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Engaging with *The Bridge*: cultural citizenship, cross-border identities and audiences as 'regionauts'

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Keywords:	cultural citizenship, audiences, civic engagement, identity, region-building, regionauts, Scandinavian drama, crime fiction, community, sense of belonging
Abstract:	<p>This article explores civic engagement with the Danish/Swedish crime series <i>The Bridge</i> (SVT/DR 2011-) based on qualitative interviews with 113 audiences and drawing on the notion of cultural citizenship. The perspective of cultural citizenship, as understood and operationalised mainly by Hermes (2005) is married with critical perspectives on the crime drama genre and its audiences along with cultural analysis of the construction of and engagement with the cross-border region in which the drama is set. The analysis shows that civic engagement with the crime series is prompted through the construction of community and allegiances through which audiences feel connected. This argument unfolds in three main analytical sections detailing how audiences' articulations of community are focused around distinct yet overlapping dimensions of community as 1) a national social ritual, 2) a sense of Nordic community and finally 3) community as regional identity and sense of belonging to a borderless Öresund utopia – the integrated region between Denmark and Sweden. In so doing, the article offers rich insights into how audiences shape civic identities as members of nation states, historical and cultural regions and as border-crossers between these geo-cultural entities in dialogue with popular culture and around the boundary-work of the different communities offered by such texts.</p>

Engaging with *The Bridge*: cultural citizenship, cross-border identities and audiences as 'regionauts'

Introduction

On a wall at the media production company Filmlance in Malmö, next to the offices of the costume designers, location managers and set designers who in the past six years have been involved in the creative process around the production of the Danish-Swedish television series *The Bridge* (DR/SVT, 2011-), two pieces of paper have been taped together and stuck on the wall. The note, which details the aesthetic manifesto written by the creators of the show, reads:

We're depicting a society which is in the process of de-humanizing. A welfare society that once was carefully crafted and rationally thought through to work efficiently is falling apart. The facades are cracking up, the dirt is showing and the functions of institutions, buildings and places seem more and more diffuse. Humans have been left neglected. We are strangers in our own society.

This article explores how audiences engage with the representations of this broken-down society: a dark, fictive post-welfare Scandinavia constructed for them by the creative team behind the popular crime series. Crime fiction as a literary genre is generally understood to be a 'tool to dissect society's flaws and failures, and to expose the wrong turns that capitalist economy and the political structures to which it is allied, has taken' (Messent 2013: 17). As a distinct subgenre, so called 'Nordic noir' crime fiction has in recent years become hugely popular among audiences around the world, not least for how it offers 'socio-political insights and builds up a complex picture of Scandinavian society and the cracks in its democratic ideals' (Forshaw 2012: 2). The television crime series *The Bridge*, set on the border of Sweden and Denmark, provides a pertinent example of this genre in how it examines and displays Scandinavia's thorny problems of widening social divides and growing vulnerable groups in long-form storytelling that brings out 'the hidden side of the welfare-state miracle in decay' (Zizek 2008).

These gloomy forebodings conveyed through aesthetics and character development resonate powerfully with audiences who engage with the political dimensions of the subtle societal critique embedded in the crime drama. However, audiences also repeatedly articulated more optimistic sentiments, for example talking about 'light coming out of the cracks' of this dystopian image of a crumbling society. Instead of leaving them feeling as 'strangers in their own society' as envisioned by the show's creative team, audiences in

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3 Sweden and Denmark expressed a profound sense of hope and unity evoked by the show. The
4 analysis shows how audiences engage with and reflect upon the complexity of contemporary
5 societies through a drama series, which complicates ideas of good vs. evil, and disturbs black
6 and white representations of characters, plots, and story lines. In this sense, audience
7 engagement with the drama resonates with the multiple, often contradictory, ways in which
8 politics and popular culture intersect. The analysis asks how *The Bridge* induces a sense of
9 community and fosters cultural citizenship in audiences.¹ It offers insights of cultural
10 citizenship as community and civic subjectivity by identifying three key themes in the data,
11 which illustrate the different dimensions of this sense of belonging to audiences. I begin by
12 introducing some key concepts and ideas that are later unfolded in more detail in the analysis.
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21 A starting point for this article is the idea that popular culture can work as a resource for
22 *citizenship* and *civic engagement*. It is by now a well-established argument that television
23 entertainment and popular culture in general, however indirectly, play an important role in
24 how we piece together the puzzle of our political subjectivities (see e.g. Van Zoonen 2005;
25 Coleman 2010; Coleman 2006; Dahlgren 2009; Hermes 2005; Klein 2012). While arguments
26 pertaining to the relation between popular culture and the performance of cultural citizenship
27 are well rehearsed, this has not yet been sufficiently studied in empirical audience research on
28 television drama and crime genres in particular (Müller and Hermes 2010). To study the
29 democratic potential of popular culture empirically, Joke Hermes (2005), drawing on the
30 work of Hartley (1996), proposes the notion of cultural citizenship as identity construction. In
31 her 2005 book, Hermes defines cultural citizenship as ‘the process of bonding and community
32 building, and reflection on that bonding, that is implied in partaking of the text-related
33 practices of reading, consuming, celebrating and criticizing offered in the realm of (popular)
34 culture’ (2005: 10). Applying ideas of cultural citizenship to the study of television audiences
35 implies asking questions of what they ‘do with (popular) cultural texts to understand, take up,
36 reflect on and reform identities that are embedded in communities of different kinds’ (Ibid).
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48 To operationalize the tricky notion of engagement, I turn to Dahlgren (2009: 59) who in
49 his extensive work on media and democracy makes a distinction between civic engagement as
50 ‘activities which pertain to the democratic character of society,’ whereas as ‘political
51 engagement implies some dimension of conflict and captures any activity that is oriented
52 towards influencing government action in some way.’ When researching civic engagement
53 then, we are looking for the multiple ways in which ‘the political’ is manifested across the
54 cultural terrain at the micro-level of everyday life and in everyday talk in which audiences
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3 make connections between the personal and the popular on the one hand, and issues of public
4 concern on the other. If we couple Dahlgren's (2006) culturalist approach to media and
5 engagement with Hermes' notion of cultural citizenship, we may understand civic
6 engagement in the context of audiences of television entertainment to signify both the subtle
7 and explicit articulations of connectivity to different forms of community, be they national,
8 regional, or cross-cultural. Taking these ideas on board, I wish with this article to broaden the
9 scope of the field of research that probes how media and culture relate to civic engagement
10 and citizenship by providing a rich empirical analysis of how these dynamics play out in the
11 context of audiences of crime drama. Although more and more critical empirical research is
12 emerging on these issues, only rarely have questions of cultural citizenship been raised in
13 relation to the crime genre (for an exception, see Hermes and Stello 2000), and never have
14 they been explored in relation to television crime series specifically. Despite recent attention
15 to the interplay between popular culture and politics (see e.g. Street, Inthorn, and Scott 2013)
16 the bearing of cultural mediations of politics on audiences' heads and hearts is still often
17 assumed and implied rather than empirically substantiated (Corner 2011).

