

Dan Ward

**Making a Killing: Science-fiction through the lens of Nordic Noir in 'Crocodile' and 'Hated in the Nation'**

One of the most noteworthy developments in the global media landscape over the past decade has been the emergence of Scandinavian crime fiction as a transnational, multi-media cultural phenomenon. Crime stories originating from Northern Europe have enjoyed critical and, to varying degrees, commercial success in the fields of cinema, television and literature, spawning translations, adaptations, and even international imitations paying visible homage to the distinctive aesthetic and thematic characteristics of the form, which have become so recognisable they have evolved into a generic type of their own – 'Nordic Noir'. *Black Mirror* invokes the conventions of Nordic Noir most prominently in two episodes, which feature in the third and fourth seasons of the show respectively: 'Hated in the Nation', and 'Crocodile'. The former is a feature-length episode, at ninety minutes long, which creator Charlie Brooker has explicitly referred to as 'a Scandi-Noir, near-future London detective story' (Parker, 2016). The latter employs the aesthetics of Scandinavian drama prominently to evoke a more visual sense of the genre; the episode was shot entirely in Iceland, during a period in which Reykjavik faced its heaviest snowfall in 70 years (Deehan, 2018). This chapter will examine the rationale, function and impact of *Black Mirror's* utilisation of these conventions in the aforementioned episodes.

**Nordic Noir: A Transnational Phenomenon**

The rise of scholarly interest in Scandinavian crime fiction over the course of the last decade or more has been a result of the critical and commercial success on a global scale of a range of imports and adaptations of texts from the region. The genre is one that traverses media and formats as well as

national boundaries, with many of the most prominent examples originating in the work of noted Scandinavian literary authors such as Henning Mankell, Stieg Larsson, Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö. It is a genre that is at once distinctly Nordic, and yet also profoundly transnational. As well as historically benefitting from regional co-funding and co-production models with ventures such as Nordvision, Scandinavian drama producers have also been helped by increased co-production opportunities from sources outside the region, such as collaboration between Scandinavian and German PSB stations (Bondeberg et al, 2017:7). This has resulted in the production of texts which 'have become very local and very global at the same time' (Hansen & Waade, 2017:2), a classic example being the *Wallander* series: Henning Mankell's internationally renowned collection of crime novels were initially adapted through a complex, collaborative production and distribution model jointly from Swedish and German investment, for opportunities in both regions across cinema, DVD, pay television and free television markets (Peacock, 2013:152). In tandem with this, Yellow Bird also produced an English language version of the series for the BBC, this time starring Kenneth Branagh in the role of Kurt Wallander, and featuring a largely British cast, but filmed in Ystad, Sweden. This adaptation underscores not only the transnational appeal of Nordic Noir, but also the importance of a particular aesthetic to the representations within the genre (in this case, the unique locale of Ystad is evidently seen as indispensable to the stories being told). Other notable Scandinavian series to be adapted into English language formats include *The Killing* (DR, 2007-12) and *The Bridge* (SVT1 & DR1, 2011-18).

It is not only direct adaptations of original Scandi series which have invoked the conventions of the genre overseas, but also contemporary examples of original English language series like *Hinterland* (BBC, 2013-), *Shetland* (BBC, 2013-) and *Broadchurch* (ITV, 2013-17); rather than recreating the specific characters and storylines of Northern European texts, these series instead replicate 'the particular noir style and melancholy' of Nordic Noir (Hansen & Waade, 2017:86). The transnational

appeal of Nordic Noir is additionally demonstrated in the increased visibility of actors and creative personnel from the genre in overseas productions: Hans Rosenfeldt, writer of *The Bridge*, developed the crime drama *Marcella* for ITV, while *Wallander's* Krister Henriksson appeared briefly in BBC's *The Fall* and Swedish actor Stellan Skarsgård starred in another BBC series, *River*. The fact that such actors and writers are so coveted by British networks and industry professionals speaks not only to the talent of the individuals in question, but to the increasing eagerness to imbue new drama productions with the intangible qualities that have come to be associated with Nordic Noir. *River's* writer, Abi Morgan, has said of Skarsgård's casting that 'he's got that Scandi thing going on that's slightly 'other'. He's quite magical – truthful, yet magical. He's a Viking' (Arnold, 2015). Former BBC controller of drama Ben Stephenson has acknowledged that 'whenever there is a phenomenon – and certainly Scandinavian novels and TV are a phenomenon – it can't help but be an inspiration' (Midgley, 2014). Just as it has become an inspiration for the aforementioned British crime shows, so too the aesthetic and themes of Nordic Noir have been adopted by Charlie Brooker in expanding *Black Mirror's* ongoing exploration of TV formats as a significant element of its social commentary. Brooker, who famously dissected and mocked the codes and conventions of popular television over a number of years in his 'Screen Burn' column (Lusher, 2010) and *Screenwipe* TV series (BBC, 2006-8), experiments with the form in 'Hated in the Nation' and 'Crocodile' with an apparent view to both paying homage to his influences, and engaging an increasingly media-literate audience in critical dialogue.

