. The speculations about the influence of, for example, *The Day After Tomorrow* on public opinion show that this fundamental suspicion is still thriving.

Nevertheless, the quote by Cameron suggests that fiction films are not compelled by historical or scientific facts. The aim of cinema is to entertain, offer solutions to self-produced conflicts and facilitate structures of identification. Cinema, in other words, is structured by its own codes and norms that primarily derive from the media system (Luhmann, 1996). Thus, despite the lack of realism or scientific accuracy, blockbuster films contribute to public risk perception by offering a particular version of global catastrophes based on popular, self-enclosed narratives of disasters.

### **Blockbuster disaster films: the inversion of news**

News of climate change generally provides fragmented scientific facts about likely outcomes of anthropogenic activities as well as reporting on collective responses and solutions to probabilistic risks. In contrast, blockbuster disaster films offer coherent but unrealistic visions of future risks based on unscientific cause-effect chains as a backdrop for individual rather than collective survivalism. Herein lies the basic principle behind the inversion of risk and disaster news in popular culture. It explains both the public fascination with, and the cultural suspicion of, blockbuster disaster films.

Firstly, in blockbuster products (literature and films) risks become disasters. Technological and natural risks turn into full-blown catastrophes in blockbuster fiction, wrecking havoc on local communities, entire nations or, as recently witnessed, the global ecosystem. Thus uncertainty is turned into certainty and the future becomes the present. The end of the world is no longer something to fear but something to be experienced.

Secondly, classical narration focuses on individuals or a small group of individuals, also known as the ensemble play or *Grand Hotel* formula. Thus, unlike disaster news – which is mainly preoccupied with collective “catastrophism,” impacts on communities, and political (in)action – disaster fiction is about individuals enduring all sorts of catastrophes. Abstract and anonymous risks become individualized struggles for survival. However, in the ritualized communication of popular culture, the real question is

rarely *if*, but rather *how* the protagonists escape from a burning tower, a sinking cruiser, a deadly virus, a post-apocalyptic world, or major climatic shifts.

One of the theoretical discussions surrounding blockbuster fiction is to what extent it breaks with, or is continuation of, classical narration. It has been argued that blockbuster films represent a post-classical cinema that is more concerned with “the look, the hook and the book” rather than character psychology and narrative coherence (Wyatt, 1994). Others have argued that while the blockbuster represents an intensified form of filmmaking, it still rests on classical narrative principles (Bordwell, 2006).

While disaster blockbusters certainly excel in spectacular effects, it also seems as if the subject matter of disasters require a rather classical character presentations in order to counterweigh the somewhat implausible settings. There are exceptions, but in general disaster films entail traditional patterns of psychological realism and character development. That may also account for the rather steady popularity of the genre.

Thirdly, risk coverage and disaster news is often about solutions to actual or future disasters, the wider consequences to communities and nations, questions of responsibilities and guilt, or the prospect of learning from present disasters and avoiding future repetitions. Disaster fiction, however, is about the here and now, of survival from one moment to the other in which the future and the wider community is of little importance.

Finally, being concerned with probabilistic risks of global disasters, news reports nourish anxieties about social stability and personal consequences. In contrast, disaster fiction is a constant reassurance that personal survival, however unlikely it may seem, is not only possible, but also the norm. As spectators, we will experience mayhem and horror; we may even watch entire countries and continents perish, but our fictive *alter ego* tends to survive leaving the spectator with a glimmer of hope and comfort.

Blockbuster disasters are fascinating in and for themselves. But they become even more fascinating when regarded as part of a wider discourse of “catastrophism” and resonating with a broader culture of disaster. As the climate is changing, so will our ideas and stories of climate change also find new forms and articulations (Hulme, 2009, p. 330). This essay has related blockbuster disasters

to public anxieties and elitist fears of popular culture; to scientific uneasiness with distortion of facts and science; to the visualization of climate change as a mega-problem and a myth of the apocalypse; as an inversion of disaster news and the improbable but comforting focus on individual survival. It is in this sense we may consider disaster blockbusters a cultural equivalent to social risk calculations: one that probes into public fears and concerns by speaking to the anxieties and imaginations of the risk society.

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### Notes

1 For a somewhat similar tendency in popular literature see Andersen (2014).

# Porous Borders

Crossing the Boundaries to ‘Eastern Europe’  
in Scandinavian Crime Fiction

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## Abstract

In Scandinavian crime fiction, an implicit dynamics is noticeable between the adjacent worlds: Scandinavia and ‘Eastern Europe’. The author of the article approaches their relation using the two interrelated concepts of *border* and *boundary* (Casey, 2011). While borders are fixed and established by conventional agreements, boundaries are natural, perforated, and undermine the impenetrability of the border. Accordingly, two main strands are discernible within the representations of ‘Eastern Europe’ in Scandinavian crime fiction: a ‘border perspective’ and a ‘boundary perspective’. The first strand is rooted in the old world with pronounced national divisions, while the other anticipates a globalised world, involving a dynamic view of the relation between the neighbours across the Baltic. As the article attempts to demonstrate, the *border/boundary* distinction can be fruitfully applied to the analysis of the Scandinavian discourse on ‘Eastern Europe’ with all its implications.

**Keywords** border/boundary, Scandinavian crime fiction, ‘Eastern Europe’, adjacency, suppression, neighbour.

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### The drama of crossing borders

The acts of crossing borders between 'Eastern Europe'<sup>1</sup> and Scandinavia are typically represented as accompanied by strong affect and fear – especially in crime fiction. Two episodes from the novels discussed below are striking in this respect. In the Swedish author Henning Mankell's *Hundarna i Riga/The Dogs of Riga* (1992), Kurt Wallander's illegal crossing of the border between Lithuania and Latvia under cover of night serves as a point of no return in the fabula. Having earlier crossed several other borders (German-Polish, Polish-Lithuanian), Wallander perceives the whole travel as a trip deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness. His thoughts are narrated as follows:

The border was invisible. It was there nevertheless, inside him, like a coil of barbed wire, just under his breastbone. Kurt Wallander was scared. He would look back on the final steps he took on Lithuanian soil to the Latvian border as a crippling trek towards a country from where he would find himself shouting Dante's words: Abandon hope, all ye who enter here! (Mankell, 2012, p. 251)

In the Danish writer Leif Davidsen's *Den russiske sangerinde/The Russian Singer* (1988), the climax scene at the end of the novel reads as follows:

We drove down toward the last frontier gate and stopped sixty feet before it. [...] [An officer] stepped out in the middle of the road and released the safety catch of his machine gun. The gate stayed down. [...] The general's long tentacles reached all the way into the KGB's frontier corps, I realized in one absurd second, just before I stepped hard on the gas. It was like a film that ran too fast, and yet it was in slow motion. Then time stood still as I saw one half of the officer's head disappear in a cloud of blood before he was hurled along the road. [...] I let all the horsepower of the Volvo set off with a roar, crashing through the gate into Finland. [...] The guests of the cafeteria were sitting outside at white tables in the mild summer morning. (Davidsen, 1991, pp. 274-5)

The two excerpts provide typical examples of both affective and narrative dramatisation of border crossing, indicating the significance attached to borders separating Eastern Europe and Scandinavia. They represent borders between two utterly different worlds: the civilised and uncivilised, safe and dangerous, visible and invisible, known and unknown (Wolff, 1994). Indeed, crossing the border to the 'other' world feels so strange that it can only be compared to literature (Mankell) or an action movie (Davidson). The border represents an ultimate edge of 'our' world and experience. At the same time, however, it implies that the two worlds are adjacent. In other words, they are neighbours.

This article argues that within Scandinavian crime fiction an implicit dynamics exists between the two adjacent worlds: Scandinavia and Eastern Europe, and that this dynamics can be understood by using two interrelated concepts of 'border' and 'boundary'. With their help, I will distinguish two central strands within representations of Eastern Europe in Scandinavian crime novels: a 'border perspective' and a 'boundary perspective'. The first one is rooted in the old world with pronounced national divisions, while the other anticipates a globalised world with the question of borders at stake.

The examples derive from *The Dogs of Riga*, Mankell's second novel in his Kurt Wallander police procedural series, and Davidson's political thriller *The Russian Singer*, the opening part of the so-called Russian tetralogy (recently expanded to pentalogy).<sup>2</sup> Both novels were written around the time of the political reorientation of 1989/91 in Europe. While they have a lot in common regarding the importance attached to the Scandinavian-East European border, they also manifest meaningful differences. Whereas Mankell questions the fixed status of the border between the two neighbours, due to which his book can be perceived as representing the emergence of a new discourse on Eastern Europe in Scandinavia, Davidson reproduces a familiar discourse known from the Enlightenment (Wolff, 1994), as well as from 19<sup>th</sup> century and the Cold War. Despite the fact that the entire Russian series was written after 1989, with the exception of *The Russian Singer*, they all, even the most recent (Davidson, 2013), reproduce a similar discourse.

As many scholars observed, place has gained increased significance in Scandinavian crime fiction in the post-Cold War period. Globalisation and regionalisation have created 'new ties between

places, undermining, for example, distinctions between national identities' (Nestingen and Arvas, 2011, p. 11). Reflecting on place in the Kurt Wallander series, Paula Arvas and Andrew Nestingen, along with Shane McCristine, note: 'the series' pessimistic tone is created by continually undermining certainties about the relations constituting place. The place of Others, the place of Sweden and the place of Wallander are [...] haunted by the fluidity [...] which makes securing a stable orientation impossible' (Nestingen and Arvas, 2011, p. 11).

### Borders and boundaries

No place is separate from its constituting element: the outer and inner borders. The ways the outer limits of Eastern Europe are represented in the two novels vary significantly. In *The Russian Singer*, the Soviet Union and Scandinavia (Norden) are staged as two disjointed systems with only spare interconnections. Davidsen's protagonist, Jack Andersen, represents a one-dimensional, non-evolving view on Russia. In Mankell's novel, Kurt Wallander, 'an agent of the very establishment targeted for criticism' (McCristine, 2011, p. 78), represents an example of the opposite. In a xenophobic fashion, he wishes to separate the two spaces but gradually realises that their interconnectedness is impossible to suppress. As the story unfolds, the presence of the 'other' space is made increasingly manifest within Wallander's own world (Sweden), not only on 'the other side of the Baltic' (Mankell, 2012, p. 46).

In his research on different types of edges in human experience, the American philosopher Edward S. Casey distinguishes between *borders* and *boundaries*. While borders are established by conventional agreements and emerge as a product of human history, boundaries are paradigmatically natural and perforated, allowing for the border to breathe (Casey, 2011, p. 388); while borders are fixed and can be measured, boundaries allow negotiation. However, as Casey emphasises, we cannot think about the edge in terms of 'either...or'. *Border* and *boundary* are two aspects of the same edge, even though they belong to ontologically different dimensions (Casey, 2011, p. 395). What is more, '*borders are always already in the process of becoming boundaries*' (Casey, 2011, p. 393, original emphasis).

It is noteworthy that Wallander crosses the border to Latvia during night, while Jack Andersen forces his car through the gate to

Finland in the daylight. If we relate Casey's border/boundary distinction to the differentiation made by the French anthropologist Gilbert Durand between the diurnal and nocturnal regimes of representation (Durand, 2002), then *border* can be thought of as 'diurnal', that is, belonging to the day, ruled by the rational, the solid and the rigid, pointing to division and separation. *Boundary*, on the other hand, represents the opposite: a 'nocturnal regime' characterised by fluidity, elusiveness and a porous structure, inviting disturbing and subversive elements. In Durand's model (elaborated, worth noticing, around 1960, still before the feminist turn in the humanities), the configuration is gendered: while the diurnal is ruled by active male subjects, the nocturnal is inhabited by female, passive objects (Chambers, 2001, p. 104). The relation is thus hierarchical. In the discussed novels, a striking dependency emerges between border/boundary dynamics and gender dynamics.

The spatial and temporal constellation in Mankell's novel, partly set in Ystad, a small town at the southern coast of Sweden, and partly in Riga, in February 1991, the Berlin wall having already 'fallen', but the destiny of the Baltic countries still unknown, carries an important message. As the Swedish author Mariah Larsson notes, 'Sweden's relation to the Baltic states as well as the Soviet Union is complex and problematic. Historically, a large portion of the Swedish colonial expansion project stretched to the east, and during the Cold War, Sweden as a neutral "middle way" nation was not only geographically but also ideologically located in between NATO and the Warsaw pact' (Larsson, 2010, p. 33). According to Larsson, these facts triggered 'a national anxiety interspersed with a vague sense of guilt' (Larsson, 2010, p. 22). Sweden's constant oscillation between East and West and their official neutrality policy impelled the authorities to turn a blind eye to the oppression of their Baltic neighbours by the Soviets. Another reason was the safety of the extensive Latvian and Estonian minorities, mainly refugees from the time of WW2, threatened by 'repatriation' to the USSR (Lundén and Nilsson, 2006, p. 4).