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20 Further, audience research in this area has primarily focused on the relationship of
21 overall patterns of media consumption to the cognitive capacities of audiences and their civic
22 subjectivity (Corner, Richardsson, and Parry 2013). When close attention is directed to a
23 specific text or genre, research tends to focus on films, drama series, or other forms of fiction
24 which dramatize institutional politics in the traditional sense, for example political comedy
25 (Doona 2016; Jones 2013) or politicotainment (Riegert 2007), while neglecting audience
26 engagement with the plenitude of media forms which narrate 'the political' in a much broader
27 sense of the word. In this sense, I subscribe to the growing body of research that takes an
28 epistemological leap to assume that content that does not make explicit references to formal
29 politics may also be understood as political and as a valuable source of civic engagement
30 (Inthorn, Street and Scott 2012).

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33 In attempting to understand audience engagement with the construction of the Öresund
34 region,² in which the drama is set, as a form of cross-border, cross-cultural place-making, I
35 am inspired by two concepts from a line of thought in cultural studies focusing on region-
36 building in different integrated border areas across Europe. I understand these border areas as
37 'political dreamscapes' and the people inhabiting them as so-called 'regionauts' who perform
38 cross-border identities (Löfgren 2008). As Chow (2016) points out, *The Bridge* is the first
39 major television production to specifically address, represent, and reimagine intercultural
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encounters in this binational region and the new spatial experience made possible by the bridge connecting the two countries. Whereas her research shows how the series, at the level of both production and narrative, articulates the difficulties and contradictions in fostering a sense of a ‘coherent Öresund identity,’ this research examines how these efforts actually resonate with audiences.

Methods

This audience study is part of a larger research project on the producers and audiences of television entertainment in Denmark, Sweden, and UK (*Media Experiences*³, 2013-2016). The article draws on an extensive data set of production and audience research, including both production interviews and observations, qualitative in depth audience interviews, focus groups, and participant observation⁴. From this larger data set, it focuses on interviews and fieldwork conducted with 113 audience members in Denmark (39) and Sweden (74).⁵ The sample includes an equal number of females and males with an age span from 21 to 71. Participants were from a broad spectrum of professions ranging from unemployed, students, and social workers, to teachers, journalists, clerks, and retirees. Danish participants lived in Western and Eastern Denmark and Swedish participants in the Stockholm urban area, Mid-West, and Southern Sweden. While these are not in the majority, the sample also includes a few (3) Danes who live in Sweden and Swedes living in Denmark. The data analysis focused on common themes *across* respondents in the two countries. After an initial mining for subtle differences in responses based on nationality, differences emerged based on communities of affinity other than that of the nation state. For example, physical distance/proximity to Öresund was a decisive factor, as respondents in the region shared a sense of local identity besides that of the Nordic, a pattern that pertained to the sample as a whole.

The qualitative semi-structured interviews have been conducted with participants individually or in smaller groups of 2-3 in home settings or in public venues such as cafés or libraries, while four were focus groups of 7-10 participants. The interviews were conducted in Danish and Swedish and later translated into English. Prior to all interviews and focus groups, participants were informed about the research project and given assurance about ethical principles, such as anonymity and confidentiality.⁶ Interviews were conducted until the point of theoretical saturation when no more variations in the data were found (Seale 1999). All interview data has been transcribed and coded for common themes. In the inductive-analytical process of working through the comprehensive empirical material, I have looked for ‘traces of

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3 community and reflection' (Hermes 2005: 11). While the voices of all 113 participants are not
4 represented in this article, I use extracts from conversations with 31 interviewees as
5 representative of the spectrum of voices within each of the broad themes identified around
6 issues of community and identity construction. In the analysis, I follow up on the cues of the
7 interviewees linking these to relevant perspectives in media and cultural studies to offer a
8 thematic analysis indicative of the wider repertoires of audiences' cultural and civic
9 engagement with the show.⁷

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15 The research was conducted in two rounds: the first in relation to season two of the
16 series during the autumn of 2013, and the second during and after the broadcasting of season
17 three in late 2015. Often however, participants did not discriminate between seasons and
18 tended to also talk about issues raised in season one as well as character development over the
19 course of all three seasons. Although this article will not address differences in audience
20 engagement across seasons, it will to some degree deal with engagement with the storyline
21 and character development over the course of the three seasons.
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27 28 **CULTURAL CITIZENSHIP AS (A SENSE OF) COMMUNITY: THREE** 29 **MODES OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT** 30

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32 Scandinavian crime drama as a genre is often associated with a serial rather than episodic
33 narrative structure. They span a large number of episodes and often several seasons, allowing
34 their central murder mystery to act as a catalyst around which a number of other storylines
35 and themes can revolve (Creeber 2015). Stretching over three seasons of 10 episodes each, a
36 serial drama such as *The Bridge* enables intimate relationships with the fictional world of the
37 drama and its characters. Because they unfold over a longer period of time, TV series can
38 create imagined communities to which viewers can relate (Gillespie 2004:140) and install a
39 sense of affinity on different levels (e.g. local, European, transnational). To be sure, *The*
40 *Bridge* gives audiences a sense of access to a symbolic community, a world of belonging
41 beyond themselves. Viewers' bonding over common identity and their reflections on this
42 identity are articulated in various ways. Further, expressions of cultural citizenship range from
43 engaging with the subtle political undertones in aesthetic and storytelling qualities of the text,
44 to the explicit articulation of 'real' and topical political matters in Denmark and Sweden,
45 which are often anchored in viewers' personal experiences of the issues raised by the drama.
46 These observations are unpacked in an analysis of articulations of community on three
47 different yet overlapping levels: community as a national social ritual, a sense of Nordic
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community, and finally community as regional identity and a sense of belonging to a borderless Öresund utopia .