### **'Hated in the Nation'**

One aspect of 'Hated in the Nation' which is noteworthy, with regard to its Nordic influences, is the length of the episode: at ninety minutes long, 'Hated' is to date the longest *Black Mirror* episode. There are clear parallels here with the seminal example of transnational Nordic Noir, *Wallander*. As previously discussed, *Wallander's* distribution model featured a complex intersection of television,

film and DVD markets, whereby the first episode of a new series would be released in cinemas, before gradually progressing to DVD, pay-TV and free TV releases. Erik Hultkvist of Yellow Bird observes that 'it's easier to look at the productions as a TV series, rather than as feature films. But they are 90 minute films' (Peacock, 2013:152). This model provides the creative advantage of transcending the rigidity of typical television scheduling requirements, as well as the industrial and generic concerns which may on occasion bleed over into the artistic product itself (though it is worth mentioning here that Mikael Wallen notes the common perception of the *Wallander* films in Sweden as only 'industrial TV', in contrast to the critical acclaim they attract overseas). On a narrative level, the added time provided by this model allows for more space to develop a story beyond a simple tale of crime and capture, and to include broader themes of thoughtful social critique which have been identified as such a pivotal theme of Scandinavian crime fiction.

We can certainly see echoes of this in *Black Mirror's* move to Netflix, and the platform's brand ethos more generally. The destabilisation of traditional conceptions of what television is, and how it should be consumed, is integral to Netflix's convergence-oriented business model (McDonald & Smith-Rousey, 2016:2). On one level, the company's binge-friendly strategy of releasing entire series of shows (including *Black Mirror*) simultaneously for convenient, on-demand viewing effectively renders the typical episodic time constraints necessitated by traditional television schedules and advertising conventions redundant. On another, it pushes back against established boundaries between film and television, both by investing so heavily in its original 'television' productions as to render the difference in quality of production values negligible, and by constant experimentation with the distribution windows of cinema and streaming release dates (Bramesco, 2018). While the Netflix brand may be associated strongly with innovation and the opportunities offered by new technologies – as is strikingly illustrated by the interactive *Black Mirror* episode 'Bandersnatch' - the influence of Scandinavian models of media convergence such as those typified by the *Wallander*

series can also be observed clearly here. As a coda to this, it is also worth noting that one of Netflix's first ventures into original programming was the Steven Van Zandt vehicle *Lilyhammer*: another example of collaborative transnational co-production, this time between Netflix and Norwegian company NRK, which foregrounded its Norwegian locale as a visible indicator of the platform's willingness to engage with this unique area of contemporary popular culture (Bakøy et al, 2017).

'Hated in the Nation' also foregrounds its Nordic influences through the names of central characters. Alongside more conventionally anglicised names, the episode's protagonists are given Scandinavian-sounding titles like Karin Parke and Rasmus Sjoberg, the latter portrayed (with accent undisguised) by Swedish actor Jonas Karlsson. Other characters, such as Vanessa Dahl (presumably a reference to Swedish crime writer Jan 'Arne Dahl' Arne Dahl) and Tess Wallander, seem to have been named as more explicit homages to Scandinavian crime fiction. This kind of 'hyperaware' intertextuality (Collins, 1995:335) has been identified as a typical characteristic within 'cult' television (Abbott, 2010:2), a category which *Black Mirror* certainly seems to fit into, and performs multiple functions in its contemporary usage. As well as allowing authors to acknowledge and pay homage to their own influences, it can draw specific parallels and evoke connections with other media forms by 'activating the text in certain ways, by making some meanings rather than others' (Fiske, 1987:108), as well as engaging the audience themselves in more active interpretation based on prior cultural knowledge (Gwenlian-Jones, in Brooker & Jermyn, 2003:186). While familiarity with Nordic crime fiction is not necessary to follow the basic narrative of 'Hated in the Nation', this sort of intertextual referencing adds a layer of complexity to the episode, and invites fans of the genre to recognise its echoes within Charlie Brooker's writing. Just as the killer in the episode lays a trail of digital 'breadcrumbs' so that the detectives may fall into his trap, so Brooker leaves similar intertextual clues for *Black Mirror's* viewers to decipher.

