

Nestingen, Andrew. 2008. *Crime and Fantasy in Scandinavia - Fiction, Film and Social Change*. Seattle: University of Washington Press. 326 pages. ISBN: 978-0295988047.

Andrew Nestingen, a professor of Finnish language and literature at the University of Washington, has published a book whose relatively neutral-sounding title doesn't do justice to the much wider interests that really occupy his attention. For his central focus is on an analysis of why and how popular culture filled the vacuum that appeared in Scandinavia when the utopian qualities previously granted to the social-democratic welfare state ("folkhemmet" as the Swedes call it) began to be questioned. At its core this constituted a challenge to the long-held assumption that the healthy communal societies of northern Europe offered the sole and clearly-desired alternative to the injured bodies of post-war mainland Europe. Such heterogeneous developments as the growth of the European Union, which Iceland and Norway have never joined, the establishment of the Euro as the common European currency, which no Scandinavian country except Finland uses, NATO membership, which Denmark, Norway and Iceland took and Sweden and Finland did not, increasing immigration, post-colonial issues, globalization and the growing sense that the individual is more important than the community challenged the given concept of a homogeneous Scandinavia. The certainty of the superiority of the state-guaranteed cradle to grave security in the utopian "folkhemmet" came under fire, and the resulting vacuum could no longer be filled by epic books and films produced by such "national" artistic giants as Knut Hamsun, Ingmar Bergman, Carl Theodor Dreyer, Jean Sibelius or Halldor Laxness. At the same time, the possibility that social democratic ideals actually do still dominate the everyday political, social, and economic realities of northern Europe lurks intriguingly in the background, as the utopian social-democratic vision may have faded but never really disappeared.

Nestingen presents his analysis of this in six chapters, the first two of which set the theoretical framework behind the exploration of the landscape that will be covered. These first two chapters demand careful reading—even a second reading—of what may at first seem to be a quite daunting theoretical discussion of social structures, written in an academic style that clashes with the writing that follows. However, the centrality of Charles Taylor's concept of the "social imaginary ... the background understanding against which our beliefs are formulated ... our spaces of display" remains crucial throughout. To illustrate the changes in perceptions in such display spaces in the post-war Scandinavian

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imagination, Nestingen compares, for instance, key opening scenes depicting heroism in two cinematic versions of Vaino Linna's iconic epic of the Finland-Russian winter war, (*The Unknown Soldier*, Edvin Laine, 1955, and *Ambush*, Olli Saarela, 1999). Laine's version shows the desperate communal rescue of a wounded soldier, accompanied by Sibelius' *Finlandia*, the national anthem, while Saarela's concentrates on the fate of an individual soldier acting heroically on his own. This is a concrete example of a theoretical concept that makes its point very clearly here, and for the most part this is the case in the chapters that follow as well. Nestingen argues that in Scandinavia it is the heterogeneous quality emphasizing individualism in contemporary popular culture that now places its stamp on Taylor's display space, which not long ago was filled by images of homogeneous communal activity. He shows how far he will take this by looking closely at the very puzzling popularity of the Finnish monster rock band Lordi that won the Eurovision Song Contest in 2006. It is a fascinating analysis, which seems really alien in the company of theoreticians like Lyotard, Lacan, and Castoriades, and sets the tone for the rest of the book.

However, what then follows should by no means be thought of as a mere continuation of the theoretical discussion. Rather there are illuminating chapters on various topics relating to what Nestingen considers successful examples of influential contemporary popular culture in Scandinavian fiction and film, particularly but not exclusively as it manifests itself in the familiar genre involving tales of crime and punishment. The author is interested and very knowledgeable on all kinds of things both central and peripheral to the topic: the changing economics of the film industry, the upgrading of melodrama to a matter of high concern in the films of Aki Kaurismäki, the contemporary transformation of such mythical and semi-mythical national figures as trolls and saga heroes, the depiction of outsiders, both sexual and ethnic, or the effect of globalization on the patterns of thought of contemporary Scandinavians and their leading authors and filmmakers.

The influence of globalization on crime fiction novels and films, for instance, is presented convincingly in a discussion of Lukas Moodysson's powerful film on the globalization of sexual exploitation, *Lilya 4-ever* and then in an excellent chapter on Henning Mankell and his iconic modern police inspector Kurt Wallander. This is particularly convincing when Nestingen discusses Mankell's experience in the heart of Africa and how he manages to transport many of his insights earned in Africa to contemporary Sweden. Nestingen is an expert on Finnish matters and his inclusion of so much Finnish material is most welcome to those with Nordic interests who tend to neglect Finland because of language difficulties. Nestingen's discussion of Finnish material is always informative, often enough fascinating, including his chapter-length discussion of Johanna Sinisalo's novel *Troll*. But I must admit I was most won over by the illuminating final chapter

on the Swede Mankell, which really deserves a prominent place in any discussion of the stature of this world best-selling author. It is too bad that Stieg Larsson's current world best-selling *Milennium Trilogy* and the three films based on it only appeared after Nestingen's book was published. An analysis of Larsson's extraordinarily complex central figure Lisbeth Salander—abandoned, tortured and permanently branded by a state that is functioning as anything but a communal protector—would surely offer a prime example for one of the main themes of this work.

The book overflows with useful information and eventually the reader begins to feel that this is something like an encyclopedia of various aspects of popular Scandinavian film and fiction today. The chapters do not always segue smoothly into each other and at times they seem to just stand on their own as individual forays into areas of interest which could use some bridging commentary. One of the few caveats I have about this book is that a discussion of Iceland is not included. Often enough the book speaks of the Nordic world, which surely includes Iceland, but Iceland is actually left out of any discussion, although it is Iceland that makes the perfect fit these days for a discussion of the influence and dangers of globalization for the Nordic world. It also supports a very lively cinema scene, highlighted by the works of one of the premier Nordic filmmakers, Friðrik Thor Friðriksson, who, as an actor, gets his tumultuous say on the topic of globalization and colonialism in a spectacular outburst at the end of Lars von Trier's film, *Direktøren för det hele* [*The Boss of it All*], 2006. I'll also mention another film that I wish had been discussed in a book that deals with Nordic crime fiction films: Ingmar Bergman's *Aus dem Leben der Marionetten* [*From the Life of the Marionettes*], 1980). Bergman himself considered it one of his best films, but it is almost always ignored because it was made in German for German television. I do think that the inclusion of an analysis of this film would have brought one of the grand old masters into a discussion of the post-utopian societies of Kaurasmäki, Moodysson and Mankell. But these are admittedly somewhat quirky and peripheral regrets. In the end the reader is very satisfied to have been taken on a journey over a vast northern landscape that is no longer quite the same as it used to be, but which becomes more comprehensible after reading this convincing introduction to post-war Scandinavian culture.

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