Social ritual: A Sunday night community

We talk about it at work. We don't just watch this alone in each of our different houses. We share it afterwards. (Dan, 48, Denmark)

Hermes (2005: 11) argues that 'popular cultural texts and practices are important because they provide much of the wool from which the social tapestry is knit.' For *The Bridge*, this social tapestry is woven together through a mix of television production, broadcasting, and audience practices, which over time have developed into a social ritual bringing together the nation in front of (television) screens on Sunday nights during the dark autumn and winter months. To audiences in Denmark and Sweden, there is thus a certain sense of community in the mere act of being a Sunday night quality drama television viewer. In both countries, there is a strong Sunday night television tradition, and the prime time 8 o'clock slot has historically been dedicated to serial crime dramas coming out of Nordic countries (primarily Denmark), which are often labelled and branded outside Scandinavia as Nordic Noir or Scandi-Noir. Public service dramas such as *The Killing* (DR, 2007-2012) and *Borgen* (DR, 2010-2013), and before that *Unit One* (DR 2000-2003) and *The Eagle* (DR, 2004-2006), have paved the way and ensured *The Bridge* (DR/SVT 2011-) this sweet spot in programming and audiences' weekly routines: 'They are aired sort of at the end of a weekend and afterwards you get yourself ready to go to bed. It wraps up the week in a good way. It's a bit of a ritual' (Karen, 56, DK). Audiences express sentiments of pride and a sense of togetherness in how they know that the rest of the nation is watching television with them:

I think the fact that there are so many other people watching the same show, that even if you watch it alone you might get a text message in the middle of it or talk to your friends about it the next day. That makes you feel like you are not watching it alone (Tanja, 37, DK).

Although often watched in solitude and in the privacy of one's home, this drama is a shared 'text' in the sense that it works as a topic of conversation during lunch breaks with colleagues, in Facebook groups dedicated to the show or the genre, in online chat messages with friends, and over dinner between family members.

On Sunday night at nine pm, I get the first text message from my friend! We text message about it, but also talk when we get a chance (...) I discuss it a lot with a colleague and a friend and we have a lot of different conspiracy theories, trying to figure out all the different storylines that are running. (Mette, 36, DK)

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3 Mette's reflections pay testimony to how popular representations can work as a cohesive
4 social and cultural force that offers means of bonding (Hermes 2005). This sense of unity is
5 also articulated at the level of storytelling. Audiences link the intertwined complex web of
6
7 different stories with stories of their own lives and express a sense of how their trajectories as
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9 viewers and citizens are being intertwined. Nanna (63, DK) elaborates on how the drama
10 makes her reflect upon how, although alone in front of the television, she is sharing an
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12 experience with everyone else in the country on Sunday nights:

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15 It confronts me with the fact that the only thing I am experiencing right now is
16 what is taking place within my bubble, but my story intersects with everything
17 else that is going on around me. This series sort of went "bling" on me. It made
18 me realize: My God, we're all part of each other's stories - we are all connected.
19 In some bizarre and fascinating way. That's also why you have to watch your
20 step and keep concentrated when watching, because you get this feeling that is
21 not just parallel stories, they are interrelated. It is like a web.
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24 What Nanna hints at here is a sense of connectivity invoked by the complex and multi-layered
25 storyline. This 'double-dimension narrating' characteristic of the genre (Redvall 2013), in
26 which several storylines are unfolding simultaneously, is crucial to understanding how the
27 genre 'reveals an intensely complex and divided world which can only be healed through a
28 combination of tolerance and co-operation' (Creeber 2015: 24). In her work on television
29 writing and production practices in Denmark, Redvall (2013) shows how this double narrative
30 structure is one of the crucial ways in which producers seek to stir debate, mirror relevant and
31 topical issues, and provide a window onto different values, cultures and ways of living among
32 their audiences (p. 68). In essence, the story of two police officers forced to collaborate
33 despite differences and borders suggests the interconnectedness of humanity in a world
34 'where everything and everyone is implicitly linked' (Creeber 2015: 24). Ultimately, being
35 part of a national Sunday night ritual thus connects viewers to an affinity beyond that of the
36 nation state.
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45 46 47 **A sense of Nordic community: post-welfare dystopia as the 'creepiness of** 48 **everyday life'** 49