Just as several character names evoke Scandi crime fiction, so too do particular characterisations in the episode. The central investigation team of Karin Parke and Blue Coulson appear to reference the increasing visibility of female lead detectives in Nordic Noir, featured prominently in significant texts such as *The Killing*, *The Bridge*, *Jordskott* (SVT, 2015-17) and *Those Who Kill* (TV2, 2011); it may also be noted that the tendency toward strong female protagonists in traditionally male-dominated professions within contemporary Scandinavian drama is not limited only to the crime genre, with the Danish political series *Borgen* (DR1, 2010-13) being another prominent example. The parallels go deeper with the characterisation of Blue, sidekick to Karin's lead investigator. Apropos to the themes of the episode, which feature state-commissioned, automated bee-like drones hacked and appropriated to commit murder, Blue has an extraordinary aptitude for computer technology. She utilises this at multiple points of the episode to locate suspects and progress the investigation, and it seems at times that her familiarity with the technology matches and even outstrips that of Rasmus, the scientist who helped develop the project for the government. She also appears to have a strong sense of personal justice: at the episode's conclusion, Blue appears to have been personally affected by her inability to prevent the mass killing which has been the ultimate goal of the plot involving the drones. Consequently, she goes to extraordinary lengths to redress this, faking her own death so that she may be free to track down the perpetrator to a foreign country, with an apparent view to exacting some form of justice. In both respects, this characterisation appears to bear more than a passing resemblance to the troubled heroine of Stieg Larsson's *Milennium* trilogy, Lisbeth Salander: In Larsson's series of books Salander, a troubled young woman who has suffered abuse throughout her life at the hands of parents, authority figures and institutions, uses her prodigious computer hacking skills to aid crusading journalist Mikael Blomqvist in his efforts to track down a serial killer and unmask corruption. As Larsson's novels take the reader deeper into Lisbeth's backstory and mind set, we see how driven she is to redress injustices as a result of the abuses she has suffered, and the latter instalments in the series follow her own personal vendetta against her tyrannical KGB agent father and sociopathic brother. As Salander has emerged as one of the more iconic

protagonists of transnational Scandinavian popular culture, the imprints in the characterisation of Blue emerge as another of Brooker's homages to the genre.

Mikael Wallen, Executive Producer of Yellow Bird, the company behind *Wallander* and cinematic adaptations of Stieg Larsson's *Milennium* series, observes that a common definer of Nordic Noir is that 'the stories are quite dark, and they offer some criticism of Swedish society and the Swedish way of living' (Peacock, 2013:151). Horst (2014) argues that 'the entire idea of paradise lost is a prominent feature of Nordic crime: the social-democratic efficient society attacked from within by violence, corruption and homicide'. The main plotline of 'Hated in the Nation' entails a serpentine murder mystery, which intersects with Brooker's trademark dystopian science-fiction combined with contemporary social critique. It begins with the mysterious, violent deaths of two minor celebrities who have become social media 'hate figures', and as the episode progresses we are taken further into a world of environmental collapse, burgeoning state surveillance and the effects on society of online mob mentality and viral hate campaigns. As is the case with 'Crocodile', technology plays a major part in the narrative and themes of the episode. In this instance, swarms of tiny, automated drones roam the country spreading pollen, performing the ecological function previously carried out by bees in order to avoid environmental catastrophe; the real bees, we are told, have become 'practically extinct'. As the story develops, these apparently benign devices take on a more sinister role, primarily through being commandeered by a malevolent hacker and used as a weapon to murder his targets, and also when we learn that the drones have been commissioned by the government with a hidden purpose: mass surveillance through facial recognition technology. **The plotline echoes a familiar truism about surveillance, that no matter how apparently benign or well-intentioned the surveillance is presented as to its subjects, it will always have the terrible potential to override its original remit, to devastating effect. Charlie Brooker's own awareness of issues surrounding creeping surveillance in Britain pre-dates *Black Mirror*, and has been an**

ongoing thread within his newspaper columns, dealing with developments from the emergence of 'CCTV cameras that shout at you whenever you do something wrong' (Brooker, 2007) to the Data Retention and Investigatory Powers bill, which he dubs 'the most tedious outrage ever' (Brooker, 2014). Although his concerns around these issues are couched in Brooker's familiar sardonic language and occasionally surrealist framing, it is evident that he has followed such developments with unease, and that this has informed the treatment of the issue in episodes in episodes like 'Hated in the Nation' to no small extent.

The portrayal of the drones at their most deadly evokes classic science-fiction and B-movie tropes, of monstrous nature as well as technology run wild: the scenes of the ferocious, single-minded swarm echo any number of derivative 'killer bee' movies, while their awesome resilience and apparent ability to resist even the military's attempts to neutralise them raise the typical cautionary spectre of Skynet. However, this ostensible focus on the destructive possibilities of futuristic technology is something of a misdirect. It is the more banal, readily available technology featured in the episode which is suggested to have the potential for true monstrosity; specifically social media, and the broader cultural phenomena that come with its proliferation.

