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Published in:

Serial Narratives and the Unfinished Business of European Identity

Publication date:
2020

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Hansen, K. T. (2020). *The Killing and the Loss of Innocence: The European Long-form Dead Girl Show*. In T. Morsch (Ed.), *Serial Narratives and the Unfinished Business of European Identity* (pp. 85-90)

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10. *The Killing* and the Loss of Innocence: The European Long-form Dead Girl Show

Kim Toft Hansen

Today, the Danish TV serial *Forbrydelsen* (*The Killing*, 2007-12) is regarded a game-changer on the European and the global TV market. Especially since the broadcast of the first season on BBC4 in 2011, the series' aesthetic influence has been observable in many guises across the world, including various European TV traditions. Today, several series produced for global TV institutions tap into the stylistics and narrative devices instigated in *The Killing*, while Nordic Noir as a stylistic expression has become one among many international aesthetic variations on the global TV market. The most conspicuous plot-device employed by producers influenced by *The Killing* has been 'the dead girl show', a trope sometimes also referred to as 'the missing children topos' that revolves around the investigation of missing and murdered children and teenagers (cf. Bolin 2018, Wilson 2003). This chapter outlines how *The Killing* has influenced European and global TV aesthetics and how the result may be regarded as a shared transcultural trend in TV storytelling.

Before *The Killing*

Before the impact of the Danish TV series, two characteristics marked the profile of the crime show. Firstly, it was the assumption that local television series would travel less outside its cultural and linguistic proximities, unless the language was English. Secondly, crime shows - also within the Nordic region - were normally episodic series with overarching plots regarding the central characters rather than the crime plot itself. The point is not that *The Killing* invented the serial long-form, since the series itself was decisively influenced by the most important game-changer within the latest 50 years of television, *Twin Peaks* (1990-91). However, the story line in the 20 episode first season of *The Killing* revolved around the investigation of and the consequences of one murder for 20 hours of television, which was a daring move even for a fully financed national PSB.

Due to the predictable structure, broadcasters have preferred the episodic procedural where the single episodic structure made it easy for viewers to return to a series, even if they missed an episode. The UK series *Prime Suspect* (1991-2006) - a series that influenced *The Killing* with its accentuated focus on a strong female lead in a male-dominated story world - pursued plot closure in a story structure with 2-3 episodes per crime plot, something also employed by DR in parts of the preceding *Rejseholdet* (*Unit One*, 2000-4). Notable European crime series such as the German *Tatort* (*Crime Scene*, 1970-), the Italian *Inspector Montalbano* (*Il commissario Montalbano*, 1999-2020) or the French *Navarro* (1989-2006) indicates the cross-cultural appeal of the episodic format at a time when the American CSI-franchise (2000-16) trended the episodic format globally. At the same time, however, the groundbreaking HBO series *The Wire* (2002-8) was slowly gaining critical attention, highlighting a slow drift towards high-end television serial formats on a global scale.

Enter *The Killing* and the New Serial Long-form

The international attention towards *The Killing* was by no means a strategic endeavor by the Danish PSB. Rather, it was produced for a local Danish audience, sold to the BBC by the ZDF's

distribution branch ZDFe for next to nothing, premiering on BBC4 four years after its original Danish broadcast. At that time, the BBC has already premiered the British adaptations of Henning Mankell's Wallander-novels in 2008, while Scandinavian literary crime fiction - based on the trending Stieg Larsson phenomenon - was already gaining further attention. Altogether, *The Killing* was broadcast on British television when the time was ripe for the long-form serial format and when the popular cultural trends were already running from the Scandinavian region.

Instead, *The Killing* brought along a new stylistic approach to the long-form crime serial, including a recognizable bleak and black monochromatic colour scheme, emphasizing the expression Nordic *Noir*, which was gaining ground at this time. The editing style and the narrative rhythm was also comparatively slow, the information density thinner, while the sound scheme of the series also fed the melancholic mood of the drama. Especially the focus on the disappearance and death of a teenager established the slow-paced emphasis on mourning and the family's sense of loss, which takes up much screen time, slowing down the serial narrative with somber images of a family in great pain.

