

Janet McCabe

Bodies at the border: Transnational co-produced TV drama and its gender politics in the pilots of BRON/BROEN and adaptations, THE BRIDGE and THE TUNNEL 2019

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/4183>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

McCabe, Janet: Bodies at the border: Transnational co-produced TV drama and its gender politics in the pilots of BRON/BROEN and adaptations, THE BRIDGE and THE TUNNEL. In: *NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies*, Jg. 8 (2019), Nr. 1, S. 301–308. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/4183>.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

<https://necsus-ejms.org/bodies-at-the-border-transnational-co-produced-tv-drama-and-its-gender-politics-in-the-pilots-of-bron-broen-and-adaptations-the-bridge-and-the-tunnel/>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer Creative Commons - Namensnennung - Nicht kommerziell - Keine Bearbeitungen 4.0/ Lizenz zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu dieser Lizenz finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a creative commons - Attribution - Non Commercial - No Derivatives 4.0/ License. For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Bodies at the border: Transnational co-produced TV drama and its gender politics in the pilots of 'Bron/Broen' and adaptations, 'The Bridge' and 'The Tunnel'

Janet McCabe on *Flow/Cut*, *Body/Matters*, *Law/Fear* – a triptych of audiovisual essays made with Catherine Grant

NECSUS 8 (1), Spring 2019: 301–309

URL: <https://necsus-ejms.org/bodies-at-the-border-transnational-co-produced-tv-drama-and-its-gender-politics-in-the-pilots-of-bron-broen-and-adaptations-the-bridge-and-the-tunnel/>

Keywords: audiovisual essay, bodies, television

1. FLOW/CUT



... the forces that perpetrate injustice belong not to 'the space of places', but to 'the spaces of flows'. Not locatable within the jurisdiction of any actual or conceivable territorial state, they cannot be made answerable to claims of justice that are framed in terms of the state-territorial principle,' writes Nancy Fraser.[1]

Fraser's thoughts on the 'politics of framing' justice in a globalised world, or what she calls a '*transformative approach*', offer me a steer on how to make sense of these audacious opening moments of the Danish-Swedish television co-production *Bron/Broen* (2011-18), as well as its scripted reiteration at the US/Mexico border in *The Bridge* (2013-14) and subterranean adaptation inside the Euro-Tunnel linking France with the United Kingdom in *The Tunnel* (2013-18). In these transnational in-between spaces of somewhere and anywhere, where jurisdictions collide, otherness is encountered and cross-border cooperation demanded, it is a female fatality – with a body that quite literally splits in two before our very eyes – that conjures this imaginary transnational television space into existence.

There is, of course, nothing particularly novel in the sight of a female cadaver; in fact a gendered, often sexually violated, corpse has long been a common generic feature of television crime. Such desecrated femininity speaks to a range of societal inequalities and discrimination, of inequities in power and wealth, told through the body's storytelling proximity from *inside* a national broadcasting territory; but a corpse split in two at the border creates a new visual language with a global reach and awakens different ideas and thoughts about injustice and inequities spilling across national territorial lines. Looking at the body, feeling the shock of its splitting, disrupts the narrative flow and brings the transnational into being. It proves a high concept idea: the body of a woman found at a border is an institutional game changer for reshaping creative and cultural transnational co-productions and forcing collaboration between two nations. In its gruesomeness – of sinew, of gastrointestinal tract – such a sight is visceral in its materiality designed to unsettle, to startle and grab our attention and plunge us deep into the story world. It further holds out the possibility for offering a new kind of representational script.

The crime scene has an immediate transnational intelligibility. It carries particular values, generic forms, and audiovisual and aesthetic styles within the very fabric of its directional travel. The national does not disappear; rather, it is where the national and transnational fields intersect. The tonality of the sound – use of a single voice in the language of its location, often echoing, sometimes heard almost at a distance – and the music – electronic, building at a slow steady pace – blends into an almost seamless acoustic register across the three versions to create suspense, until the audio ripping at the sight of the body splitting apart. Melancholia collectively seeps into the aesthetics, but a different colour palette shades the mood of the gloom –

golden honeycomb colouring the baked heat of the US/Mexico borderlands (*Bridge*) to the slate blues and metallic greys denoting the chill and glowering skies over the Channel and its coastal towns (*Tunnel*) and glacial tones and sepia shades of a Scandinavian night (*Bron/Broen*). Colouring these affective moments are ones that lure the audience into the atmosphere of the series, but also locates characters within regional landscapes and its imaginary spaces, both somewhere and nowhere.