The motif of the bee-like drones functions on multiple levels as analogous to issues surrounding social media. One aspect it references fairly explicitly is the notion of the 'hive mind' that inevitably arises as part of the viral nature of social media. As much as some social media platforms may encourage an almost narcissistic individualism in providing a public space for the broadcast of the everyday minutiae of one's life, they can also foster a need for approval and connectivity through functions such as likes, retweets, hashtags, and an emphasis on 'trends'. The initial murders that take place in the episode come about as a result of an online contest entailing the use of the hashtag '#DeathTo ', and the ease with which this hashtag takes hold within the narrative points to the



alarming banality of the rationale by which individuals are motivated to wish death on complete strangers via social media. In 'Hated', the hashtag is incited by 'outrages' as mundane as a celebrity criticising a child's dancing on a talent show, or a young woman taking an irreverent selfie next to a war memorial. While such examples may seem typical of *Black Mirror's* parodic embellishment of contemporary cultural trends, they are clearly rooted in real events. Similar instances can be found within recent popular culture: after the initial screening of Channel 4's controversial documentary *Benefits Street* (C4, 2014), it was reported that police were investigating death threats against residents of the street, with Twitter users tweeting via the #BenefitsStreet hashtag threatening to 'brain' or 'set fire to' the people featured in the programme (Denham, 2014). Examples like this, and the representations in the text which take inspiration from them, are constitutive of online 'firestorms', which have been defined as 'sudden bursts of negative attention in cases of controversy and outrage' (Lamba, Malik & Pfeffer, 2015), or 'an event where a person, group or institution suddenly receives a large amount of negative attention' (Pfeffer, Zorbach & Carley, 2014). The term (along with other commonly used synonyms like 'Twitterstorm') evokes notions of a force of nature, fearsome in its spontaneity and volatility; according to Lamba et al (2015), the typical Twitter firestorm reaches peak activity on the same date it first appears. The phenomenon has become so commonplace and toxic on particular platforms that corporations have attempted to institute changes in the platforms neutralise their susceptibility to what have been colloquially termed 'pile-ons' (Nicholson, 2019). Once again, the bee motif is important here in reflecting not only the groupthink of the 'hive' (and how dangerously suggestible it may be), but the potential power of the swarm.

**That the monstrous potential of social media is only fully realised in the episode when it begins to interact with the state's own surveillance technology is also telling. Much has been made in recent years of concerns over the way in which social media may be used surreptitiously to mine data or**

influence election campaigns, and in 2019 a report covering internet use in sixty five countries concluded that internet freedom had declined for the ninth consecutive year (Shahbaz and Funk, 2019). Of particular concern is the intersection between technological advances and the increasingly blurry relationship between the state and commerce. Leetaru (2019) highlights the increasing influence of private companies in what he calls 'the modern digital surveillance state'. Such companies may be responsible for anything 'from acquiring and managing the vast datasets recording our daily lives to providing analytical software and services on top of that data'. Much of the surveillance being undertaken through social media is now automated, utilising 'advances in AI and pattern analytics' to map everything from interpersonal relationships to potential attitudes or past, present and future locations (Doffman, 2019). It is also increasingly monetised: Doffman warns that social media users 'have now inadvertently opted into a data goldmine', the fruits of which are 'available commercially', ready to be mined by 'mass scraping tools' (Doffman, 2019). Such resources have been used by police and government agencies in the UK and US to identify and monitor a range of activists, journalists, lawyers and social media administrators from across the political spectrum, 'many of whom had no criminal background' (Shahbaz and Funk, 2019). The nightmarish vision presented in 'Hated', in which unchecked AI collides with the omniscient surveillance state and the toxicity of commercial internet platforms, invests the creeping foreboding so often inspired by this intersection with a more tangible, visceral sense of threat. It also reaffirms the concerns so often evoked within socially-conscious Nordic Noir of the social consequences that may be carried with the transition from social democracy to a more oligarchic, corporatized model of government.

### 'Crocodile'

As well as the labyrinthine serialised narratives employed by many contemporary British crime shows, Ben Stephenson identifies a pronounced 'sense of place and location' as one of the central