Remakes and Serial Influences

On the one hand, of course, the American and the Turkish remakes of *The Killing* highlight a format gaining an international interest. The history of the American AMC version even tells a story about how new global players tap into trends, including Nordic *Noir*, as the show was cancelled after the first two seasons, picked up again for a third season in collaboration with Netflix, only to conclude with the fourth 2014 season produced solely for Netflix. This indicates that the long-form serial may be more suitable for new viewing practices around streaming services rather than the traditional linear TV practice described above. The remakes and the Netflix reboot of *The Killing* also highlights how the changes in serial storytelling was about to be impacted by the so-called 'Netflix effect'. Two years before the fourth American season of *The Killing*, Netflix premiered their first 'original', the Norwegian PSB-collaboration *Lilyhammer* (2012-14), indicating an expressed interest in Nordic crime shows from Netflix.

On the other hand, the specific narrative and stylistic influence of *The Killing* may also be directly found in a range of series - besides of course the remakes - utilizing the missing/murdered child/teenager topos as a narrative engine for one complete season. Within the Nordic region, the personal grief of missing children has been furthered by two Swedish serials, i.e. *Jordskott* (2015-17) and *Ängelby* (2015), as well as the Danish-French co-production *DNA* (2019-). Soon after the BBC broadcast of *The Killing*, the British series *Broadchurch* (2013-17) premiered on British television, showing deep resemblances with the storyline, mood and structure of *The Killing* in the first season. The British anthology serial *The Missing* (2014-2016) used the missing children topos for two different seasons, setting parts of the stories in France and Germany, respectively, and resulted in the spin-off serial *Baptiste* (2019) set in Amsterdam. The serial format revolving around a missing or dead child/youngster works here as a narrative engine in transnational stories about crime investigation.

In France, the above mentioned Spanish serial *Patricia Marcos: Missing* was remade into *Disparue (The Disappearance, 2015)*, but in the French case the influence from *The Killing* is reemphasized by using music from Frans Bak, the composer of the original music for *The Killing*. The year after, the French serial *Le forêt (The Forest, 2016)* showed an obvious influence from *The Killing* too. In Belgium, the serial *Hotel Beau Sejour* (2017) also departs from a dead girl show with significant stylistic traits influenced by the bleak color scheme of *The Killing*. Outside Europe, the New Zealand TV serial *Top of the Lake* (2013) and the Australian *The Kettering Incident* (2016) have both been highlighted as deeply indebted to specifically *The Killing* and generally the stylistics and serial pace of Nordic *Noir*.

HBO's *Pustina* and Netflix's *Dark*

Generally, the serials outlined above merely indicate how *The Killing* and the subsequent Nordic Noir trend has become an international stylistic vocabulary among others - and one that global players such as HBO and Netflix in various ways may draw upon.

When HBO Europe opened up for local crime productions in Eastern Europe, they did so firstly by remaking the Norwegian crime serial *Mamon* (2014-16) in Czech and Polish versions, the Norwegian crime serial *Øyevitne* (*Eyewitness*, 2014) as the Romanian *Valea Mută* (*Silent Valley*, 2016), and the Finnish crime serial *Helppo ellämä* (*Easy Living*, 2009-11) as the Hungarian *Aranyélet* (*Golden Life*, 2015-18). Though, in plot development, narrative pace and bleak stylistics the one that has most clearly been influenced by *The Killing* is the Czech HBO-serial *Pustina* (*Wasteland*, 2015). The serial tells the story about a missing girl through a tripartite scenario consisting of procedural, political and personal storylines like *The Killing*, but with one difference in the conflation of the political and personal storylines into one as the missing girl is the daughter of the local mayor. The influence from *The Killing* becomes obvious at the time when the police locates the dead body of the missing girl. By coincidence, a parent - the father in *The Killing* and the mother in *Wasteland* - is present upon the discovery, and the police needs to hold back the parent. Intertextually, *Wasteland* shows its direct influence from the Danish source text.

