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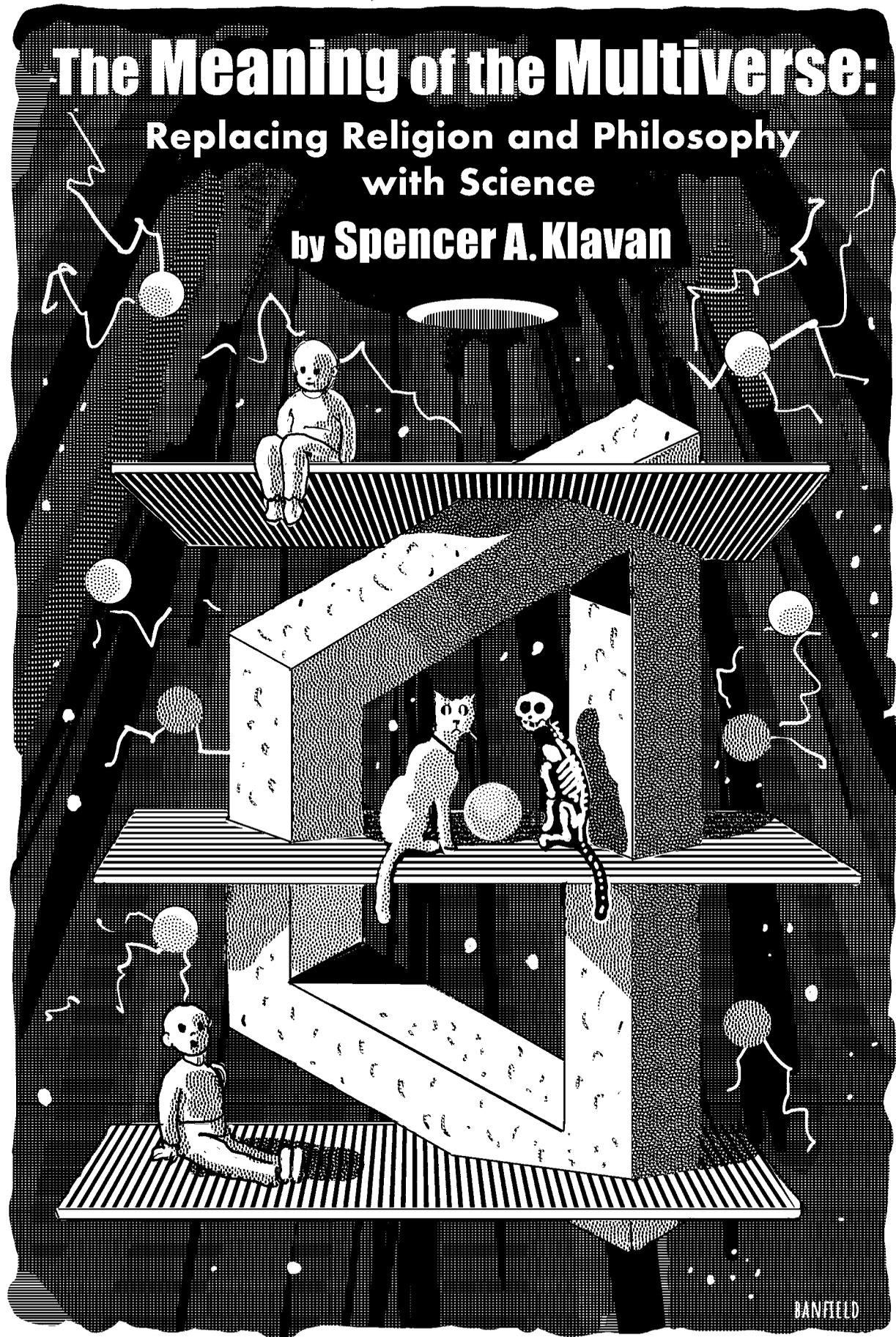
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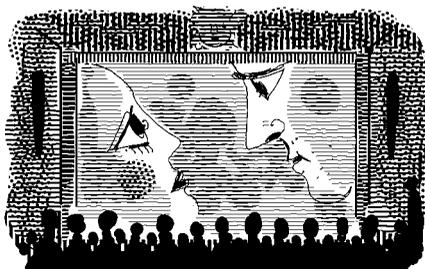
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SHADOW PLAY

by Martha Bayles



A Light from the North

AS A LITERARY GENRE, NORDIC NOIR began in the mid-1960s with ten murder mysteries jointly authored by Swedish crime writers Per Wahlöö and Maj Sjöwall. The novels were an instant success because, in addition to solving particular crimes, their protagonist, a moody police detective named Martin Beck, uncovered a hidden world of dysfunction and malfeasance behind the benign façade of the Scandinavian welfare state. This combination of sleuthing and political commentary captured the spirit of the times.