In Mankell's novel, the Baltic Sea acquires a metaphorical dimension – it is a boundary by its very nature; its fluency and porosity disseminate to the plot construction and relations between the actors; they also affect Wallander's perception of reality. Shortly after a life-raft with two Russian corpses reaches the Swedish coast – an

event that commences the criminal plot – the Baltic becomes the subject of inspector Kurt Wallander’s frequent reflections, eventually forcing him to re-evaluate Sweden’s – and his own – position in the surrounding world. The Baltic’s fluent nature allows for the boundary-aspect to dominate the fixity of the political border. It lets ‘other’ elements through – such as the dead Russians. The sea connotes *both* adjacency, which raises Wallander’s fear, *and* an ostensibly safe distance. This ambivalent perception of the Baltic – as both an imagined protective moat and the place of an unidentified danger originating from the East – corresponds to discourses present in Swedish politics in the earlier decades of the Cold War (af Malmborg, 2001, p. 159). Wallander, who embodies the ambiguity of growing xenophobia, on the one hand, and Swedish moral conscience, on the other (McCorristine, 2011, p. 78), wishes borders to be borders (and not boundaries). However, as the plot unfolds, his hope of staying safely isolated and uninvolved fades. The process includes Wallander becoming gradually aware of gaps in his knowledge regarding the history Sweden shares with its Latvian neighbour. He learns, for instance, about the existence of the Latvian minority in Sweden. The ambiguity of attraction and fear to what is on the ‘other’ shore of the Baltic reaches its climax when Wallander travels to Latvia illegally in the second part of the novel – thus allowing for the boundary to take command over border and, moreover, reversing the traditional direction of illegal movement.

What happens, then, after Wallander has illegally crossed the border? First of all, he loses his firm position as a subject in narratological terms, instead becoming a helper. The process comprises a meaningful reversal regarding both national and gender roles: the main Latvian female character, Baiba, the widow of a murdered dissident (major Liepa), becomes the *subject*, while Wallander turns – at least briefly – into an *object* of internal play between Latvian dissidents and the pro-Soviet authorities. The aim is to get hold of major Liepa’s secret report before the pro-Soviet police find it. Meanwhile, Wallander falls in love with Baiba, who rejects him. In contrast to Davidsen’s novels in which traditionally understood gender roles are strongly represented, in Mankell, these roles are challenged. Baiba embodies separation and difference, while Wallander reorients his attitude towards the scenarios of the nocturnal: involvement and connection across national,

cultural and gender divisions. In the end, he realises how difficult they are to enact.

Using A.J. Greimas' narratological term, both the political situation in Latvia and Baiba become Wallander's destinators, a role belonging to the Swedish police and authorities in the first part of the novel (Stjernfelt, 2003, p. 138). Simultaneously, Wallander's position changes from being an ordinary Swedish policeman to Baiba's and the dissidents' private detective. A detective typically transgresses the average, norms and codes governing the police, and accordingly, does not work 'by the book' (Stjernfelt, 2003, p. 141). 'Average' can here mean both Swedish and Soviet standards. Wallander's transnational encounter, his 'boundary experience', opens his eyes to the relativity of such apparently neutral dimensions as law or police investigation rules. Paradoxically, during the Swedish part of the investigation, Wallander is impelled to act according to the Soviet destinator (whose 'middlemen' are the Swedish diplomats fearing that the 'Latvian case' can bring political discord), while when in Latvia, his acts are guided by the anti-Soviet destinators. Thereby, Mankell brings paradoxes into focus: the contrast between Sweden and Latvia is less clear than it might seem at first. At least it rests upon other factors than the trite visible/invisible, civilised/uncivilised, secure/insecure binaries. In Sweden, the lack of transparency is hidden, while in Latvia it is a self-evident condition; in Latvia, insecurity is obvious, while Swedes 'have been lulled into a false sense of security' (McCorristine, 2011, p. 78).

As Charity Scribner observed, the disintegration of Eastern Bloc socialist countries 'prompted comparisons to the exhausted welfare states of the West' (Scribner, 2003, p. 64). Wallander's meeting with Latvia makes him disillusioned about *Folkhemmet* (People's Home), the ideal of Swedish welfare state defined by social equality and moral decency (Tapper, 2011, p. 22). Unlike in a typical police procedural, Mankell's novel does not serve as a 'comforting reassurance to the reader that there is discipline and justice in society' (Bergman, 2011, p. 35). In Davidsen's *The Russian Singer*, the Danish authorities' acceptance of the Soviet conditions is also approached critically. However, the oppositions are fixed: Russia unchangeably remains dystopian and fascinating, while Denmark is the quiet and rightful welfare state, the place of "Interlude", where the protago-

nist lives peacefully, trying to forget his impeded diplomatic career at the Danish embassy in Moscow.

In Davidsen's novel, the diurnal regime clearly persists. Certainly, the black-and-white reality is partly determined by the political thriller genre, where distinctions between East and West are sharp (Davidsen, 1999, p. 3). Again, the clear-cut divisions relate to the strong position of the subject. Davidsen's hero, unlike Mankell's anti-hero, represents a masculine James Bond-like type, who is well-oriented in international affairs. Equally, the plots and trajectories in Davidsen's novel include dividing and separating (Chambers, 2001, p. 104), which additionally resonate in the borders that can be measured precisely. In *The Russian Singer*, it reads: 'I drove the sixty feet to the small cafeteria [on the Finnish side] and stepped into civilization' (Davidsen, 1991, p. 186). Davidsen's use of the term 'civilization' is supposed to denote a highly developed standard of living, as opposed to the uncivilised, underdeveloped Soviet world. As in Georg Brandes's travelogues, *Indtryk fra Polen / Impressions of Poland* (1888) and *Indtryk fra Rusland / Impressions of Russia* (1888), the border represents the beginning (or end) of the 'other' world – dangerous, invisible, and unknown. Paradoxically, however, the 'other', Eastern Europe, is unchangeably known-and-visible for Davidsen's protagonist. The recognition of the Soviet Union as a criminal place is introduced to the reader from the very beginning. Unlike in *The Dogs of Riga*, in Davidsen's novel Eastern Europe is always already a crime scene – and always already familiar to the main protagonist. The representations of the place are filtered through the authority of the speaker, unmistakably well-informed about the (dystopian) reality he confronts. In other words, the speaker takes the position of a superior subject-in-control, while what is seen in front of him and described becomes positioned as an inferior object. The opening paragraphs of *The Russian Singer*, narrated in first person, introduce the reader to Moscow – or rather, a tiny part of Moscow, limited to what the protagonist can see through his window. However, the description of the Sadovaya street, seen from Jack Andersen's room, quickly turns into a metaphor of the whole city and, finally, the Soviet society and its political situation:

As often before, I was looking down upon the *scarred asphalt* of the Sadovaya, where the frozen mixture of ice,

gravel, and snow looked *like a bandage that should have been changed a long time ago*. The Sadovaya is the ring road that surrounds the center of Moscow like a cigar band. It means the Garden Road, but *like almost everything else in the city, the beautiful name covered an unpleasant reality*. The Soviet Union is a society that distinguishes itself by describing lies as truths and staring them straight in the face before turning its back on them, pretending that they do not exist. [...] A deep-frozen night, when *the dark stillness of Moscow* grew even quieter, so that *all lonely and unhappy people* did not know what to do with themselves; *when the choice seemed to be between the bottle and suicide*. It was early January, and the cold cut deeper than the thermometer showed, because it had come from the depths of Siberia surprisingly and suddenly after days of thaw and slush and false promises of impending spring.<sup>3</sup> Like many times before, I stood by the window smoking my pipe and looking out over the *lifeless city* [...] Sharp icicles hung *like fangs* along the roofs. (Davidson, 1991, pp. 3-4, added emphases)

The gaze of the narrator – or rather, his voice and the rhetorical devices such as metaphor, hyperbole or animization (in italics) – transform the view unfolding in front of his eyes into an imaginary spectacle of horror and hopelessness. The aura of the place resides in its imagined, life-threatening danger. Inanimate objects are attributed features of living creatures – and deprived of life again. Thus, the rhetoric enacts stereotype. As the Indian theoretician Homi Bhabha noted, stereotype is the major discursive strategy of fixity, ‘a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and demonic repetition’ (Bhabha, 2004, p. 94). This paradox inherent in stereotype guarantees its currency: it ‘ensures its repeatability in changing historical and discursive conjunctures’ (Bhabha, 2004, p. 95).

A striking difference between the two authors lies in that while Davidson stages the border as constituted by the ‘other’, Soviet side, in *The Dogs of Riga* the border is being established from both sides: the East European as well as the Swedish (the border is ‘inside him’ [Mankell, 2012, p. 251]). While Mankell narratively destabilises the border and gives way to boundary (both thematically by making it

porous and narratively by displacing the protagonist from the subject position), Davidsen establishes a 'regime of antithesis' (Durand, 2002, p. 31). Gender relations only confirm this. As the Spanish scholar Ana Manzanas put it, 'As a representation of the vertical axis, the wall / fence stands as a crucible of power and phallicism' (Manzanas, 2007, p. 11). Unlike in Mankell's novel, where the female Latvian protagonist acts as a subject and destinatary, Davidsen's female protagonist, Lilli, functions both as a victim of the Soviet system and as an object of exchange across the border. Thus, Jack will only reveal his secret knowledge to the Soviet authorities on the condition that they let Lilli travel with him to Denmark. Finally, the difference between Mankell and Davidsen rests upon the degree of satisfaction and fulfillment gained by the protagonists, both in sexual and professional terms: while Jack wins Lilli's love and is presented in the Soviet media as a hero, Wallander does not manage to ignite Baiba's feelings, and the Swedish police never learn about his successful performance in Latvia. Wallander gets neither a 'reward' (a woman) nor satisfaction derived from being officially acknowledged for his deeds.

### **Suppression and change**

The 'boundary perspective' in Mankell's novel involves another relevant aspect. Drawing on a spatial metaphor employed by Sigmund Freud (Freud, 2012), I will call it suppression. Suppression related to and exposed by border crossings in *The Dogs of Riga* occurs as an incidental emergence of both geographical and historical issues, encompassing the mentioned 'vague sense of guilt' in relation to the Baltic neighbours (Larsson, 2010, p. 22). Erecting any borders, whether visible walls and fences or invisible political borderlines, involves suppression or disavowal of some kind (Scribner, 2003, pp. 135-36). What distinguishes Mankell's 'boundary perspective' from Davidsen's 'border perspective' is that while the Swedish author makes suppression a subject of reflection, a feature that exceeds the formula of the genre, Davidsen with *The Russian Singer* acts as its agent.

Wallander's growing awareness of the Latvian neighbour's existence on the 'other' shore of the Baltic emerges as a 'side effect' of the investigation he conducts, to begin with officially in Ystad, and later unofficially in Riga. Concurrently, in the fabula Wallander is

clearly opposed to the central Swedish authorities, who – fearing the Soviets – monitor the investigation. Both the authorities and Wallander exhibit suppression towards Sweden's Baltic neighbours. I will argue, however, that whereas the authorities represent fixity and adjustment, Wallander represents a unit of change, subject to revision and dynamism. Wallander tries to overcome his ignorance and understand the Latvian 'other', who knocks on the door of his moral conscience.

The Baltic Sea is directly related to the layer of suppression in the fabula. In the context of what could be called 'suppression and geography', I will recall a useful spatial metaphor employed by Freud, where crossing a border (threshold) illustrates the psychological phenomenon of suppression:

We will compare the system of the unconscious to a large *ante-chamber*, in which the psychic impulses rub elbows with one another, as separate beings. There opens out of this ante-chamber another, a smaller room, a sort of *parlor*, which consciousness occupies. But on the *threshold* between the two rooms there stands a *watchman*; he passes on the individual psychic impulses, censors them, and will not let them into the parlor if they do not meet with his approval. (Freud, 2012, p. 256, added emphases)

Freud discusses here the individual psychological process of suppression. However, if we extend the metaphor of an antechamber and a parlour to any kind of two adjacent spaces, separated by a 'threshold', that is, a border overseen by a 'watchman', where the movement from the 'antechamber' to the 'parlor' is a strictly controlled process, then it can be fruitfully applied to a literary representation of two neighbouring countries sharing a common history, one having the status of the centre or 'parlor', the other of a forgotten periphery or 'antechamber'. Suppression can be viewed as a cultural phenomenon, related to space, borders and history.

Indeed, already at its very beginning, the novel introduces the reader to an act of suppression, revealing the porous structure of the borderline connected to the prevailing Cold War reality. In chapter one, set on the Baltic Sea, we encounter a Swedish smuggler, an obscure figure who transports goods from Sweden to the (former)

Eastern Germany on his fishing boat. When he discovers a life-raft drifting on the sea with two dead bodies in it, he decides not to take any steps or notify the police – to avoid disclosing his illegal activity. However, nagged by guilt, he finally tows the raft closer to the Swedish coast and sails away. The fact that the attempt of suppression, in other words, pretending that the life-raft was non-existent, takes place on the Baltic Sea, is meaningful – the sea is a borderland, in its nature closer to the fluent boundary than fixed border (Casey, 2007, p. 389), between the former Warsaw pact countries and Sweden. The smuggler operates in a grey zone in-between, demonstrating that both sides, the 'neutral' Sweden and Eastern Bloc, are dependent on each other and draw mutual benefits from the Cold War order.

