"Death of the Author": Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahloö’s Police Procedurals

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Introduction: Scandinavian crime

In a recent newspaper article, the journalist John Crace states that there is a sense of “the other” in Scandinavian crime fiction which makes it distinctive (Crace 2009).1 Indeed, in attempting to identify this “other”, John Lloyd (2011) suggests that, “Certainly we can read the darkness, violence and anarchy that erupts in these crime novels as forming part of the subsoil of life in Scandinavian countries”. Arguably, Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahloö’s police procedural novels have contributed to expanding the parameters of traditional mainstream crime fiction, by tapping into this Scandinavian distinctiveness and by reimagining the police procedural subgenre. This chapter explores the renewal of crime fiction generated by Sjöwall and Wahloö’s ground breaking novels, and examines issues surrounding definitions of “authorship” in the light of their collaborative writing practice. I discuss Sjöwall and Wahloö’s interrogation of the function and role of the individual as well as the relationship between individual and collective, both in their approach to the police procedural format, and in devising a collaborative writing voice and sensibility.2

Sjöwall and Wahloö’s now widely known classic series of police procedural crime novels feature a Stockholm police department set between 1965 and 1975 (Arvas and Nestingen 2011b: 2). The growing critical interest in their work mirrors the recent rise in popularity which Scandinavian crime fiction has enjoyed among English-speaking readers, as work has been translated and reissued. Sjöwall and Wahloö’s work has been influential in determining major stylistic and thematic developments, both in American and British crime fiction as well as in
contemporary Scandinavian crime writing. Discussing its rise in popularity among a broader readership, Crace comments on the recent phenomenon in Britain of Scandinavian crime fiction. He notes that, in recent years, crime fiction from Scandinavia has become a visible presence in Britain, and its long-standing tradition has been uncovered: “[it] may still be something of a novelty act in the UK (United Kingdom), but it’s a well-established genre in the rest of Europe” (Crace 2009). Furthermore, scholars are now exploring not only Sjöwall and Wahlöö’s oeuvre, but also the hinterland of Scandinavian crime writing, as their writing is attracting critical appreciation for its “hard-boiled” narrative style and the simmering political engagement which promotes their crime fiction’s didactic and transformative functions. This chapter's investigation of these issues therefore falls in two parts. The first part examines the development of Sjöwall and Wahlöö’s police procedural, focusing on its innovative and tradition-breaking aspects. The second part discusses the collaborative writing mode used by Sjöwall and Wahlöö in the “Story of a Crime” series, arguing that the authors devised a collaborative, egalitarian ethos which enabled them to negotiate issues related to gender and potential professional inequalities, driving their shared vision of a distinct literary sensibility.

Challenging the tradition: Sjöwall and Wahlöö’s police procedurals

Sjöwall and Wahlöö have contributed significantly to the evolution of the contemporary police procedural, by developing a specific approach which promotes a focus on the tension between individual and community as well as on the politics of representing crime. Socially relevant and politically astute, their “Story of a Crime” series remains a consistently challenging body of work. This part of the chapter examines the ways in which Sjöwall and Wahlöö’s crime fictions break with previously established mainstream traditions of crime writing, by interrogating and challenging the values inscribed in these traditions or generic “master narratives”. According to Arvas and Nestingen (2011b: 2), this analysis involves exploring questions, such as:

From what literary traditions has Scandinavian crime fiction emerged, and has it changed those traditions? What is its relationship to the particular societies, institutions and places that have produced it? How do authors and readers use Scandinavian crime fiction in cultural and political struggles?