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51 It strikes a chord with that community and unity we have in the Nordic
52 countries (Nanna, 63, DK).
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54 A second dimension of cultural citizenship that emerged in the analysis of the interview data
55 relates to audiences' identification with a Nordic or Scandinavian community. This is a
56 community of shared values, grievances, and frames of reference, and audiences' engagement
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3 with this community is suggestive of the ‘affinitive capacity of popular culture to make
4 people aware of communities of interest to which they might belong’ (Street, Inthorn, and
5 Scott 2013: 5).
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10 The series prompts deliberation on the cultural similarities and subtle differences between the
11 two countries. To Nanna (63, DK), the Nordic feel ‘besides from the story and the plot, is in
12 pictures of the nature and our architecture. You have the feeling that although you cross the
13 bridge to another country, we are still very much alike. I can’t explain it, what the Nordic
14 dimension is. I have friends in Germany who I think are very different from us’. Difference is
15 in fact a key element in how audiences ‘deploy a sense of self and of identity’ (Hermes and
16 Stello 2000) around their interpretation of the series. Some audiences pay close attention to
17 how the subtle and almost imperceptible differences between the two neighbouring countries
18 are represented through the two detectives’ relationship and collaboration: ‘They represent
19 two countries with differences but also similarities. They work together to solve issues, they
20 don’t take into consideration who they are, where they’re from, if they are man and woman,
21 they just cooperate. They don’t play on the categorisation of people and that is really
22 refreshing’ (Mette, 36, DK).
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32 To viewers, the main female character Saga Norén⁸ symbolises these subtle cultural
33 differences: ‘Saga has a diagnosis so that makes her very direct, but in general that is a Danish
34 trait. In Sweden, you beat around the bush and don’t dare to bring up sensitive issues (Julia,
35 27, DK). Katarina (50, Sweden) contemplates how Saga’s complicated personality is used to
36 negotiate boundaries of difference and connects this to larger, more existential questions
37 invoked by the show:
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43 In a sense, it’s about: How can society work, really? How do we work in
44 society? To Saga it’s like life is a set of building blocks, but they forgot to
45 include the manual. It’s interesting how we approach people who don’t have a
46 manual.
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48 Corina (51, SE) taps into this idea when she argues that, for her, the show raises the question:
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50 What does it mean to be a human being? For example, how can someone want
51 to be with Saga? Her boyfriend is weird or stupid. It’s not logical that he would
52 be dating her. But if it does make sense, then yes okay, humans are indeed that
53 complex (...) and all of that is stuff that we don’t just accept, we have to dive
54 deeper into it. And in doing so, you learn something about yourself. To me, that
55 makes the show not only an escape from everyday life, but also a way of trying
56 to understand life.
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3 Many viewers conceded to having a love-hate relationship with Saga in the first two seasons
4 because of her lack of social skills and empathy. But somewhere between the end of season
5 two and the beginning of season three, audiences started empathising with the character and
6 her personal struggles, seeing Saga as the emotional hub of the storytelling. To audiences,
7 Saga's story and development over the course of the three seasons thus epitomize themes
8 around relationship dynamics, moral dilemmas, and political and cultural tensions (Hill
9 forthcoming 2018).
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16 **Bound together by 'endless Scandinavian winters'**

17 Another community-building element is evoked by something as mundane as the weather,
18 which to audiences epitomizes the drama's sense of melancholy and nostalgia. Time and time
19 again, audience members remarked how the ceaseless cold, grey, and dim weather in
20 Scandinavia is powerfully used in the drama to enhance a feeling of gloominess and despair.
21 As fellow sufferers who each year live through the 'endless Scandinavian winters', this seems
22 a familiar and realistic depiction of everyday life in Scandinavia during most of the year:
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28 It's this kitchen sink realism. It's scaled back (..) grey and raining. Autumn. This
29 Nordic light when the sun doesn't go all the way up. Ever. (...) This raw, cold
30 tone makes it feel familiar. (Maria, 30, SE)
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32 Katarina (50, SE) agrees when she describes the look and feel of the show:
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34 [It is] very grey. That's something I like with the Scandinavian series, it can be
35 completely unglamorous. It can be raining for an entire series. Nobody cares,
36 and I like that. It's sort of mundane. It's so grey, it's so foggy, it's so boring.
37 And that's just how it is. But we live here anyway, and go about our lives.
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40 Her experience of feeling at home in the rainy and grey landscapes relates directly to that of
41 Sara (52, SE):
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43 It feels just right. It describes with sound and image exactly the feeling you get.
44 Very Malmö-ish weather. It's always a bit windy here. And it's not even proper
45 rain, it just hangs in the air. And it's dark, and there are windscreen wipers, and
46 it's all very drab.
47

48 Because 'that darkness is part of our reality here' (Anna, 23, DK) viewers feel at home in the
49 images positioning them as members of a group of like-minded viewers 'in the know' of what
50 everyday life in Scandinavia feels like. The weather and the way it is creatively tampered with
51 and poetically enhanced thus work as a trope in the storytelling and as an important element
52 in how the audiences are invited to feel part of a larger social self in a Nordic community. We
53 might usefully understand these dark, grey, and raw tones described by the audiences as part
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3 of the ‘local colours’ embedded into the so-called ‘Nordic noir production values’ (Waade
4 and Jensen 2013). In this sense, viewers are responding to the aestheticising of the distinct
5 ‘climate, seasonal conditions and light’ of the region and to how this is used strategically to
6 produce ‘structures of appeal and [to] evoke imagined communities’ in audience members’
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8 minds (Eichner and Waade 2015).
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11 12 13 **Engaging with the post-welfare state – cracks in the Nordic model**

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15 It is in the very essence of crime fiction to ‘lend itself to political and oppositional purposes’
16 (Horsley 2005: 158-159). Common to the novels, films, and series labelled under the broad
17 banner of Scandinavian crime fiction or Nordic Noir, is the exposition of the social and
18 political fissures and failings of the Nordic countries, which are so often highlighted as
19 exemplars in questions of welfare, living standards, education, etc. The genre thus uncovers
20 the underbelly of the state apparatus in purported social democracies. To some audiences, the
21 idea and ideal of Scandinavia as a community is intrinsically enmeshed with how the genre
22 trenchantly addresses questions of (the collapse of) the welfare state ‘in [its] often anti-
23 establishment probing of society’ (Forshaw 2012: 9). Indeed, the attempt to portray ‘a society
24 in the process of de-humanizing’ as envisioned by the creative team comes through clearly to
25 the audiences:
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There is something about this safe society that turns out to be not so safe after all. Some have considered the Scandinavian countries as ideal types. We have the welfare state but then you start scratching in the surface and realise that the state is evil. (Camilla, 42, DK)

In Camilla’s response, we see both culture and engagement with culture crystalize into a form of political commentary. She picks up on moral, social, and political concerns as these are narrated through stories of broken relations, soundscapes, and the blue-toned aesthetics of the cold urban landscapes and barren, abandoned rural areas. To audiences, this political commentary is understood and appreciated as a very subtle undertone, an element hidden or embedded in the portrayal of the societies in which the narrative unfolds. Maria, a young Danish viewer sums it up in the following way: ‘There’s some politics, yes, but it isn’t political per se, that would have annoyed me.’ As Nanna notes: ‘When politics are put in play in this subtle manner, it becomes relevant to me.’ The attention to detail in efforts to produce a sense of decay and destruction when filming in both exterior and interior settings resonates with audiences: ‘It has a bit of a Roy Andersson feeling to it in the way it induces a sort of realistic tone or sense. In the scenes in the police station, there’s this fluorescent light that