elements such texts have taken from Scandinavian TV (Midgley, 2014). This obviously includes narrative elements specific to particular locales (the political and religious aspects of *The Fall*'s Belfast-based storylines, for example), but another commonality in several of the examples cited previously, such as *Shetland* and *Hinterland*, is an aesthetic characterised by somewhat isolated communities, rural settings, and the tension between urban modernity and proximity to nature (hence the preservation of Ystad as setting for the British TV adaptation of *Wallander*). Once again, there are parallels here to the way evocative natural landscapes and geography have been commonly deployed in Scandinavian media and popular fiction. Crime writer Jørn Lier Horst (2014) has pointed to what he calls 'Nordic melancholy' as a key part of the appeal of Scandi crime fiction which transcends interest in the crime narrative itself, and provokes a fascination 'concocted from winter darkness, midnight sun, and immense, desolate landscapes'. Hansen and Waade (2017) see the 'commodified melancholic landscape' as a central feature of Nordic Noir, employed variously to reflect the mood of characters and to evoke certain romanticised imagery of a region. The aesthetics of Scandinavia are characterised in the genre by 'the grey winter sun, bright summer nights, white winter landscapes and the green spring', represented across disparate geographical environments including 'the vast, bleak landscapes in Denmark, the Norwegian and Icelandic mountains and the forest landscapes in Sweden and Finland' (Hansen & Waade, 2017:87). Nature in Nordic culture has been in some respects 'rendered with transcendental qualities' historically, specifically the duality of eternal light and eternal darkness, and thus framed 'as both the cause of madness and pain – and their remedy' (Schultz Nybacka, in Askegaard & Östberg, 2019:209). For Hansen and Waade, these stylised representations of environment are typically interwoven with the social critique previously discussed as a central aspect of Scandinavian crime fiction. Their discussion of what they call 'welfare melancholy' draws particular attention to the function of 'desolate landscapes' in critiquing 'the fall of the welfare society' in Sjöwall and Wahlöö's seminal 'Story of a Crime' series of novels (Hansen & Waade, 2017: 82-3).

This kind of foregrounding of environment is one of the most prominent aspects of 'Crocodile', a nightmarish cautionary tale which features a successful architect called Mia, who embarks on a grisly murder spree in a doomed attempt to prevent a crime she was involved in as a young woman from coming to light years later. Like the BBC's *Wallander*, the episode features the juxtaposition of a Scandinavian filming location with an English-speaking cast; however, unlike that adaptation, the location is not established within the text as being in Scandinavia. This creates an interesting dynamic in which, in spite of the visibility of a very striking physical landscape and geological features, there is nonetheless something of a sense of placelessness about the episode. On a thematic level, this underscores the apparent rootlessness of the characters and the society Brooker envisions more broadly. 'Crocodile' draws strongly on the physical aesthetic of Nordic storytelling, and the function of the environment in the episode is not only to evoke the generic associations of Nordic Noir, but also to mirror key aspects of plot and characterisation. In the early scenes of the episode, a young couple, Mia and Rob, are seen drinking and dancing in a nightclub, hours before being involved in a fatal car accident which claims the life of an unknown cyclist. In a panic, and fearful of the legal ramifications of having been under the influence at the time of the crash, the pair decides to cover up the crime by disposing of the body in a river, rather than report it to the police and risk a certain prison sentence. From the outset, the physical environment plays a key part in the storytelling. The car accident takes place on icy roads, in the middle of a snow-covered, mountainous wilderness. The eerie isolation of the deserted landscape undoubtedly plays a part in persuading the guilty parties that they may plausibly escape the consequences of their crime, with the absence of any witnesses or other human life in the nearby vicinity allowing the time and space needed to get rid of all traces of the death. This initial tragedy, and the criminal actions which accompany it, set into motion the spiral of violence and increasing moral depravity which begin to build years later, as the episode's timeline progresses.

As previously mentioned, the conditions experienced during the filming of the episode were amongst the most extreme experienced in the Reykjavik region in decades, to the extent that filming was temporarily suspended at one point of the shoot due to the level of snowfall. Episode director John Hillcoat observes that 'it's very humbling because it's a constant reminder of how powerful nature is: it adds energy. The world is right in front of you, and you have to deal with it' (Delahaye, 2018). Although the degree of severity of the conditions could not have been predicted (or indeed desired) by the production crew, the icy backdrop is clearly a conscious creative choice, and one which contributes greatly to the visual symbolism within the episode. The harshness of the environment mirrors Mia's increasingly ruthless mentality as she resorts to ever more depraved and malign lengths in her bid to suppress evidence of her crimes. While Brooker suggests it was not the primary motivation for the episode's title, the cold-bloodedness of the titular reptilian is one of several connotations which may be read into it, resembling as it does Mia's own coldness, and that of the environment within which the episode plays out.

Speaking of the episode's title, Brooker has surmised that it is 'an analogy for somebody who'd been traumatised at an early age, and might be troubled by life forever and never able to relax.' (Brooker et al, 2018). Brooker explains that the title evolved out of a very different episode outline, but endured despite the changes to the story; the initial plot had featured a baby who witnessed their mother's murder, and the subsequent impact on world view which Brooker likened to a virtual reality simulation of a boat ride, in which a crocodile attack happened in the opening minutes of the experience. Even the analogies used in this account underscore the tension between technology (the virtual reality simulator) and nature (in the form of the wild crocodile) which is pervasive throughout the episode. The snow-tipped, mountainous backdrops which provide the setting for much of the episode bring to mind Hansen and Waade's observation highlighted previously about the narrative function of 'desolate landscapes' in shaping the social criticism prevalent in Scandinavian crime

fiction. The natural world is prominent in the aesthetic of 'Crocodile', but it is a bleakly ambiguous presence rather than a reassuring one. The sheer vastness of the open spaces add to the aforementioned sense of isolation that looms over the episode, echoing the existential emptiness of its characters and what they are capable of in the name of self-preservation when loosed from the social moorings that typically foster empathy. Even the man-made structures in the episode add to this: office buildings with cavernous halls and soaring high ceilings, and dark hotel rooms with LCD screens that create the queasily antiseptic effect of a clear blue, bubbling pond, once again reaffirming the uneasy faux-tranquility that infuses the episode with tension.