Likewise, throughout the story, both Wallander and the officials from Stockholm attempt to keep the 'Latvian case' away, move it back to the 'antechamber'. However, as the story unfolds, not only the physical closeness, but also fragments of historical connections emerge, entering the 'parlor' and revealing themselves as suppressed from the official discourse, as well as missing in the awareness of the individual.

A relevant example of suppression occurs when Wallander is reminded about the Swedish hegemony in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in the areas of today's Latvia, a part of history that has almost been forgotten in Swedish schoolbooks (Maciejewski, 2001, p. 56).<sup>4</sup> Significantly, Wallander is reminded about this historical fact by a pro-Soviet police officer, who suggests a parallel between the bygone Swedish and current Soviet imperialism. Indirectly, Sweden's colonial past as a superpower in the Baltic Sea area is recalled, the period when Russia was her most important rival. These oppositions, as Støren and Salicath emphasise, did not disappear after Sweden's influence gradually faded (Støren and Salicath, 1986, p. 2). Wallander visits the Swedish Gate in Riga, originating from that time, but his attitude can be said to illustrate suppression:

[He realised that] it must be the Swedish Gate [...]. He shivered. It had grown cold again. He inspected the cracked brick wall absent-mindedly, and tried to decipher some ancient symbols carved into it. He gave up more or

less straight away, and went back to the car. (Mankell, 2012, p. 221)

As Casey observes, 'If external edges serve to terminate something, internal edges complicate it from within. [They] may indicate still deeper structures that are themselves hidden from view' (Casey, 2011, p. 384). As the boundary grows in importance in *The Dogs of Riga*, unwanted and suppressed impulses, 'internal edges', gradually emerge in Wallander's awareness. Many remain in his 'fore-conscious' (Freud, 2012, p. 256). All of them, however, invite the protagonist and the reader to re-imagine both past and present connections across the border. Bringing 'transnational interconnection into adjacent frames', they are 'a way of disrupting certainty of perspective' (Nestingen, 2008, pp. 231).

Mankell's and Davidsen's novels, originating from more or less the same time, represent two parallel, significantly different narratives on the border and boundary between Scandinavia and Eastern Europe. Mankell's novel can be perceived as an emerging new discourse or reshaping of the old one, while Davidsen's is fixed and rooted in the long-established tradition. I view these two approaches as two external poles, not necessarily occurring separately, often mingling in different proportions, on the continuum of contemporary Scandinavian discourse on Eastern Europe – both in crime fiction and other cultural works involved with the subject.

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## Notes

- 1 The inverted commas are used here for the term 'Eastern Europe' (left out in the rest of the article) to indicate its constructedness and the fact that the term does not mirror geographical, political and cultural reality. In this respect, see also Wolff (1994) and Mrozewicz (2013).
- 2 Other examples include Kaaberbøll and Friis (2008; 2010; 2011), and Småge (1997).
- 3 This sentence is an implicit reference to a concrete political situation, helping us define the time when the plot begins as early January 1985. After a short 'thaw' period of Yuri Andropov's rule, Konstantin

Chernenko became the leader of the Soviet Union in February 1984, his politics being viewed as a return to the strict policies of the late Leonid Brezhnev era.

- 4 Maciejewski's observation regards the so-called Swedish Deluge (in Polish *Potop Szwedzki*), that is, a series of mid-17th-century campaigns of Swedish army in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (Maciejewski, 2001, p. 56).

# Fifty Shades of Seriality and E-Readers Games

## Key Note Speech

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### Abstract

Jim Collins' keynote lecture focuses on serial narrative and e-readers, their simultaneous developments and interconnections. He considers how both the bestseller and the blockbuster have been changed in fundamental ways because of the coupling of narrative format and digital device.

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### Serial narrative and e-readers

I should begin by explaining my title since it might raise expectations that I will be discussing something at least vaguely pornographic. I will be investigating the pleasures of popular culture, licit, illicit, and otherwise, but this is not an extended reading of the work of E.L. James. On the other hand, I do concentrate on the coupling of two hugely attractive principals that have generated enormous media buzz individually, and I reflect, quite explicitly, on how their union can lead to endlessly prolonged pleasure be-

fore the thundering final climax, all experienced in the most intimate of places.

In other words, I am focusing on serial narrative and e-readers.

Each has its own history, but how do these simultaneous developments shape how the other works? Each of these phenomena are massive research subjects unto themselves, but I want to explore their mutual impact, and consider how both the bestseller and the blockbuster have been changed in fundamental ways because of that coupling of narrative format and digital device.

When I sent my title to the organizers of this conference, I thought *Shades of Grey* and *Hunger Games* might be useful texts to talk about the connections between seriality and e-readers but I did not anticipate how vividly connected these phenomena would be in terms of exactly these titles. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, the three volumes of *Shades of Grey*, the collected version of the Grey trilogy and the three volumes of the *Mockingjay* trilogy were seven of the top eight bestselling ebook titles in 2012. In fact, only two of the top ten ebook bestsellers were not part of series since, *Bared to You*, the first volume in Sylvia Day's *Crossfire Series*, came in at number nine. And then Amazon very usefully began using this image to promote their Kindle reader.



This image, in particular, crystallizes the contemporary state of the adaptation at the intersection of seriality and digital devices. What I find most interesting about the domination of serial narrative on the ebook bestseller charts is that the successful synergy between the two is not restricted to a particular genre or audience. There are indeed many shades of seriality – Young Adult Fiction and Mommy Porn titles are both thriving as different genres for divergent audiences in the same serial mode on the same delivery system. But the list of genres and audiences grows still longer if we look at other Kindle advertisements, such as which feature *Mad Men* and *True Blood*. Apparently, we have to add quality serial television drama to that list which expands dramatically not just the range of genres and audiences, but the cultural status of the texts involved. American quality television sits just as squarely at the intersection of serial narrative and digital device as the young adult bestseller. And we can expand that range of televisual seriality further still to include the most highly pedigreed forms of literary fiction, now that the first two novels in Hilary Mantel's Tudor trilogy, *Wolf Hall* and *Bring up*

*the Bodies* have both won Man Booker prizes (which in and of itself is testimony to the changing status of seriality) and are now in development as BBC /HBO co-productions. At this point, we can argue that different shades of seriality extend all the way up and down the cultural hierarchy; and your portable media device of choice can deliver the entire spectrum.