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3 flickers. When you see nature, it's flat and desolate' (Maria, 30, DK). Drawing on their often
4 extensive knowledge of the crime genre and how *The Bridge*, as part of this genre, draws on
5 the abstract aesthetics pioneered by the Swedish film director Roy Andersson, audiences
6 indicate how the show evokes for them a sense of artificial realism.
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11 When Peter (58, SE) concedes that the series to him produces 'a doomsday feeling,' he is
12 putting words to the very sentiments envisioned by the producers and to how the crime genre
13 represents in a realistic fashion 'the most anxiety-producing issues and narratives of a culture'
14 (Nickerson 1997: 744-745). But drama confronts us with these uncomfortable issues from the
15 comfort of our homes. As Frida (24, DK) explains: 'There is something I like about watching
16 something that is a little bit scary when I am at home, within the safety of my own house.'
17 Consuming drama in these settings then becomes a means to come to terms with worst-case
18 scenarios and reflect upon a changing society (Nickerson 1997). Part of the allure and
19 anxiety-producing features of crime fiction is precisely the fact that the story is embedded into
20 everyday routines and narratives that take place in familiar locations.
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29 **'Mundane Creepiness' and the 'light at the end of the tunnel'**

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32 There's this sense of danger, but at the same time it is also situated in everyday
33 life. (Robert, 37, DK)
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35 In season two, the plot revolves around a deadly plague set off by eco-terrorists dressed in
36 sinister animal masks. In season three, we follow the detectives as they track down a maniacal
37 and vengeful serial killer who publicly stages the bodies of his victims as grotesque art
38 installations. Engaging with such acts of transnational terror or gruesome and gory crimes,
39 which in *The Bridge* are centred around narratives of evil in and among 'ourselves' in familiar
40 settings, creates a contradictory mesh of sentiments among audiences. They describe the
41 experience as 'mundane creepiness' or 'scary cosiness,' and as being immersed in a
42 disturbing and strange, yet cosy and familiar setting: 'the greyness of the show creeps into
43 me' (Jenny, 22, SE). As one young female student explains: 'I think it reminds me of when I
44 was younger and *Beck* (SVT 1997-) was always on, late on Sundays. I'd lie in my parents'
45 bed and watched until 10 o'clock when the news came on. And it was a bit creepy. But you
46 felt very safe. You could just close your eyes when it was too scary' (Emma, 21, SE). To
47 Maria (30, SE), 'It transmits this feeling of unease because of this sense of everyday life. Or
48 the fact that you can recognize the locations. I suppose it's both thrilling and uncomfortable
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3 because it gets close to you somehow’.

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6 Viewers stress how the death and horror that play out in this familiar, everyday, apparently
7 safe society are what makes them reflect upon how evil or terrorism are not external threats;
8 instead, evil is lurking everywhere, and the viewer has the sense of something malignant
9 taking place ‘on the other side of the privet hedge’ as this female respondent explains:
10

11
12 It’s that way it makes you think it could be your next-door neighbour who has
13 gone crazy. That creepiness of everyday life...of the mundane. But that’s also
14 what makes it easy to relate to and what triggers so many emotions. Like ‘what
15 are they doing on the other side of the privet hedge? (Mathilda, 27, DK)
16

17
18 Katarina (50, SE) shares this view when she argues that:
19

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21 It’s this gloomy, dramatic feeling. But there is also a very everyday feel to it.
22 So, there is both this very dramatic...but the everyday is there too. I thought a
23 lot about why these Nordic series are so scary. I think in the North we are so
24 sound and safe. You are situated in the Swedish welfare society, but still
25 something dangerous is lurking. I mean you are not in a jungle or in the ghettos
26 of LA. In a nice villa area but still something is dead wrong. (Katarina, 50, SE)
27

28
29 It is through the fine-grained analysis of how the vernacular and familiar imprint on buildings,
30 locations, and landscapes, along with how the aesthetics of everyday life in Scandinavia are
31 experienced by audiences, that we come to understand key elements in how the show engages
32 them in a sense of Nordic community.
33

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36 Still, in the midst of the darkness, decay, and gruesomeness unfolding in everyday settings,
37 audiences sense rays of light and glimmers of hope:
38

39
40 Sometimes in between all this gloominess there are these liberating moments
41 between the two main characters. (Niels, 61, DK)
42

43
44 It’s sad because it’s about violence, death, and lost souls. But there is still light
45 at the end of the tunnel, somehow. In the atmosphere. There are cracks where
46 the light sort of comes through. (Robert, 37 DK)
47

48
49 A young female focus group participant (Alice, 21, SE) explains that the drama keeps her
50 hanging somewhere in between a sense of hope and despair:

51
52 It always feels like it’s all really hopeless: “Oh no, everything is going to hell.”
53 And then something happens that makes you feel a tiny bit of hope. They
54 always trigger that sense of hope: “Oh, it might work out.” And then: “No, it
55 won’t.” And then: “Well, it might.” I suppose that’s where the suspense comes
56 from. Things are always on the brink of destruction.
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3 Some of the features evoking these more optimistic sentiments of hope and community in
4 audiences are the values and ideals of the cross border co-operation at the heart of the story.
5
6 *The Bridge* speaks to a desire for understanding across differences, and to a utopian vision of
7 an Öresund region without borders. A strangely mesmerising and persuasive image of a
8 region in which the two countries and cities blend together in a grey and foggy borderland
9 builds up over the course of the three seasons. This perspective comes across most clearly in
10 the how audiences relate to the construction of the Öresund region.

