

FOREWORD

Norway is a very small country, and public funding has long been necessary to maintain a national cinema. Against this background, commercial film genres (with the sole exception of the comedy) had never taken permanent hold at any point in Norway's cinema history, until shortly after 2000. Since then, popular genres like the action film, the romantic comedy and the war film have proliferated in Norway. Norwegian horror fiction also came to a massive turning point in 2003: that year saw the release of *Dark Woods*, the first clear-cut and successful Norwegian horror film to hit cinemas since *Lake of the Dead* in 1958. For the past two decades, genre entertainment has reached unprecedented popularity in Norwegian cinema, including the previously shunned horror film. In fact, Norway has become the only Nordic country to cultivate a regular output of horror, both in underground moviemaking as well as the mainstream cinema which is the focus of the present book.

Besides *Dark Woods* by director Pål Øie, my book will give particular attention to the *Cold Prey* trilogy of slasher films that started with Roar Uthaug's *Cold Prey* in 2006; the psychological horror films *Next Door* (2005) and *The Monitor* (2011) by Pål Sletaune, and Joachim Trier's *Thelma* (2017); as well as the horror-related genre hybrids *Troll Hunter* (2010) by André Øvredal, and *Ragnarok* (2013) by Mikkel Brænne Sandemose. These films are major works of commercial and artistic importance in Norway's horror cinema tradition, although many others will be discussed along the way. I will also chart the changes and continuities that are discernible in the development of Norwegian

horror from the original *Lake of the Dead* by Kåre Bergstrøm in 1958 to the modern re-adaptation of the same source novel, Nini Bull Robsahm's *Lake of Death* in 2019.

This book follows on from my PhD research into popular Norwegian cinema, a project which was designed to serve the need for a closer look at how and why horror became a mainstay in Norwegian national cinema, and how this tradition relates to the major global force of Hollywood genre cinema. Genre entertainment, including horror fiction, enjoys great popularity in Norway these days. The book will aim to explain why a coherent Norwegian horror cinema did not exist prior to 2000, and how horror became a trend after that point. One might assume that Norway was fertile soil for this kind of national tradition, bearing in mind that the closely related crime genre has a peculiar history in this country.

In March 1923, publishers Gyldendal took out a ground-breaking ad to hype their latest crime novel, *The Train to Bergen Was Robbed Last Night* (*Bergenstoget plyndret i natt*). The book was co-written by poet Nordahl Grieg and translator Nils Lie, under the pseudonym Jonathan Jerv (which translates as Jonathan Wolverine), and the publisher's inventive approach to marketing consisted of a front-page ad in the newspaper *Aftenposten*, among others, which read 'The Train to Bergen Was Robbed Last Night!'. The ad was designed to look like a newspaper headline, many people mistook it for an actual headline, and this created quite the intended uproar. Once the wilful act of misguidance was revealed, the book sold like hot cakes around the time of the 1923 Easter holidays.

With a formal tradition of taking a minimum of five days off at Easter, Norwegians have seen fit to use this time for visits to mountain or seaside cabins. This national pastime of recreation in nature is effortlessly combined with reading fairly light thrillers and crime novels, something that literature marketing has not failed to exploit. In Norway, enjoying peace and quiet comes with a certain dose of murder and mystery, and the proper literature is easily adaptable to radio as well. As television became more and more common, including in remote cabins, this Easter reading and listening tradition morphed into an Easter viewing tradition, with British detectives like P. D. James' Dalgliesh and Agatha Christie's Poirot gaining great popularity in Norway. So ingrained in Norwegian culture are the Easter holiday traditions that one of the greatest public outrages of the 2020 pandemic lockdown was aimed at the ban on travelling to remote cabins at Easter. Taking this annual cabin vacation away from Norwegians was controversial enough for the government to not even consider such a ban during the second year of the pandemic in 2021.

The 1923 publishing coup related above might be called the 'seed of the Easter crime phenomenon' (Folkvord 2018), at least in terms of marketing and possibly in terms of reading habits, a phenomenon that seems curiously

particular to Norway. Throughout the twentieth century Norwegian crime literature grew steadily into a strong and coherent tradition, and when we fast forward to the 1990s, closer to the post-2000 horror boom in Norwegian cinema, we find the start of the truly massive output of crime and thriller fiction from Norwegian authors that we are now accustomed to. However, horror films being popular with Norwegian audiences did not automatically translate into this same type of fiction becoming a trend in domestic film production. Indeed, horror film has only quite recently become a solid national tradition in Norway, a fact which is a main issue of discussion in this book.

The relevance of the Easter crime tradition to the question of Norwegian horror cinema is obvious when one considers the settings of two of the earliest films in the genre: *Dark Woods* (the Norwegian title *Villmark* literally translates as *Wilderness*) takes place in the woods around a mountain lake, far from the city, and *Cold Prey* stages its action in and around a mountain lodge, which is plopped down in the middle of an Easter-like snowy desolation. The question of why Norwegians like to spend their holidays devouring crime fiction can be extended to asking why such a seemingly peaceful and happy country, in a peaceful and happy Nordic region of Europe, produces horror movies at all. This is another main topic of the book.

The interest in Norwegian horror from abroad does not represent something completely new or truly unique. The post-2000 popularity of the literature, film and television crime fiction known collectively as Nordic noir is a strong example of dark and troublesome entertainment from the Scandinavian and Nordic countries that strikes a global nerve, not necessarily by being very original in terms of plots and stories, but through the particularities of their melancholic settings. Modern Norwegian crime literature and the recent wave of horror cinema are not alone in having a global reach, for the aesthetics of horror have generally made for strong cultural exports from Norway to the world: from the scary folktales of the 1800s to the black metal music scene that grew globally influential in the 1990s, horror motifs and tropes in Norwegian popular culture have since coalesced into the modern horror cinema of Norway. With the non-artistic and sinister sideshows of church burnings and murders heightening a sense of international infamy, some elements of the early black metal scene took its relation to horror culture way too far. Even so, an aesthetic of dread and terror in the presentation of Nordic rock music no doubt communicates very well across borders. Recently, the Norwegian heavy metal band Vreid released the album *Wild North West* and accompanied the music with a long-form video filmed in the same woods where the Norwegian horror cinema ground-breaker *Dark Woods* was shot nearly two decades ago.

Horror and its related genres are thriving in Norway at the time of writing. The producers of *Dark Woods* are currently in post-production with the psychological horror film *The Nightmare* and are also preparing a television

series called *Norwegian Horror Kit* that will combine folktales and horror in a contemporary setting. The producers of *Cold Prey*, on the other hand, have shifted their focus from horror to disaster films, of which *The North Sea* is the latest example. Several more horror films and horror-related genre hybrids are in the works in Norway, the horror tradition in Norwegian cinema still going strong. It is my hope that the present book will illuminate its past, its major works, and also its possible future.

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