In Scandinavia today, most serious criticism of the welfare state comes from free-market, center-Right parties. This was not the case 50 years ago when Nordic noir was born. Back then, the critiques came from the far Left, with Marxists and fellow travelers like Wahlöö and Sjöwall condemning social democracy as a bourgeois accommodation to the evils of capitalism. A similar take can be found in the novels of subsequent writers, such as Henning Mankell (creator of the gloomy detective Kurt Wallander), Stieg Larsson (author of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* and its sequels), and Leif G.W. Persson (celebrity criminologist turned prolific author).

But over the decades, as Nordic noir sold millions of books and profited from hundreds of film and TV adaptations, this critique lost its Marxist edge. What had begun in the 1960s as an indictment of greed, hypocrisy, cynicism, and criminality as vices endemic to capitalism devolved into a cult of viciousness for its own sake, as globally marketable entertainment. Today this cult is centered in Hollywood, where America's privately owned, wholly unregulated entertainment industry gives new meaning to the word "hypocrisy" by

on the one hand, kowtowing to the Chinese Communist Party, and, on the other, finding so many ways to portray evil that it forgets how to portray good—surely an abuse of American artists' hard-won freedom.

A Leading Lady Who Can Lead

THIS CULT OF VICIOUSNESS IS ONLY ONE of many signs of Hollywood's moral debasement. But it makes an interesting foil, because in recent years some of the

Discussed in this essay:

Borgen, created by Adam Price.
Danish Broadcasting Corporation

smartest and most talented pushback has come from Scandinavia. A prime example is *Borgen*, the latest international hit from DR, the Danish public broadcaster, which ran for three seasons between 2010 and 2013 and then returned for a fourth earlier this year. (At the time of this writing, the first three seasons are available on Amazon Prime, the fourth on Netflix. All are subtitled in English.) To the surprise of DR, which had developed *Borgen* in the spirit of "public service" rather than profit, the series was hugely popular in the Nordic countries and attracted sizable audiences in 70 other countries, including the U.S.

"Borgen" is Danish for "castle," used as shorthand for Christiansborg Palace, the latest in a succession of royal residences that have stood on the same ground in Copenhagen since 1167. A grand neo-baroque edifice completed in 1928, Borgen is home not only to the Danish Parliament but also

to the offices of the prime minister, the Supreme Court, and a suite of reception rooms for Queen Margrethe II. There is no American equivalent to this building, and certainly none to the TV series that bears its name. Whenever I hear *Borgen* praised for being like *The West Wing* or the American version of *House of Cards*, I wince because it is so much better.

To begin with, there is nothing Hollywood about the lead character, Birgitte Nyborg, the first female prime minister of Denmark. Played with astonishing subtlety by Sidse Babbett Knudsen, this fictional woman may well be more famous than the two real-life women who subsequently achieved that office, Helle Thorning-Schmidt (2011-15) and Mette Frederiksen (2019-present). Of the qualities that make Birgitte so impressive, the most salient is that she cannot be described in the language of "female empowerment," because that language assumes women have no power unless they wrest it from men through protest and complaint.

That is not Birgitte's style. Mentored by Bent Sejrø (Lars Knutzon), a crafty political greybeard who stands in awe of her talent, Birgitte is perfectly aware of being surrounded by male politicians who assume they are more skilled than she. But rather than bemoan the fact, she watches and waits, and when the time is right, she beats them at their own game. This does not make her cold and calculating. On the contrary, she is a loving wife and mother who, despite her strong ambition, is loyal, kind, generous, and principled. She is also a charmer who "could talk a dog off a meat wagon," as my Boston Irish father-in-law used to say.