My determination to pursue the ubiquity of ever longer narrative formats in tandem with the increasing ubiquity of digital devices might at first seem like an odd move since one of the common assumptions about e-readers is that they are decreasing attention spans through perpetual distraction and will only shorten narrative formats to even smaller bytes of information. Nicolas Carr makes exactly this argument in his book, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to our Brains* (2011), contending that

When a printed book is transferred to an electronic device connected to the internet, it turns into something very like a Web site. Its words become wrapped in all the distractions of the networked computer. It loses what the late John Updike called its 'edges' and dissolves into the vast, roiling waters of the net. The linearity of the printed book is shattered and along with it the calm attentiveness it encourages from the reader. The high tech features of devices like the Kindle and Apple's new iPad may make it more likely that we'll read e-books, but the way we read them will be very different from the way we read printed books. (p.104)

Once the material object that is the book changes from page to digital screen, Carr is convinced that close reading and extended narrative formats will inevitably disappear. He laments that no one will have interest in reading *War and Peace* again because it is just too long. Change the object that is the book and suddenly attention spans shorten, long form narrative shrinks into sound bites, and deep reading is no longer necessary. According to this scenario, reading on e-reader is the gateway drug that leads inevitably to the hard stuff of digital culture –become psychologically dependent on that e-reader and eventually you will find yourself in an alley some-

where with a cell-phone novel written by promiscuous Japanese teenagers sticking out of your arm.

The variety of texts on the screen in the Kindle Fire could, of course, be read as evidence of inherent distractability and Angry Birds is part of that mix, but so are serial narratives like *Mad Men* and *Hunger Games* and *True Blood* which take for granted the ability to acquire and hold knowledge about narrative universes that extend over thousands of pages or several seasons of episodes which seem pretty close to being the opposite of the endless distractability Carr alleges is to be the case with the e-reader.

But changing the material form of the book does not necessarily result in this domino effect where close reading and long form narrative must inevitably disappear. Quite the opposite appears to be the case. I think Lisa Gittelman's definition of a medium is especially useful here. She argues that a medium is a technology that enables communication, but it also depends on "protocols": those social and cultural practices which determine the functions and values a medium might take on over time. She considers recorded music to be a medium that has been around for over a century, but the delivery systems have changed from cylinders, to records, to CDs to MP3 files. If we were to adapt this to a long form narrative, we could argue that the shift from wood pulp to e-reader is a change in delivery system. While I will explore this relationship between medium and delivery system in greater detail later in this lecture I think it is a useful point of departure for understanding literary experiences within digital cultures precisely because it allows us to see isolate individual aspects of the literary experience which have been considered so tightly imbricated that they are thought to be intrinsically interconnected. We have been led to believe that literary reading depends on an object called a book, an extended narrative format called a novel, a degree of engagement called close or "deep" reading, and a literary culture which makes qualitative distinctions about what does and does not belong in that category. The anxious debates about the future of literary culture seize only on the first element, the material form of the book itself, and then predict drastic changes about the future of reading because they assume that the other three factors automatically change accordingly, which in turn is based on the assumption that these factors are indivisible aspects of literary reading. But long form narrative and close reading can be pried away

from literary reading – in fact there appears to be an industry devoted to doing exactly that.

### The serial narrative across media

The fact that the quality television serial in the manner of HBO now appears to be the format of choice for the kind of sophisticated storytelling formerly thought to be the exclusive domain of the literary novel figures as an important pivot point in three different historical arcs. Television scholars such as Jeffery Sconce and Jason Mittell have argued convincingly that the textual universes that now expand to seventy or eighty hours of continuous narrative development mark a new epoch in television history because the tyranny of 30 and 60 minute program formats has at last been overthrown. That the kind of quality serial programming which first became prominent on HBO somehow exceeded the medium as we knew it a decade ago was summarized by its very tagline “It’s Not TV, It’s HBO,” and now appears to have become the model for so many other television channels desperate to incorporate long format series, suggests that there has indeed been a paradigm shift in television narrative. But rather than belabor this well-documented point, I want to explore two other questions – what does quality seriality suggest about the evolving relationship between literary culture and visual culture? And ultimately, what does the interplay between seriality and digital devices tell us about contemporary narrativity?

In my recent book, *Bring on the Books for Everybody*, my goal was to trace the contours of a particular “media ecology” shaped by the increasing convergence of literary, visual, and material cultures. The phenomena that I examined in detail – adaptation films, Amazon.com, television and internet book clubs, and literary best-sellers – are best understood as interdependent components of a popular literary culture.

I concentrated on the Miramax adaptation films such as *The English Patient*, *Shakespeare in Love*, and *The Hours* because they exemplified the emergence of a *cine-literary* culture in which canonical and prize-winning contemporary literary fiction became a very particular form of prestige blockbuster filmmaking. There, I described the pre-history of the Miramax adaptation in the 1970s and eighties, a time when Hollywood’s obsession with high-concept spectacle and teen pics had reduced the adaptation to the world of Public Television in

the United States, specifically *Masterpiece Theatre* on Sunday nights which specialized in importing BBC television adaptations that were long on British literary prestige, but short on production values, and even shorter on audience share.

The adaptation was primarily a televisual phenomenon during the seventies. It suffered accordingly, surviving in what had become genteel poverty growing ever more faded as its production values seemed ever more impoverished compared to mainstream film and network television. Once the Merchant and Ivory films such as *A Room with a View* and *Howards End* that began to appear in the mid- to late eighties, a small but viable niche audience for adaptation film was consolidated, the lush production values were restored, and the adaptation was rescued from the ghetto of public television in the U.S.

And then, when Miramax's high-concept literary adaptations became dependable Academy Award magnets by the mid-nineties, the new equation was solidified: the British-made serial adaptations seen on public television in the U.S. signified cheap and irrelevant, as Miramax adaptations became ever more opulent "event pictures" with high production values, star-studded casts, and adapted screenplays by the likes of Tom Stoppard and David Hare, all benefiting from maximum promotion by the brothers Weinstein.