The concerns around the survival of the welfare ideal which pervade Nordic crime fiction loom in 'Crocodile's depiction of a society in which big tech and large companies play an omnipresent role. In this society, state functions and responsibilities appear to have been increasingly given over to or shared with private entities. When Shazia, an investigator working for an insurance company, visits a client to interview him about his claim, she uses a device known as a 'recaller' which is used to scan people's memories in order to verify claims. The claimant voices his assumption that the devices are 'police things', but Shazia tells him 'not since last year – we all have them now'. This is a clear indication of the inverse trajectory of the state and corporations in this society, with the outsourcing of a police technology – as well as, implicitly through Shazia's character arc, the investigative responsibilities of the police – to private companies. The critique of the welfare state commonly associated with Nordic Noir often appears ambivalent, but is most typically directed from the left, targeting not necessarily the ideals of social democracy, but more often the sincerity of the politicians charged with custody of the project, and questioning its ability to endure and prosper in the face of such challenges. Robbins (2015) takes this a step further and identifies much of the criticism of the state present in Scandinavian fiction as closer to 'critique of neoliberalism from the left', and certainly the society depicted in 'Crocodile' seems to be one in which the 'big state' ethos

of social democracy has been scaled back to such an extent that its institutions appear to be characterised primarily by detachment and disinterest. The fact that Mia and Rob's initial crime has gone undetected for fifteen years does not speak reassuringly to the continuing efficiency of law enforcement agencies in this kind of environment, and it seems that the police have been increasingly sidelined as pertains to their traditional duties. As Shazia progresses with her investigation, we also learn from a hotel clerk that their booking procedures have changed as a result of a celebrity client's solicitation of a rent boy while staying as a guest at the hotel having been uncovered by tabloid hackers. This fleeting aside provides another indication of the outsourcing of investigatory work to the private sector, whether insurance investigators or the tabloid press.

Mia reluctantly agrees to cooperate with Shazia's investigation only because she is told that she is now compelled to by law, and that they should both seek to avoid 'dragging things out' by involving the actual police. This suggests an intentional abdication of responsibilities by the state, in tandem with the readiness of a willing private sector to absorb them. David Cameron, the British Prime Minister when *Black Mirror* initially launched in 2011, came to power a year prior on the back of a manifesto that prominently featured a policy known as the 'Big Society'. Cameron framed this project, which aimed to encourage community groups to play a greater part in the delivery and upkeep of traditional public services such as transport services, libraries and post offices, as a way of empowering communities and harnessing 'people power'. However, the scheme was promoted against a backdrop of severe cuts to government funding of public services, and as such was criticised by union leaders as a cost-cutting means of ceding state responsibility for these services (Smith, 2010). As Cameron's premiership progressed, he expanded the idea as a means of releasing public services from 'the grip of state control', and argued that they should instead be 'open to a range of providers competing to offer a better service' (Cameron, 2011), and shortly thereafter it was reported that, in practice, what this had led to was the emergence of 'an oligopoly' in this

outsourcing, with contracts in the public services 'overwhelmingly snapped up by a few big businesses' (Clark, 2012). In 'Crocodile', we see an interesting critique of this kind of shrinking of the state emerge: when society has ceased to exist in any meaningful form, why should individuals have any concern for any person or thing outside of themselves and their dependents? The implicitly Darwinian ethos emerging from the conflation of civil society with the need for 'competition' creates a context in which Mia's monstrous actions become horribly understandable, in which the primitive survival instinct is all.