16 **Community as the borderless utopia of Öresund**

17
18
19 Malmö and Copenhagen feel like one (...) It doesn't seem like two countries, it
20 seems like one. It's very beautifully portrayed. (Madeleine, 27, SE)

21
22 Commentators and critics have called the place portrayed in the show 'a Malmö that does not
23 exist and an Öresund region yet to come' (see e.g. Flykt 2013). What they are hinting at is
24 how the drama persuasively constructs the region as a friction-free utopia in which all cultural
25 and language barriers have been eliminated. Audiences too react to how 'it seems like it takes
26 two minutes to go across' (Sara 46, SE) and how 'everybody understands each other, it's
27 unrealistic' (Eva, 42, SE).

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32
33 Löfgren (2008) considers a region such as that of Öresund a 'political dreamscape' to signify
34 how these integrated transnational territories are often more of a political project rather than a
35 lived experience of the citizens in the region. This also applies for the Öresund region, which
36 at least initially existed more in public relations material intended to attract investors and
37 tourists than in the consciousness of people on both sides of the strait. Even though the
38 Öresund region, along with many other integration projects across Europe, may be considered
39 a top-down political project, there is also a more bottom-up or on-the ground dimension to
40 region building that involves creative and cultural practices of various kinds. In this final
41 section, I suggest that a production such as *The Bridge* and the various ways in which
42 audiences identify with its fictive portrayal of the borderland between Denmark and Sweden
43 could be understood as part of these cultural practices that build bonds between citizens
44 across borders.

45
46
47 To be sure, the Öresund region is primarily an economic and political project
48 spearheaded by a powerful elite. In fact, it is often considered one of the success stories and
49 was, at least in the initial phases, seen as somewhat of a laboratory of cultural and economic
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3 integration within the European Union and as ‘an experiment in the new Europe without
4 borders’ (Löfgren 2008: 198). Audiences critically relate the drama to the strategic
5 communication and branding around the opening of the bridge around the millennium, which
6 was directed at investors, citizens, and tourists, and which for many years influenced life in
7 the region. One young male contemplates:
8
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10
11 They’ve succeeded very well in painting Malmö and Copenhagen as some form
12 of Scandinavian capital. It almost feels like it’s one city. Almost like it’s an
13 elaborate marketing project. Maybe you want to live in the city where everyone
14 dies. But they’re presenting Malmö as the Öresund region, as one. It almost
15 feels deliberate. As if Region Skåne had teamed up with filmmakers and bought
16 a show in order to paint that picture. (Arvid, 23, SE)
17
18

19 Reminded of the mass-mediated spectacle of the opening of the Öresund bridge around the
20 millennium, one female viewer comments:
21
22

23 It’s really smart. The Öresund consortium, the branding of Öresund, and all
24 these organisations we have spent millions creating to put the Öresund regions
25 on the map. They must have all gotten a lot of help from this show. (Ann Marie,
26 60 SE)
27
28

29 Local audiences who have first-hand experiences with the integration of the region are,
30 despite knowing that the representation is not all true to the realities of everyday life in the
31 region, intrigued by the vision of the drama. A long-term commuter proclaims: ‘To me, it’s
32 like: ‘Well, it would be great if it was really like that’: a little utopia without borders’ (Sara,
33 46, SE). The fact that everybody seems to understand each other is seen to be ‘unrealistic’ and
34 ‘unreal,’ but viewers appreciate it as a ‘what if’ comment on the potential of the region and
35 the future prospects of Scandinavia at large.
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40
41 Many local audiences in the Malmö and Copenhagen area express a very strong sense of
42 belonging to an Öresund community and of being citizens of the region. They appreciate the
43 fact that *The Bridge* takes place in the region and that it projects an image of a metropolitan
44 and international hub to the outside world. To Swedes in Scania, the southern part of the
45 country, many of whom consider Copenhagen their go-to metropolis, this is especially true in
46 relation to – and often in opposition to – Stockholm:
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51 It means so much to me that it’s from the Öresund region. Partly because I think
52 the region should be featured more, but also because it’s nice to recognize
53 things. I’m tired of seeing scenes from Stockholm all the time. (Sara, 46 SE)
54
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56 We don’t get a lot of attention in this region, compared to Stockholm. In
57 Stockholm, they tend not to care about a lot of issues down here, least of all
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1
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3 supporting the Öresund region, so I like that the show is from here. (Katarina 50
4 SE)

5
6
7 Morten (49, SE), an entrepreneur and businessman in the region, describes the representation
8 of Öresund in the drama:

9
10 It's not just an urban landscape, it's a metropolis. The international atmosphere
11 that comes with the bridge, going back and forth. You barely know where you
12 are, which country you are in. When you live here it makes you a bit proud. I've
13 often wondered if people up in Stockholm get the same feeling.
14

15 To Malin (36, DK), who works for the Swedish Migration office on issues of integration, the
16 filmic techniques by which the borders are erased are particularly significant to her
17 engagement with the drama:
18

19
20 It's an interesting initiative in terms of trying to weave together Scandinavian
21 countries through television, like they do for example through *Skavlan*⁹, which
22 is also a cooperation between not Denmark but Norway and Sweden. The same
23 goes for *The Bridge*. I may be a bit influenced by my job, but I think it's a
24 positive thing to try to make connections across borders and create relations.
25 Because that is essentially what they do - they create a vision of a region in
26 which people collaborate. To me it's almost part of a larger diplomatic strategy.
27 I think that is extremely positive as a way to try to erase existing borders.
28
29

30 A male viewer from the region similarly argues that:
31

32 The urban setting or background that they use, where they portray the Öresund
33 region as a big city type of urban jungle, is interesting (...) I think the bridge as
34 an actual geographical reference point makes it believable and it brings you
35 further into this make-believe universe. I see this area as part of my daily life,
36 the Sweden-Denmark area, and that makes me identify with the series.' (Lars,
37 43, DK)
38
39

40 In this sense, some of the local viewers fit the profile of what Löfgren (2008) has called
41 cultural regionauts.¹⁰ Regionauts are 'people who develop skills and regional knowledge in
42 using the world on both sides of the border' (p.196). They move in both 'the physical and
43 mental landscapes of a region, exploring differences' (Ibid.). To local audiences, the drama
44 thus plays into an already exiting yet porous regional identity; engaging in a set of 'collective
45 narratives about 'our region' and how we and our region are understood to differ from others'
46 (Paasi 2003). Cultural geographers have argued that that people living near a state border
47 embody particular 'hybrid border-crossing identities,' which refers to the identity of an
48 individual whose life is entangled with border crossings and the multiculturalism of a
49 particular region (Prokkola et al 2012). Crossborder regions like these, Löfgren argues, are
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not only defined in terms of physical distances and transport systems, but also by cultural definitions of proximity and reachability.