But if we fast-forward fifteen years from the Academy Award orgy given to *Shakespeare in Love* in 1998 to last month's broadcast in the U.S. of the BBC/HBO co-production of *Parade's End*, the adaptation equations between media have shifted yet again, particularly in regard to the cultural value of seriality and the "national identity" as it were of serious narrative fiction. When George Entwhistle, BBC's Director General announced the air-date for this mini-series based on the tetralogy of novels by Ford Maddox Ford, he said that it would be as good as *Mad Men* and *The Wire*. When the chief spokesperson for the British Broadcasting Corporation promises that a mini-series adaptation of a series of novels by Ford Maddox Ford, which have been judged by Graham Greene and Julian Barnes to be among the greatest masterpieces of British Literary Modernism, will be outstanding because it will be just as good as a couple of American TV shows then the relationship between literary fiction and quality television has been revalued.

Obviously there is another kind of “media ecology” at work since the status of adaptation, seriality, and the transatlantic identity of high culture have changed profoundly since Miramax was in love with Shakespeare. The desire to adapt the canonical British novel persists but the models for its adaptation are, in the case of both *Mad Men* and *The Wire*, original programming developed for American television – anything but old *Masterpiece Theatre* classics. And the American-ness of that new quality television is, if anything, advertised aggressively as such, as seen in the advertisement for SKY Atlantic, which brings Europe the best of HBO and AMC (<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=txcbk3tV2Hc>>).

In this promotional ad for SKY Atlantic, “stories” appear to be fairly important to Dustin Hoffman, accompanied by the New York skyline, but one thing is certain – the sort of stories that are so good that we wish they would never end are serial narratives on American cable television – because they do indeed almost never end, even when you would like them to. This fetishizing of story is hardly surprising, given that the networks which produce these programs describe themselves in exactly the same terms – the AMC tagline is “*Story Matters Here*” and HBO insists “*Let the Stories Begin*.<sup>1</sup>” There are no books surrounding Dustin or anything that looks like a library to function as signifiers of literariness – great stories do not have to come from books anymore because the most sophisticated narratives are no longer restricted to a print-based literary phenomenon. The profusion of books in the *Masterpiece Theatre* title sequence continued throughout the Miramax adaptations of the late nineties and early twenty-first century where the fetishizing of the book and the hands of the English authors writing those books that were the basis for the adaptation at hand remained a consistent visual motif, evidenced by the frequent close-ups of both as quasi-sacred objects in *Shakespeare in Love*, *Finding Neverland*, and *The Hours*. In contrast, Hoffman is surrounded only by cinematic values and the America urban landscape in all of its jump-cut, hand-held glory, which appears to be where all *these* great stories come from. Transatlantic quality television now appears to have become relentlessly serial, cinematic, and resolutely American.

It is, of course, tempting to argue that if the Miramax adaptation film represented the essence of cine-literary culture at the turn of the twenty-first century, the HBO/BBC adaptation like *Parade’s End* ex-

emplifies a contemporary *tele-literary* culture in which the serial has superseded the feature film as the format of choice for literary narrative. Hilary Mantel sold her Man Booker-prize winning novels to BBC and HBO, not to the Weinstein brothers or Focus Features. But the emphasis on *stories* in the Sky Atlantic advertisement suggests a more far-reaching change is underway – namely that the print or image-based nature of the medium is no longer the determinant of narrative complexity or its cultural value – now it is all about “story” and the delivery system, or more precisely, serial stories of indefinite length; and Sky Atlantic, the global television-art house-library, can hook you up with that exactly that type of story.

The interrelationship between format, medium, and creative enterprise change accordingly. Much was made in the press about how Stoppard’s screenplay for *Parade’s End* marked his return to the BBC after a 35-year hiatus. In contextualizing that return, Mark Lawson makes the essential point that while it was relatively common for the British playwrights to move back and forth between the theatre and television in the sixties, the single TV play was slowly phased out of British television as the serial form became increasingly dominant, just as the tele-film series had replaced the anthology dramas on American television by the late fifties. At that point, the television serial was the antithesis of legitimate theatre and the truly literary which were singular works of art – the very notion that narrative closure could be prolonged indefinitely was proof positive of market pressures and their inherent inferiority as a narrative mode intended for children, housewives, and mindless coach potatoes. The rapid elevation of seriality from one of the lowest forms of television entertainment to one of the highest forms of cultural expression in any medium depends on a number of factors; but the redefinition of seriality by HBO and AMC depended, to a great extent, on making the writer the lynch-pin of the successful series; and this move toward a production model which values stories and the people who write them above all has lured a number of literary novelists to television. Stoppard may have co-written the screenplay for *Shakespeare in Love*, but he now says he prefers writing for television because it is far closer to writing for the theatre. Where seriality was once synonymous with a lack of authorial vision and creative possibility, it is now being hailed for the creative potential it offers literary authors, a point articulated in no uncertain terms by Pulitzer

Prize winning novelist Michael Chabon, who said, “There can’t be a novelist in America who watched *The Wire* and didn’t think, ‘Oh my god I want to do something like that.’ The tapestry is so broad it’s like a nineteenth century novel.” For a television serial to be compared to the nineteenth-century novel – the very gold standard of the art of narrative – and judged therefore infinitely superior to the constraints that come with the mere feature film, suggests just how thoroughly the revaluation process has been accomplished. Salman Rushdie, one of the acknowledged masters of the 20th-century novel who is developing a science fiction series for *Showtime*, echoes Chabon’s assessment of the situation: “You can write as freely as you want. It’s a novelistic amount of time. The major creative forces in these novels are the writers.”

### **Sophisticated stories of indefinite length**

If stories, specifically sophisticated stories of indefinite length, are no longer medium specific, then what should we call them, and how will they be categorized? Mittel has argued that the DVD box set has provided a “shelve-ability” factor for the television series which enables close reading of television texts which makes possible ever more complicated televisual narrative universes. Where Rushdie uses the word “novelistic” to describe the amount of time a story is allowed to unfurl on the television serial, the shelveability factor allows for another kind of novelistic time in regard to these series, namely, the temporality of a novelistic *mode of viewing* where episodes are watched and re-watched in the same kind of endlessly variable rate that novels are read and reread chapter by chapter. I think this is a convincing argument but I would like to frame the situation in another way.