Generally, Netflix has been able to tap into the Nordic Noir trend by either producing crime serials influenced by the aesthetics or by acquiring Nordic shows produced within the aesthetic vocabulary. The 'original' Netflix serial *Dark* (2017-), especially the first season, departs from the missing children topos as well as the darker aesthetics of Nordic Noir, which is also indicated in the laconic title of the show. The Danish names of central German characters stress the influence from Nordic Noir, but the narrative pace of *Dark* does not directly fit the slow-paced narrative rhythm of *The Killing* and the like, since its face-paced, complex narrative rather fits the stylistic traits of many other Netflix shows. This means that Nordic Noir and *The Killing* is not the sole influencer of Netflix's *Dark*, but rather that the missing children of Nordic Noir has become a part of the international stylistic and narrative vocabulary that works side by side with references to *Twin Peaks*, Stephen King, *Stranger Things* (2016-) and different global popular cultural tendencies noticeable in *Dark*.

Transcultural Sensibilities and a Shared Type of Storytelling

From the above it may appear as if stories of missing and dead children and youngsters is a late-modern TV invention. Nonetheless, stories of child-death runs through the history of mankind, holds a prevalent position in biblical narratives too, and - as noted by Marilyn Francus in her book *Monstrous Motherhood* (2012) - the function of child-death in popular cultural narratives reflects socio-cultural tensions and the inadequacy in addressing larger ideological issues. In other words, the use of the topos in TV crime serials echoes deep transcultural roots that may easily be stimulated in serials with both local and international ambitions, since the loss of a child and the process of mourning is transculturally discernible.

As missing children and dead teenagers become a shared popular type of transcultural storytelling, it reveals a popular cultural interest in dealing with philosophical questions of innocence. Customarily, we regard the child as an emblem of innocence, but when children are lost, society faces challenges of not handling its own future (embodied by the child) and its own

imbedded innocence. When children disappear and when youngsters are murdered, stories speak a language that every culture may appreciate, but in doing so the stories indirectly negotiate the societies own loss of innocence. In Danish public service television drama production, the philosophical layer in TV dramas have been referred to as ‘double storytelling’, i.e. at root a compelling story with an extra ethical layer examining larger social issues. Figuratively speaking, societies that let their youngsters disappear and die are no longer innocent and face severe challenges. The weight of the missing children topos in European TV serials signals a time when European societies need to look deep - as societal parenthood - into their own constructions and reveal the unpleasant truths that need fixing for society to work. For parents, it is necessary to find an impeccable balance between freedom for individual development and security and supervision. Essentially, using missing children as a transcultural common theme poses metonymic and important questions about societies’ level of freedom, social security and surveillance.

Conclusion

Using the international influence from *The Killing*, this subchapter has revealed a new serial tendency within TV crime series, which has been significantly strengthened by the rise of streaming services and a new viewing practice. However, the Danish serial game-changer not only influenced a new long-form serial format and stylization, as it also drew attention to the missing children topos as a narrative engine for telling transculturally recognizable stories. Missing and dead youngsters as a criminal case has spread across Europe and outside with an interest in asking important questions about our societies’ level of security. The result is that Nordic Noir today is a recognizable style on par with other international popular cultural trends.

Key takeaways

- The ‘missing children topos’ has been a narrative/serial engine utilized across different European TV/SVoD institutions and contributed to the shift from episodic series to long-form serials.
- Following a trope like that of the missing child shows the interconnectedness of international crime serial television production and contributes to its ‘transcultural readability’.
- With the ‘missing children topos’ we see a common moral topic emerging across very different European TV traditions, while still accentuating local features of the stories, producing a translocal sensibility and a shared serial type of storytelling.