**Concerns such as those raised in 'Crocodile' around the merging of state interests with private commerce are clearly influenced by developments in British politics such as those discussed above (along with the ones addressed by Brooker in his newspaper columns). However, it is important to remember that such developments are not unique to any one government or state, but rather part of an ongoing pattern of economic liberalisation emerging in tandem with globalisation across a range of Western democracies. This adds another layer of meaning to the uneasy sense of 'placelessness' evoked in 'Crocodile's uniquely eclectic aesthetic and narrative blend. The utilisation of the Nordic Noir motif evokes the socially conscious character of Scandinavian crime fiction, but the way in which it is used emphasises the transferability of its concerns within a globalised political and economic landscape. The aforementioned sense of placelessness elicited through the episode's blend of British actors and Icelandic locales also alludes to a confusion of geographical boundaries: just as Nordic Noir crosses cultural borders, more ominously so do the anxieties the genre so often addresses. Leetaru (2019) explains how the growth in outsourcing by states of surveillance activities to private companies can be seen to render legal boundaries and borders increasingly redundant. Using the example of a private US company granted access to an EU citizen's private data initially collected by another contractor, Leetaru outlines the process by which that data may be subsequently used 'to build a deep learning model to better flag a certain**



kind of suspicious activity'. Thereafter, this model may then be sold on 'to other law enforcement and allied governments, including that EU citizen's own government, which might otherwise face restrictions in using its citizens' data to build surveillance deep learning models' (Leetaru, 2019). Just as it was in 'Hated', the erosion of boundaries between the private and the public is an underpinning theme which functions on multiple levels in 'Crocodile', and the hybridisation inherent in the episode's depiction of place reflects the extent to which the reach and remit of multinational corporations have begun to bypass borders, and in doing so demonstrate why the critique of neoliberalism present in much of Scandinavian crime fiction is doubly relevant to societies outside the Nordic countries.

## Conclusion

The use of intertextual referencing has become a familiar strategy in 'quality' TV, and *Black Mirror* utilises it prominently to make links to the contemporary cultural phenomenon of Nordic Noir. Scandinavian crime fiction foregrounds the persistence of enduring social ills and human flaws steadily devouring the utopian social democratic ideal, raising questions about social democracy's ability to redress the inherent failings at the heart of Western society when helmed by flawed or corrupted politicians. In *Black Mirror*, this social critique sets its sights on another 'secular religion', that of technology and scientific progress. *Black Mirror's* dystopian homilies typically presume the last vestiges of any aspiration to social democracy in the fractured societies they depict as already stripped away, replaced by a corporate technocracy in which the functions of the state and civic institutions are increasingly outsourced to big tech companies. This is, of course, not dissimilar to the situation presently experienced in many contemporary neoliberal democracies, and this is consistent with *Black Mirror's* particular approach to socially conscious science-fiction: while fantastical technology is represented, in many cases its narrative function is analogous to or peripheral to currently existing technology. Ominous technological developments act as a vehicle that enables the

monstrosity of human nature to come to the fore, and gives the lie to the doctrine of social enlightenment as an inevitable companion to scientific progress. *Black Mirror* is a series that consistently plays with the conventions of genre and form to achieve particular artistic goals: by invoking the conventions of Nordic Noir in 'Crocodile' and 'Hated in the Nation', it attempts to refocus audience attention firmly on the social critique at its core.

## **References**

S. Abbott (ed) (2010) *The Cult TV Book*, London & New York: I.B. Tauris

B. Arnold (2015) "'I've turned down every other cop show": Stellan Skarsgård on *River*', *Guardian*, 7 October 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2015/oct/07/stellan-skarsgard-abi-morgan-river-behind-the-scenes-tv-police-drama>, accessed 8/9/2019

S. Askegaard & J. Östberg (eds) (2019) *Nordic Consumer Culture: State, Market and Consumers*, Cham: Springer Nature

E. Bakø, P. Roel & A. Spicer (eds) (2017) *Building Successful and Sustainable Film and Television Businesses: A Cross-National Perspective*, Bristol: Intellect

I. Bondebjerg, E. Novrup Redvall, R. Helles, S. Sophus Lai, H. Søndergaard, C. Astrupgaard (2017) *Transnational European Drama: Production, Genres and Audiences*, Cham: Springer Nature

C. Bramesco (2018) 'Is Netflix about to change how it releases original movies?', *Guardian*, 31 August 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/aug/31/netflix-release-model-oscar-films-alfonso-cuaron>, accessed 1/11/2019

C. Brooker (2007) 'I can see you, citizen', *Guardian*, 9<sup>th</sup> April 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/apr/09/humanrights.politics> (accessed 3/4/2020)