Not only is Birgitte not "empowered" in the Hollywood sense, she is virtuous in the




In the
Next Issue

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Charles Murray
Diverse Democracies

David P. Goldman
Confronting China

Joseph M. Bessette
Bill Barr's Memoirs

Richard A. Epstein
Racial Classification

Diana Schaub
African Founders

Myron Magnet
Clarence Thomas

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classical sense. The most absorbing moments in *Borgen* are when her emotions are at their most explosive, and she curbs them most sternly in order to maintain her dignity and achieve her political objectives. The ability to govern oneself is an ancient virtue associated with the power to govern others, and therefore considered manly. But it can also be womanly, as the first Queen Elizabeth understood—and expressed in her own words in this poem:

I grieve and dare not show my discontent,
I love and yet am forced to seem to hate,
I do, yet dare not say I ever meant,
I seem stark mute but inwardly do prate.

As for Birgitte's political objectives, they are centrist, which in Denmark means social democratic, more or less. Modest in size (bigger than Maryland, smaller than West Virginia), with a population of 5.8 million people (2.6 million fewer than New York City), Denmark is solidly committed to a huge public sector that provides free medical care; various family supports; education from ABCs to Ph.D.s; funding for churches, arts, the film industry, and public broadcasting (DR); aid to the territories of Greenland and the Faroe Islands; and a well-trained and equipped military allied with NATO and the United States.

Equally un-Hollywood is *Borgen's* refusal to preach in the manner of *The West Wing*, whose oh-so-righteous president and oh-so-clever staff know the answer to every question before it is asked. Birgitte is an old-fashioned politician, mindful of the difference between her cherished convictions and political reality. The Danish parliamentary system is unusual in having had no single-party governments since 1953. Instead, it typically works through minority coalitions that continually need the support of other non-coalition parties. This political terrain, with its ever-shifting programs, priorities, and personalities, is Birgitte's natural habitat.

Less Killing, Less Crime

DR DID NOT EXPECT *BORGEN* TO SUCCEED, according to executive producer Camilla Hammerich. Just prior to launching the series, another DR drama series, *The Killing*, was an international hit. *The Killing* is a Nordic noir masterpiece in the old-school sense of centering on a monstrous deed (the rape and murder of a teenage girl) but portraying most of the characters as flawed human beings, not monsters. As Hamm-

erich recalled in a 2015 interview, the success of that series brought pressure to ratchet up the viciousness with "something of the same... more killing, more crime." But DR resisted—and spent the next few years making *Borgen* instead.

The question is why. Despite DR's public funding, ratings matter. Indeed, to be awarded the coveted time slot of Sundays at 8 p.m., a drama series must test well with various focus groups; and when aired, it must attract and retain an audience of at least 1 million. So, while a good murder mystery is a slam-dunk, it was an uphill slog for Adam Price, the highly respected writer and producer who created *Borgen*, to persuade DR's drama division that politics was not "too dry and boring" (in Hammerich's words) to be the subject of a series. When the executives at DR agreed to let him make *Borgen*, it was not because they expected a hit. It was because they felt threatened.

Like the BBC in Britain, DR has long ruled the Danish airwaves with an array of radio and TV channels providing not just entertainment and culture but news and public affairs. Today that is changing. DR1, the main DR news channel, is still the most trusted in Denmark. But in recent years it has lost audience share to tabloids and other for-profit competitors. And like news outlets everywhere, the news division of DR has been disrupted by digital technology, especially social media.

These trends are alarming, because democratic governance requires a public forum, and for the past 175 years (since the rotary press was invented), that forum has been the mass media. When the mass media break into fragments, it is good for competition, we are told. But competition for what? Hard news, especially investigative journalism and political reporting, is almost never profitable. To survive, it needs to be reliably funded; and its freedom and independence need to be protected by a government that is not afraid of criticism.

In the United States, where the mass media are privately owned, the funding for hard news has historically come from more lucrative parts of the business, such as advertising, sports, and entertainment. This was true of both print and broadcast media. However, print and broadcast have very different histories regarding government protection of press freedom. While print outlets such as newspapers gradually gained their independence through the courts, radio and TV outlets have been regulated since the 1920s (to good and ill effect).



These arrangements worked so well for so long, Americans grew to think of journalism as an autonomous truth-telling institution beholden to no earthly power, least of all a government. This notion reached full flower in the mid-1970s, when the tireless digging into the Watergate scandal by *Washington Post* reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein contributed to the downfall of President Richard Nixon. Ever since, this “Watergate ideal” (as I call it) has inspired journalists around the world. This can be a good thing, especially in countries that violate press freedom by attacking independent journalists. But when carried to extremes, the Watergate ideal can cause citizens in democratic countries to forget, or take for granted, the role of government in protecting all of their unalienable rights, including press freedom.