One of the ways in which the show installs this feeling of proximity and reachability in its audiences, is through the constant and swift travelling back and forth across the border. These sequences often depict the two detectives in Saga's car, driving across the bridge in what seems to be a matter of minutes. In this construction of the imaginary crossover-cityscape between Malmö and Copenhagen, it does not matter which location we are in. As Hans (44, DK) notes: 'I can't always see if it shows Sweden or Denmark, but perhaps it is not so important either since it is the Öresund region they are showing.' By the end of season three, viewers have naturalised the cross-cultural community of the region to the extent that they stop even noticing the cross-border settings: 'As a citizen of Öresund, I think the co-operation between Sweden and Denmark was much more obvious in the first season, less so in the second one, and then in season three it's normal' (Heidi, 47, DK).

As we can see, audiences articulate the boundary-work between the two cities, countries, and main characters, and speak to how the lines between them are blurred or erased. Just as the two detectives and main characters are constructed as 'regionauts,' effortlessly and swiftly traversing national territories in the 'imagined cross-border metropolis' in the series (Chow 2016: 45), audiences share a sense of being positioned as regionauts by the series. If popular culture allows us to fantasize about the ideals and hopes we have for society (Hermes 2005), then engaging with the producers' way of portraying the region as a successful political and cross-cultural project, as well as how audiences experience this portrayal, allows us to account for the ways that 'utopian wishes mix with more sinister feelings of foreboding about how culture and society will develop' (Ibid: 3). *The Bridge* as both a wishful story of a region and a critical commentary on this region thus engages audiences not only in a persuasive 'territorialisation of culture' (Löfgren 2008: 196) but also works to naturalize border crossing and the idea of a borderless Scandinavia. Perhaps it also allows audience members to ultimately imagine a borderless Europe or world.

Closing borders (and closing remarks)

By 2016, the invisible boundaries of a cross-cultural community and absent borders so present on *The Bridge* were conceived as a bit of a paradox in relation to the real-world political crisis and the new border controls installed between Denmark and Sweden, which were constructed as a consequence of the 'refugee crisis' that unfolded over the summer of 2015. As events

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3 started to develop by the end of the third season, Danes and Swedes living in the region all of
4 a sudden found themselves in a full-fledged political crisis between the two countries over
5 issues related to the Geneva Conventions and how to collaborate on the sudden influx of
6 migrants and refugees, and saw extensive border controls being reinstalled for the first time
7 since the 1950s. At the time of the final interviews conducted for this study, these issues were
8 all over the news and were consequently a topic of debate amongst viewers. ‘Now it is all
9 different because of the border controls that have been introduced’. In one of the last
10 interviews, a viewer exclaimed: ‘Today the government said they might close the bridge’
11 (Julia, 27, DK). Indeed, many noted how border controls between Denmark and Sweden were
12 in full force – and the irony of this given the theme and vision of the show they had come to
13 love:
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21 I really love the way they try to erase existing borders... It’s interesting that the
22 reality is completely the opposite. Now we have border controls and it’s not at
23 all possible to just pop over the bridge as [the detectives] do. It’s a really sad
24 turn of events, and I wish it had gone in a different direction. (Malin, 36, DK)
25
26

27 The image of cross-border collaboration at the heart of the drama no longer reflected the
28 political realities in the region. As a borderless, integrated region all of a sudden seemed
29 distant, viewers encouraged the producers of *The Bridge* to take action:
30
31

32 In the next season, they must do something with these border controls. If they do
33 a fourth season it would be an amazing historical document about what is
34 happening right now. They have to do something on that theme now that all this
35 has happened in the region. They can’t ignore that! It’s probably already being
36 written! (Måns, 42, SE)
37
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40 CULTURAL CITIZENSHIP AND TELEVISION CRIME SERIES

41
42 How does this sense of community expressed by the viewers translate into claims about civic
43 engagement and ultimately the citizen revenue of the drama? Audience engagement with the
44 series is mainly prompted through the building of community and allegiances through which
45 they feel connected. *The Bridge* positions viewers as members of a community, which
46 mobilises particular forms of social subjectivity. These communities may not be the same to
47 all viewers, but take different shapes and sizes, three of which I have highlighted here.
48 Audiences do not pertain to one single identity that is exclusively national, Scandinavian, or
49 regional. They construct and see themselves as belonging to different yet overlapping
50 communities – as Danes, Swedes, Scandinavians, citizen of Öresund, or perhaps all at once.
51 With these categories I do not mean to suggest an idea of place as a container of identity, but
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3 rather a relative understanding of place as an arena for *multiple* identities, 'with borders being
4 understood not as exclusive differentiators of places but as porous lines' (Massey, 1995: 67–
5 68). Just as lines between national borders are porous and unstable, the boundaries between
6 the national, transnational, or regional communities that bind audiences of *The Bridge*
7 together as they go 'in search of the fantasies and feelings that connect us to each other'
8 (Hermes 2005: viii) overlap and intersect in intricate ways.
9