- C. Brooker (2014) 'What is Drip, and how, precisely, will it help the government ruin your life?', *Guardian*, 14<sup>th</sup> July 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jul/14/drip-government-data-retention-investigatory-powers-bill-horrors> (accessed 4/4/2020)
- C. Brooker, A.Jones & J.Arnopp (2018) *Inside Black Mirror*, London: Ebury
- W. Brooker & D. Jermyn (eds) (2003) *The Audience Studies Reader*, London & New York: Routledge
- D. Cameron (2011) 'How we will release the grip of state control', *Telegraph*, 20 February 2011, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/8337239/How-we-will-release-the-grip-of-state-control.html>, accessed 19/10/2019
- T. Clark (2012) 'Report: Cameron's big society is being thwarted by outsourced public services', *Guardian*, 3 December 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2012/dec/03/cameron-big-society-at-risk-private-outsourcing-public-services>, accessed 19/10/2019
- J. Collins (1995) *Architectures of Excess: Cultural Life in the Information Age*, New York: Routledge
- T. Deehan (2018) 'Exploring the locations of Black Mirror season four', *The Location Guide*, January 4 2018, <https://www.thelocationguide.com/2018/01/exploring-the-locations-of-black-mirror-season-four/>, accessed 2/10/2019
- J. Delahaye (2018) 'Black Mirror 'Crocodile' location revealed as viewers floored by breathtaking snowy landscapes', *Mirror*, January 8 2018, <https://www.mirror.co.uk/travel/europe/black-mirror-crocodile-filming-location-11791798>, accessed 2/10/2019
- J. Denham (2014) 'Benefits Street residents subjected to death threats after Channel 4 show airs', *Independent*, January 7 2014, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/news/benefits-street-residents-subjected-to-death-threats-after-channel-4-show-airs-9043932.html>, accessed 10/10/2019

Z. Doffman (2019) 'Your social media is (probably) being watched right now, says new surveillance report', *Forbes*, November 6 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/zakdoffman/2019/11/06/new-government-spy-report-your-social-media-is-probably-being-watched-right-now/#76db9c0a4f99>, accessed 2/4/2020

J. Fiske (1987) *Television Culture*, London: Routledge

H. Lamba, M. Malik & J. Pfeffer (2015) 'A tempest in a teacup? Analyzing firestorms on Twitter,' in *Proceedings of the 2015 IEEE/ACM International Conference on Advances in Social Networks Analysis and Mining*, ASONAM, pp.17-24

K. Leetaru (2019) 'Much of our government digital surveillance is now outsourced to private companies', *Forbes*, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kalevleetaru/2019/06/18/much-of-our-government-digital-surveillance-is-outsourced-to-private-companies/#3002fe121799> (accessed 3/4/2020)

J. Lier Horst (2014) 'The secret of Nordic noir', *The Hindu*, 5 April 2014, <https://www.thehindu.com/books/literary-review/the-secret-of-nordic-noir/article5875988.ece>, accessed 2/10/2019

T. Lusher (2010) 'Charlie Brooker: 10 of the best Screen Burn columns', *Guardian*, 16 October 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2010/oct/16/charlie-brooker-best-screen-burn>, accessed 19/10/2019

K. McDonald & D. Smith-Rousey (eds) (2016) *The Netflix Effect: Technology and Entertainment in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, New York: Bloomsbury

N. Midgley (2014), 'How British television fell under the spell of Nordic Noir', *Telegraph*, 28 March 2014, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/tv-and-radio-reviews/10724864/How-British-television-fell-under-the-spell-of-Nordic-noirThe-Tu.html>, accessed 15/9/2019

T. Nicholson (2019) 'Twitter wants to stop pile-ons with a 'clarification' button. Here's how it would work', *Esquire*, 18 February 2019, <https://www.esquire.com/uk/latest-news/a26387783/twitter-wants-to-stop-pile-ons-with-a-clarification-button-heres-how-it-would-work/>, accessed 15/9/2019

S. Parker (2016), 'Charlie Brooker on the imminent technology apocalypse', *Esquire*, 21 October 2016, <https://www.esquire.com/uk/culture/interviews/a11194/charlie-brooker-black-mirror-season-three-interview/>, accessed 15/9/2019

S. Peacock (ed) (2013) *Stieg Larsson's Millennium Trilogy: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Nordic Noir on Page and Screen*, Eastbourne: Palgrave Macmillan

J. Pfeffer, T. Zorbach, K. M. Carley (2014) "Understanding online firestorms: Negative word-of-mouth dynamics in social media networks", *Journal of Marketing Communications*, vol. 20, no. 1–2, pp. 117-128

B. Robbins (2015) 'The detective is suspended: Nordic Noir and the welfare state', *Post 45*, 18 May 2015, <http://post45.research.yale.edu/2015/05/the-detective-is-suspended-nordic-noir-and-the-welfare-state>, accessed 18/10/2019

A. Shahbaz & A. Funk (2019) 'Freedom on the net 2019: The crisis of social media', *Freedom House*, 4 November 2019, [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/11042019\\_Report\\_FH\\_FOTN\\_2019\\_final\\_Public\\_Download.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/11042019_Report_FH_FOTN_2019_final_Public_Download.pdf), accessed 2/4/2020

N. Smith (2010) 'David Cameron launches Tories' 'big society' plan', BBC, 19 July 2010, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-10680062>, accessed 18/10/2019

K. Toft Hansen & A. Marit Waade (2017) *Locating Nordic Noir: From Beck to The Bridge*, Cham: Springer Nature