Disorienting and disconcerting, this lethal television engagement with intimate female geographies further introduces another kind of disconnected heroine – the detached, socially-challenged female investigator with a borderline personality working at a national border who is able to read a crime scene like no-one else: the Swedish homicide detective Saga Norén (Sofia Helin), member of El Paso police department detective Sonya Cross (Diane Kruger), and French Commander Elise Wasserman (Clémence Poésy) based in Calais. What is striking about this mediated female protagonist is how each share similar physical attributes: blonde, white European. Norén/Helin, Cross/Kruger, and Wassermann/ Poésy, on the surface at least, speak to what Susie Orbach calls a neoliberal democratisation of feminine beauty ‘exported globally as aspiration’.[2] It is a look that speaks directly to a global conversation about white femininity and how this feminine type continues to travel widely as a privileged narrative agent. Nowhere is this better articulated than in the semiotics of the flaxen hair. Blonde tresses have long held a totemic power in Western culture, but the flowing locks of each position them as figures at the border: fragile but unflinching, familiar yet enigmatic. Yet aligned in looking at the corpse each conveys a mysterious stillness, the ingénue-ness of Wasserman set against an emotional frailness of Cross and the ice coolness of Norén with her platinum halo of hair caught in the chill wind of the night.

2. BODY/MATTERS



To problematise the matter of bodies may entail an initial loss of epistemological certainty, but a loss of certainty is not the same as political nihilism. On the contrary such a loss may well indicate a significant and promising shift in political thinking. This unsettling of ‘matter’ can be understood initiating new possibilities, new ways for bodies to matter.[3]

Each female investigator turns up at the coroner’s office to learn more about the manner of death, to understand exactly what has happened to their high profile corpse laid to rest on the border: Kerstin Ekwall, chair of Malmö city council; Marie Villeneuve, an anti-European and anti-immigration French politician; and Lorraine Gates, a US anti-immigration lawyer. The three detectives arrive confident in knowing the identity of their victim, but on further investigation certitude evaporates and another body starts to emerge: anonymous, without identity, and in the US and UK/French version racialised. Norén and Wasserman are left to extract the secrets of these bodies for themselves, communing with the dead to acquire knowledge and determine a cause of death.

The haptic touch of the female detective becomes almost a caress; and it is in those moments distinct categories of victim and heroine uncomfortably blur. Norén proves best able at conducting a forensic autopsy, better able to make sense of the pathology of a corpse and the chemistry of its decay. This is in part because she is given longer, as the duration of the sequence is slower to deliver its chilling revelation that the corpse is not one but two different women. In brisk contrast US cutting rates means Cross spends the least time with the body. She is told the cause of death and is instead more focused on the precision of the crime than its manner and, because of the more obvious

racial differences between the two victims, does not need to spend any time pondering the shades of a paler corpse. Cross thus appears to be navigating a different kind of television storytelling ecology to Norén and Wasserman, one which dispatches its narrative information with relative efficiency, but also does not quite grant permission to this new kind of representational female agency, detached and in exile within herself.

It is the (ob)scene of the border. Mutilated bodies, social divides, different priorities: it is the function of the female body as representational parts that brings into play an entire catalogue of social (in)justice – poverty, drug addiction, immigration, prostitution. These bodies speak intently to which borderline spaces are valued more highly than others, but also in the peripatetic exchanges necessitated by the relocation from one broadcasting territory to another where specific struggles involving the local start to emerge. In surgically slicing two bodies at the waist, and then reconstituting social inequalities into one gendered casualty, this bisected corpse at the border speaks directly to the ambition of *Bron/Broen* as a new kind of television crime series: a geopolitical, bilateral, bi-lingual thriller.

3. LAW/FEAR



'Globalization is changing the way we argue about justice', claims Fraser.[4] And it is these questions of justice, of representation and (in)visibility under the law, which go directly to the core of *Bron/Broen* and its adaptations. Written in and (often with alarming brutality) across the female body sex deter-

mines another kind of borderline between the individual and the State, private guilt and collective culpability, and the way in which we draw those boundaries defining the ‘who’ of justice in the first place. ‘The result is a major challenge to received understandings, which fail to ponder *who should count* in matters of justice’.[5]

Rescuing vulnerable woman by men with ambiguous motives, ferrying them away from spaces of danger when the institutions of the law fails to protect them, speaks to this issue of reframing justice in a globalising world. Three men who operate at the margins of society help three women who struggle for recognition – political, economic, and cultural – within territorial states. In *Bron/Broen* Stefan Lindberg (Magnus Krepper), a social worker based in Malmö, who has already proven himself a strangely dubious figure, comes to the aid of a battered woman called Veronika (Tuvalisa Rangström). He rescues her and her children from an abusive and drug-dependent husband and drives them to a safe house somewhere deep in the Skåne countryside. At issue here is the terrain for recognition, for *who* can claim justice and *who* controls access to it, but also the way we argue about social justice for women within territorial borders in the first place. The result of removing a woman from somewhere to the undefined space of nowhere is a new sense of vulnerability. In the case of Veronika taking away any trace of her social belonging to a world of marriage, home, and community in Malmö reduces her to an exile in her own native country.