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13 In their study of audiences of multicultural television drama, Müller and Hermes (2010)
14 advise audience researchers to remain careful of mistaking active viewers for active citizens.
15 Indeed, it would have been relatively easy to cherry pick and highlight the parts of the data
16 which provide solid arguments for 'proving' or demonstrating how audiences are engaging in
17 different 'political readings' of the show, and are performing the role of 'good political
18 subjects' of intelligent, quality TV. What is important to this study however is instead to
19 reflect the complexity of the data set, and of audience practices in general, by demonstrating
20 how engagement with the explicit political themes and formal politics addressed in the series
21 were in fact largely marginal. Instead, civic engagement was intricately articulated through
22 the discursive strands of quality entertainment as social ritual as well as the community-
23 building capacities of drama, in a manner which positions social and political issues in much
24 more implicit and subtle ways. If we understand cultural citizenship as identity construction in
25 line with the broad definition proposed by Hermes (2005), then performances of cultural
26 citizenship among audiences of this study were not marginal or isolated at all. Rather
27 expressions of community and bonding and reflections on this community- while of course
28 registering at various degrees of intensity - saturate audiences' accounts of their experience of
29 the show.
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42 In some cases, these accounts were ambiguously intertwined with place-branding
43 discourse and audiences were in a sense replicating region-building and marketing lingo. At
44 the same time however, they were critically reflecting on their own sentiments of almost
45 naïve regional pride and engagement with these utopian tales. These dual, sometimes
46 contradictory, articulations suggest to us that audiences are savvy of how such elite-driven
47 discourse may indirectly inform their sense of inclusion and belonging, while they still allow
48 themselves to be fully immersed into the experience produced *for* them and to buy into the
49 premises that indulging in this media experience entails.
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55 Certainly, as this study draws on a sample of participants from Denmark and Sweden
56 exclusively, many of whom lived in the Öresund region, it is important to take into account
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3 how the national and regional specificity of the contexts in which these subjects are inserted
4 are critical factors in how the drama plays into civic subjectivity and engagement. The sense
5 of community (or lack thereof) might be very different to audiences outside Scandinavia (for
6 empirical analysis of international audiences of *The Bridge*, see Askanius forthcoming 2017;
7 Hill 2016b). Despite the limitations of the data, the analysis is not however merely suggestive
8 of how audiences in Denmark and Sweden engage with this particular crime series, but might
9 be considered to have ramifications for how to understand the cultural mediation of politics
10 and audiences' engagement and identification with such representation more broadly. We see
11 how audiences shape their civic identities as members of nation states and historical and
12 cultural regions, and as border-crossers between these geo-cultural entities, *in dialogue with*
13 the text and *around* the boundary-work of the different communities offered *by* this text.
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23 In 1973, Richard Dyer argued that entertainment offers audiences a utopian vision of a better
24 world. Returning to Dyer's notion of entertainment as utopia, Sue Turnbull (2010) in her
25 discussion of the BBC adaption of the Swedish crime series *Wallander* (BBC One, 2008-)
26 entertains the idea that Scandinavian crime fiction might be the very antithesis of Dyer's
27 matrix. In *Wallander's* world, which is 'full of manipulation and deceit, and far from a sense
28 of community pulling together in the face of a challenge to the moral order' (Ibid: 822),
29 Turnbull does not find much evidence of a better world to come. The findings of this study
30 suggest that perhaps neither of the two is particularly accurate. Rather, crime fiction registers
31 to the audience as both a vision of utopia and the exegesis of society's underbelly. It may well
32 be the sense of being thrown back and forth between hope and despair for our common future
33 that mesmerise audiences and keep them critically engaged.
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46 ¹ A plenitude of work is currently emerging on *The Bridge* as an illustrative case of the production models, co-
47 funding structures and export patterns of Scandinavian television drama; for good examples see e.g. Bondebjerg
48 and Redvall 2013; Redvall 2013; Jensen, Nielsen and Waade 2016; Jensen and Waade 2013; Waade and Jensen
49 2013. For publications focusing on the aesthetic qualities of the series see e.g. Chow 2016; Eichner and Waade
50 2015; Gray 2014).

51 ² The Öresund or Øresund region (Swedish/ Danish) is a transnational metropolitan area in Denmark and
52 Sweden centred around the Öresund strait and the two cities, which lie on either side, Copenhagen Denmark and
53 Malmö Sweden. The region is connected by the Öresund bridge which opened in 2000 and spans the strait at its
54 southern end. Each of the three seasons of the television series *The Bridge* takes place in this border region. In
55 the first season a body cut in two is found on the bridge, one half on the Swedish side and one on the Danish side
56 of the border forcing the police from the two countries to collaborate on the murder case.

57 ³ For more information on the *Media Experiences* project see <http://mediaexperiences.blogg.lu.se>

58 ⁴ The data set for the larger case study of the production and reception of *The Bridge* consist of a total of 27
59 production interviews and qualitative interviews with 167 audiences conducted over season 2 and 3 in Denmark,
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5 Sweden and the UK. The production research was conducted mainly by Annette Hill whereas the empirical
6 audience research was conducted by Koko Kondo in the UK and Tina Askanius in Scandinavia.

7⁵ In the following analysis, abbreviations are used to indicate whether the quote is from a Danish (DK) or
8 Swedish (SE) respondent.

9⁶ This information was provided both orally and in a consent form signed by the interviewer and the interviewee
10 prior to the interview.

11⁷ The analytical process of coding and analysing the interview data also unfolded in several stages. The first
12 coding process looked for explicit articulations of political themes and readings of the text. The results of this
13 coding process were abandoned however as the themes distilled from this process were found to be too polarised
14 around a dichotomy of 'popular versus political' engagement that did not reflect the complexity of the data. The
15 second time around the material was instead coded for 'traces of community and reflection' on this community
16 (Hermes 2005: 11) more broadly. By going back and forth between the analysis, literature review and close
17 reading of quotes, eight thematic strands around the broad notion of community were found. From this 'loose'
18 coding for community then followed a more focused sub-coding. This process grouped the data into the three
19 final themes of identity construction and community as 'social/national context', Nordic/Scandinavian context
20 and 'regional context' respectively. In the final stages of the analytical process I went through the material once
21 again to fine-combe the coding for the themes identified and pick out quotes from respondents giving voice to
22 these three articulations of community.

23⁸ Popular opinion is that Saga sits somewhere on the Asperger's spectrum, but this is never made explicit in the
24 drama or by the scriptwriters.

25⁹ *Skavlan* is a popular Swedish/Norwegian television talk show, which has been airing in both countries and
26 Finland on Friday nights since 2009.

27¹⁰ Löfgren develops this concept based on the earlier work of Thomas O'Dell (2003)