Sophisticated stories of indefinite length are no longer medium specific just because writers such as Stoppard, Chabon, and Rushdie will work across media on an even more regular basis. The redefinition of the status of extended long format narrative is certainly driven by changes in authorship and the move to a publishing model for television exhibition, but it is also a direct by-product of the digital devices on which we consume all of the above. The screen on which I watch BBC/HBO’s version of *Parade’s End* is the same screen on which I read my ebook edition of Ford Maddox Ford’s novel, and both form part of the personal digital libraries

which sit inside that screen and I take with me wherever I go. When novels, films, television programs, and songs are all files downloadable from the same sites, all playback-able on the same portable devices, they are all different incarnations of the same screen culture. At this point, I want to return to the distinction between medium and delivery system that I referred to in my introduction. Are television serials and MP3 files just the newest delivery system for long format narratives, or does their co-presence on the same playback screens, in the same personal digital archives, become a new supra-medium in which watching, reading, listening, and surfing the net are all subsumable to the pleasure of playlisting? I use the term playlisting here to refer not just to the lists of songs one might compose but as a mentalite, a way of constructing a more or less coherent personal identity cut to the exact measure of our personal cultural obsessions we assemble in our digital archives. The edges of the book that Carr refers to do indeed become elastic, as do the edges of the television programs, films, paratexts, or any other files downloaded or accessed from there.

The media ecology of popular literary culture that I described in *Bring on the Books for Everybody* was all about the expansion of the literary experience across print, visual and material cultures. The smart tablet represents the perfect compression of the movements across those cultures by making them all co-equal options on one device. This multi-functionality has important ramifications for how we understand the metaverses of serial narratives. The term metaverse is often used to describe the complicated narrative universe of a serial program or film franchise as it progresses from season to season or film to film across years and even decades. I think the metaverse of a given program like say *Mad Men* is better understood as expanding along two axes simultaneously – the horizontal axis, which entails the expansion of the narrative universe from season to season in more or less linear fashion, which the viewer has to maintain from year to year to be able to savor the intricacies of that progression. The vertical axis is formed by all of the various paratexts that are generated by networks and fans as the series progresses in the form of websites, spin-off texts, ancillary products, and mash-ups – the texts, in other words, which any fan of a series samples selectively, or promiscuously, on a regular basis in order to really appreciate the full transmediated richness of that metaverse.

This has become standard operating procedure for television viewing in the twenty-first century.

### Transmedial play

My argument is that the digital device becomes the most effective way to maneuver through that metaverse. When we hold one in our hand, we are simultaneously Viewer-Reader-Listener-User-Players. I am invoking Steven Dinehart here because I think the way he describes transmedial play in regard to phenomena such as digital art and alternate reality games can be adapted to the way we experience the metaverse of a serial narrative on an e-reader. According to Dinehart,

In a transmedial work the viewer/user/player (VUP) transforms the story via his or her own natural cognitive psychological abilities, and enables the Artwork to surpass medium. It is in transmedial play that the ultimate story agency, and decentralized authorship can be realized. Thus the VUP becomes the true producer of the Artwork. (Dinehart, 2008)

Paraphrasing Dinehart, we could say that it is through the built-in transmedial functionality of the e-reader that we necessarily surpass any one medium, and experience our own ultimate story agency as we navigate the metaverse according to our own agendas. These are the e-reader games I refer to in the title of my lecture, and like any good video game, they involve both ludic and narrative components, the narrativity in this case being a matter of how we construct our identity out of the various routes we take on the internet and the digital archives we assemble for instantaneous access.

At this point, I want to turn to the metaverse of *Mad Men* and talk about how it can be experienced on my own digital devices and, in the process, explore the two different types of transmedial narrativity that are at play. The first is within the program material, which is all about the movement between the literary and the televisual in the quality serial narrative. This scene is from episode one of Season Two and it is a particularly exuberant example of tele-literary culture, which is founded on the movement across media. Here the *story* of Don Draper, one of the *stories* Dustin Hoffman and SKY At-

lantic keep talking about, is clearly meant to be taken as the stuff of great literary writing, but it happens to be on serial television. Don Draper is not just any smoking black silhouette drinking his cocktail. One of the greatest lines of 20<sup>th</sup>-century poetry, “Now I am quietly waiting for the catastrophe of my personality to seem beautiful again, and interesting, and modern” seems to apply to him perfectly – Don is the guy who Frank O’Hara was writing about in 1957. The fusion of the literary and the quality televisual serial could hardly be more explicit –this is where story – and great poetry –matter.

But showing you this does not really explain why this kind of serial television is so popular, and it does not reveal much about the other kind of narrative pleasure I get from the *Mad Men* metaverse as viewer-reader-user-player. I keep up with *Mad Men* on the season pass I buy from iTunes, which allows me to keep up with the forward progression of the narrative along the horizontal axis I referred to. But I can just as easily move in and out of the paratextual dimensions of that metaverse. If I visit the website, I find abundant lessons in how to *Mad Men* myself. There I can learn to make the same cocktails that Don does and even create my own *Mad Men* avatar. If I want to know more about this “Meditations in an Emergency” business, I can google it and end up at variety of blogs. But I also receive emails from *Banana Republic*, a clothing store chain and a division of GAP Inc., with updates on the release dates of their next *Mad Men* collection, which coincides annually with the season premiere of the show. I can decide whether I want to accept their invitation to the cocktail party they are having at a store near me to celebrate the re-launch of the show and the collection. And if I want to appreciate the design concepts that *Mad Men* and *Banana Republic* have in common, I can check out their design statement or even dress like Don or Betty Draper and become a real life avatar at which point the convergence between literary, visual, and material cultures come sharply into focus.

## Conclusion

That movement between sites, combined with the curatorial activity involved in downloading and arranging of libraries of MP3 files has its own kind of narrativity. By way of a conclusion, I want to reiterate the connection between seriality and digital devices, and the two types of transmedial narrativity they each depend on for their

entertainment value. This advertisements for *HBO GO on Kindle Fire* visualizes how aggressively HBO is now going after the world of mobile devices because they know that a massive percentage of its audience watches its programming not on television sets but on laptops and mobile devices. If we imagine the contemporary television serial as just another chapter in the history of adaptation which happens to take place on the small screen, we will fail to appreciate the seismic shifts that are occurring in the relationship between literary and visual culture, and in the relationship between cultural value and narrative format. Most importantly, we will fail to appreciate the ways in which both the literary bestseller and the adaptation are being transformed by all of those literary authors now writing directly for television, instead of writing the prize-winning, best-selling novels that eventually become Academy Award-winning adaptations. And if we conceive of the e-reader too narrowly, as only the newest delivery system for long-form narrative, we will fail to fully appreciate how it is a technology with its own protocols, which are based on the ability to download and archivize different media and move effortlessly across them as we playlist our cultural obsessions according to our own personal narratives. Understanding how bestsellers and blockbusters work in contemporary culture depends on how we manage to account for ways that the stories that keep us up at night now move across media every night of the week – in an endless variety of shades. But it will also depend on how successful we are at accounting for the pleasures generated by the e-reader games we play on devices that are not only media technologies, but also technologies of the self in digital cultures.

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