This capacity to de-territorialise a woman takes on a far more sinister flavour when it overflows national borders. Steven Linder (Thomas M. Wright) traffics Eva Guerra (Stephanie Sigman) from Juarez in the boot of his car and away from a life of prostitution, but locks her to a caravan in the middle of desert outside of El Paso; and Stephen Beaumont (Joseph Mawle), who runs a hostel for illegal immigrants in Folkstone, saves Veronica (Catalina Denis), an undocumented Colombian immigrant, from the clutches of a pimp who want to sell her into prostitution, only to uncomfortably hold her as an image on his mobile phone. These women become vulnerable to transnational forces, where struggling against one set of local patriarchal practices of sexual or economic exploitation are reconstituted within another national context where having no legal documentation leads to no representation under the law.

The chiaroscuro gloom of the trailer, where sources of light are muted and faces barely distinguishable; the under-lit muted gloom of a seedy boarding house on the South coast of England; and the isolation of a cottage

somewhere in Skåne: there is a sense of being nowhere, a feeling of being stranded at the ends of the earth where no one knows anything about them. Male saviour turns into patriarchal menace and female flight translates into disenfranchisement and further dependency. Because, in the words of Stefan, 'I can.'

In creating a disorientating sense of geography, an alternative cartography of the female experience, these navigational movements involving bodies, spaces, subjectivity, and identity embrace different (often unanticipated) issues of recognition, representation, and social (in)justice and modifies understandings of what we might mean by 'women's rights' and emancipation today.

What is it to tell stories across borders, to produce stories in two places at once? It is the dynamics of transnationalism that comes into view for me in the poetry of this process of making the audiovisual television essay. There is, of course, a misappropriation of the televisual text, a sense of controlling a product that moves and flows from one territory to another as a way to make sense of it. Just as the women are constantly misrecognising and reframing their experiences of the world, the same political, economic, and cultural dimension of this series in global motion is made visible anew in the collision of the texts.

How can the audiovisual help us interface with the transnational, and how does it help us look at the different ways in which such representation of women are produced and traded, replicated and reduplicated, travelling in and through difference mediascapes, across different media. Such localised initiatives and regional television systems collide with the politics of contemporary global culture in these transnational cartographies for sure.

Sparking my interest in exploring the possibilities afforded by the audiovisual essay for studying transnational television and adaptations of scripted television drama results from the challenges, compromises, and limitations I often face when trying to make sense of the specificities of representation and representational strategies in dramas that cross borders. The difficulties involved in trying to provide meaningful analysis of multiple texts, produced within different media ecologies and positioned on diverse digital platforms, as well as having to deal with the sheer volume of text, frustrate any easy attempt to navigate the object of study. More often than not one is reliant on showing one extract after another; and in so doing it can lead to troubling comparative modes of viewing and relative reading practices, where the specifics of a text become somewhat lost, and where the remake often reads as

less authentic than the original. Trying to communicate the specificity of one text without compromising the integrity of another, but allowing one text to exist next to another offers expression within the paradox. In letting them speak nearby, in the words of Trinh T. Minh-ha, further enables me to make sense of women with a borderline personality, to understand what value she has for culture and how she makes visible the values of television transnationalism in her reiteration.

Author

Janet McCabe is Senior Lecturer in Film and Television at Birkbeck, University of London. She has co-edited (with Kim Akass) several collections, including *Quality TV: Contemporary American TV and Beyond* (IB Tauris, 2007), *Reading Sex and the City* (IB Tauris, 2004), and *TV's Betty Goes Global: From Telenovela to International Brand* (2013), and authored *The West Wing* (Wayne State University Press, 2013). She is the managing editor of the international television journal *Critical Studies in Television* and currently writing a book exploring the intersection of feminism and television in a theory of transnational TV feminism *in* and *through* the politics of representation at the border in *Bron-Broen-Bridge* and its adaptations.

References

- Butler, J. *Bodies that matter*. London: Routledge, 2011.
- Fraser, N. *Fortunes of feminism: From state-managed capitalism to neoliberal crisis*. London: Verso, 2013.
- Orbach, S. 'Fashioning the Late Modern Body: The Democratisation of Beauty' in *Cultural politics in a global age: Uncertainty, solidarity, and innovation*, edited by D. Held and H. Moore. Oxford: One-world Publications, 2008: 365-370.

Notes

- [1] Fraser 2013, p. 201.
- [2] Orbach 2008, p. 365.
- [3] Butler 2011, p. 6.
- [4] Fraser 2013, p. 189.
- [5] *Ibid.*, p. 13.