In *Borgen*, the Watergate ideal is linked to Katrine Fønsmark (played by Birgitte Hjort Sørensen), an ambitious young journalist at TV1 (based loosely on DR’s flagship news channel). At first glance, Katrine seems just a pretty face who, together with Birgitte’s cynical but soulful spin doctor, Kasper Juul (Pilou Asbæk), provides the obligatory love interest. But on the wall of Katrine’s tiny apartment is a poster of *All the President’s Men*, the Hollywood film based on Woodward and Bernstein’s book about Watergate. And it is partly

through Katrine’s eyes that we witness the changes in mass media that threaten to undermine Danish democracy.

These changes include the rise of *Ekspress*, a fictional tabloid edited by Michael Laugesen (Peter Mygind), the leader of the fictional Labour Party until his rampant egotism led to his being unseated. As editor-in-chief of *Ekspress*, Laugesen is willing to print anything, no matter how unethical or outrageous, to sell papers and keep himself in the limelight. In Season Two, Katrine and her friend Hanne Holm (Benedikte Hansen), an older woman who is a star reporter but has a drinking problem, both take jobs at *Ekspress*, only to find their ethics continually challenged by Laugesen’s methods.

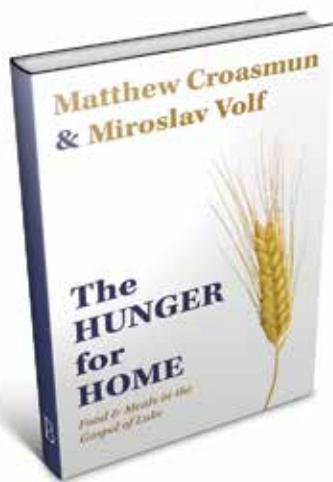
A few episodes later, Katrine and Hanne return to TV1, where they continue to assert their journalistic independence at every opportunity, often annoying Torben Friis (Søren Malling), TV1’s stolid news editor. Much later, in Season Four, an older and less fragile Katrine has replaced Torben as news editor. But when a disgruntled news anchor with a large social media following launches a nasty, sneering campaign against her, Katrina has a nervous breakdown and quits. Fortunately, she has a husband and two children to go home to. But the message is clear: the digital age has made mincemeat of the Watergate ideal.

Grown-up Entertainment

IT SEEMS WE HAVE COME FULL CIRCLE. OUT of concern for the commercial and technological threats to DR’s news division, DR’s drama division produces a TV series that is partly about the workings of the Danish parliamentary system, but also partly about...the commercial and technological threats to DR’s news division. As the literary critic Irving Howe once said when asked if the New York literary scene was incestuous, “It only looks that way from the outside.” Incestuous or not, it works. When the audience starts to abandon hard news for more entertaining alternatives, such as mindless infotainment, mind-numbing “headline news,” and propagandistic talk shows, the solution is not to make hard news more entertaining. Instead, it is to produce grown-up entertainment like *Borgen*.

But that requires supports similar to those required by hard news: reliable funding, creative freedom, and protection from undue external pressure, whether political or commercial. By providing a group of talented, savvy people with the stability and space needed for the crafting of a vast, intricate portrait of politics, media, and society that hums along like a finely tuned engine, by turns witty and suspenseful, heartwarming and heartbreaking, Danish public broadcasting has done the world a great service.

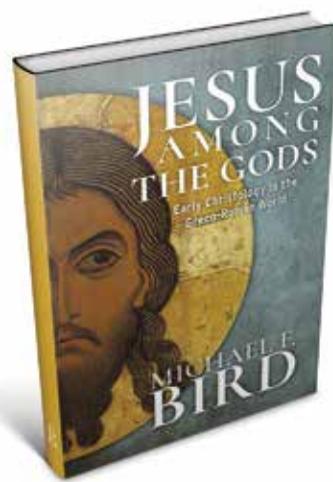
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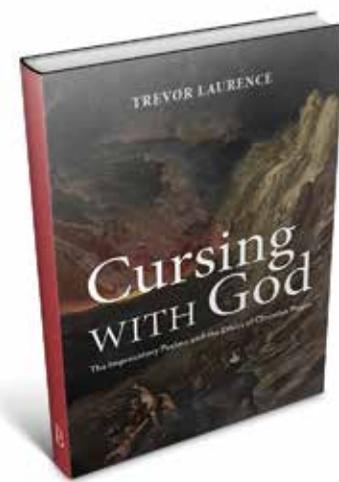
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