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A Critical Examination**

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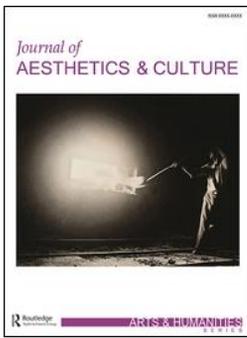
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EDITORIAL

The New Nordic? A critical examination

The Nordic countries (or *Norden* in the Scandinavian languages) are a geographical *and* cultural homogeneous region consisting of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, including the associated territories of Greenland, the Faroe Islands, and the Åland Islands. Often “Scandinavia” and “Norden” are conflated or both terms are used without differentiation to describe or to try to define specific cultural currents, phenomena, or political/societal “models.” Most often this is done from the outside because the Nordic countries seem to have much in common in their way of life, history, their use of Scandinavian languages, and social structure. In an article in *National Geographic* (February 25, 2015) called “True or False: Scandinavians Are Practically Perfect in Every Way,” the author Simon Worrall begins his essay thus: “To an outsider, Scandinavia can seem like a group of small, difficult-to-tell-apart Nordic countries. Frequently derided by right-wing politicians as an example of everything wrong with Big Government, the Scandinavian countries are, in fact, some of the richest, most successful societies on Earth, with exceptionally high levels of education, health care, and safety.”¹

Per definition, the term “Scandinavia” covers the three monarchies of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. But sometimes—especially in British and American contexts—other “Nordic” countries or regions are included, such as Finland, Iceland, and the Faroe Islands, because of their historical association with the Scandinavian countries and the Scandinavian peoples and languages. But formally, Scandinavia should be considered a subset of the Nordic countries.

Whereas notions such as “Scandinavian style” or “the Scandinavian model” are used, especially in Anglo-Saxon contexts, the term “the Nordic” has a much wider and longer history and use. Throughout the 19th century, a rather nationalistic current dominated the Nordic countries. Often, however, the nationalistic discourse was not separated from a focus on the specificity of “the Nordic” as a region; on the contrary. An example is the leading Danish art historian, N.L. Høyen. Høyen strongly promoted a nationalistic art but, to him, it had to be seen in a larger Nordic context. In 1844, he formulated his ideas in a now-famous lecture called “On the conditions for the development of a Scandinavian National art in a Scandinavian Society,” and in 1847, he founded “The Society for Nordic Art.”²

In 1814, Denmark lost Norway after its defeat in the war against England. Norway was forced into a union with Sweden, a union that was not dissolved until 1905. Denmark lost another war against Germany in 1864 and was again seriously diminished. So although especially the three monarchies historically have been fighting with each other over territories, the nationalistic currents in the 19th century and in particular the age of industrialism gave rise to new strategies both uniting and promoting the resemblances of the region. An example is the huge “Den Nordiske Industri-, Landbrugs- og Kunstudstilling i Kjøbenhavn” [The Nordic Exhibition of Industry, Agriculture and Art in Copenhagen] in 1888 uniting and promoting the whole region. Throughout the 20th century both governments, the industry as well as the various cultural scenes have used the term “the Nordic” to define and promote art and

culture from the region, both within the region but most often outside the region.

But suddenly, in the early 2000s, a new term started to be prevalent: “The New Nordic.” It mainly appeared in relation to food, as “New Nordic Food,” and in 2004, a “New Nordic Kitchen Manifesto” was introduced and signed by 12 Nordic leading chefs. In 2005, a “New Nordic Food Programme” was launched by the Nordic governments together.³ The purpose of this 3.35 million Euro program was “Enhancing Innovation in the Food, Tourism, and Experience Industry.” Since then, the term “New Nordic” has spread not only throughout the region but also outside the Nordic countries. “Nordic Noir” has developed into a strong brand with TV-series, such as *The Killing*, *Borgen*, *Wallander*, and *The Bridge*, and novels by Jo Nesbø, Jussi Adler-Olsen, Stieg Larsson, and many others. The New Nordic is used to label liveable Nordic architecture and sustainable Nordic design. And on top of it, Scandinavian countries now also take the lead in world-wide happiness surveys.

It seems like the whole world is embracing, loving, and worshipping “The New Nordic” these years. Art museums like Louisiana in Denmark curate exhibitions entitled “New Nordic,” community administrations hold theme conferences on “New Nordic Welfare,” a company brands itself on “New Nordic Engineering,” and “New Nordic Hair Volume” is a Swedish hair tablet that nourishes your hair from the inside to make it healthy and beautiful. “The New Nordic” is indeed an important brand encouraged by entertainment and tourism industries in the Nordic countries.

But is there such a thing as “The New Nordic”? And if so what is it, and is it more than a smart brand? What is the history behind the concept? When did we start to talk about it, and does it have the same connotations across media, countries, and genres? Or is it already now a dead concept?

Who should respond to these questions if not Nordic scholars? Although *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* is truly international, we have invited a range of scholars from the Nordic countries to contribute to this themed collection of articles. We asked them not only to identify specific Nordic themes, currents, and fashions in arts and culture, but to critically discuss “The New Nordic” as

a discourse seen from within or from outside the Nordic countries.

Altogether, the five articles in this collection cover the cultural areas where the term and the brand “The New Nordic” have been most dominant. The idea came up at an international academic conference that I participated in last year. During the conference, I had informal conversations with colleagues from Canada, Australia, and England, and I realized that they were extremely conscious of Nordic crime novels as well as TV-series (much more than me as a Dane!), and they had all absorbed the terms “New Nordic” and “Nordic Noir.” “Nordic Noir—embodied in Scandinavian dramas like *The Killing*, *The Bridge*, and *Borgen*—have become cult hits in the UK,” as the first lines in an article in the British *The Daily Beast* in 2012 put forward.⁴

Jacob Stougaard Nielsen, in his article “Nordic Noir in the UK: The Allure of Accessible Difference,” analyzes this “success story” from within, namely from the British side. He argues that the success of “Nordic Noir” in the UK resonates with particular British patterns of cultural consumption as well as social inequalities and unequal globalization and, therefore, maybe tells more about the UK than just Nordic culture.⁵

In “The Rise and Fall of the New Nordic Cuisine,” Jonatan Leer maps and discusses the ideology, the politics, the criticism, and the transformations of the concept New Nordic Food, particularly focusing on the leading Danish discourse and examples. Leer discusses how the example of the New Nordic Cuisine highlights the complex and often contradictory dynamics of the local/global dichotomy in contemporary food and consumer culture.⁶

In “New Nordic and Scandinavian Retro” Anders V. Munch and Niels Peter Skou discuss the term in relation to design. In this cultural field, the concepts “Scandinavian Design” and “Scandinavian Modern” have a long tradition as an international brand, and the authors argue that the current wave of New Nordic design grows out of or is, at least, interwoven with the receptions of “timeless” design, classics, and Scandinavian retro. But even more New Nordic design must be seen as part of a more all-encompassing lifestyle trend where the designed items represent accessories for the good life of a

conscious citizen with personal surplus for the practicality of smart details, authentic values, or environmental concerns.⁷

Contemporary art, governmental strategies, and utopian cultural imaginaries come together in Mathias Danbolt's "New Nordic Exceptionalism: Jeuno JE Kim and Ewa Einhorn's The United Nations of Norden and Other Realist Utopias." Here Danbolt takes an artistic intervention at the Nordic Culture Forum summit in Berlin in 2009 made by Kim and Einhorn as a starting point for a critical discussion of the history and politics of Nordic image-building.⁸

Finally, the article "The New Nordic Comics—a Question of Promotion?" by Rikke Platz Cortsen and Ralf Kauranen takes it all back to branding. The authors analyze the concept of "New Nordic" with respect to how it plays out in the field of comics. By looking at recent anthologies of comics with artists from the Nordic countries, they study how both the terms "New" and "Nordic" can have much more complex meanings than defining one specific current when discussed in connection with the comic scene.⁹

This small handful of analyses, insights, and critical discussions of the concept of "The New Nordic," thus, covers some of the most relevant areas normally labeled as "The New Nordic," but of course does not provide the reader with a full and complete answer to the critical questions put forward. Nevertheless, I invite the reader to share and to be informed as well as inspired by the variety of insights that the five articles provide—and maybe to develop more academic studies and critical analysis on the concept of "The New Nordic" which has been extremely widespread within tourism, cultural branding, and the so-called experience economy, but which at the same time has been much less dominant within academic cultural and aesthetic studies.

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Notes

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