

## **Unthinking ethnocentrism: Ecocritical approaches to ethnic diversity in Nordic screen media**

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### **Abstract**

This article develops an ecocritical perspective on the ways Nordic film and television has addressed ethnic and racial diversity. Here, we develop the term ‘ecotone’, a concept originating in ecocritical studies that characterizes the transitional space linking separate ecological communities. Focusing on the popular noir series *Bron/Broen (The Bridge)* (2011–2018), Hannes Holm’s Swedish comedy *En man som heter Ove (A Man Called Ove)* (2015), the Norwegian teen drama *Skam* (‘Shame’) (2015–17) and Ruben Östlund’s controversial film *Play* (2011), we claim the ecotone, when adopted as a form of mediated intervention, allows us to interrogate the taken for granted ideological foundations of Nordic societies. This involves unpacking the representations of material culture and spatial interconnectedness that define the immigrant Other in relation to their environment.

### **Keywords**

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The purpose of this article is, to a large extent, to widen the scope of thematic concerns that can be considered ecological and, in the process, evaluate some of the ways in which environmental metaphors and ‘natural’ concerns are harnessed as anthropocentric tools of socio-political power. We adopt the ‘ecotone’ as a conceptual framework for interrogating how Nordic screen media position race and belonging, given the Nordic socio-political

valorization of egalitarian inclusivity. We suggest that ecotones, rather than functioning as a means to merge the human with their environment, tend to be used as means to consolidate both anthropocentric and socio-political hegemony. We use our examples to examine how Nordic screen media both contributes to and, occasionally, challenges ‘normative’ cultural ecotones. While our analysis does not focus on nature or the non-human environment *per se*, we use the ecotonal tool of ecocriticism to unravel the implicit cultural and political systems that prop up the exclusivist ideological standards of contemporary Nordic screen media.

### **Red herrings**

The plots of the first two seasons of the Danish-Swedish television noir *Bron/Broen* (*The Bridge*) (2011–2018) contain an intriguing set of narrative reversals. The first season starts with a dismembered body laid out at the border crossing of the eponymous bridge. The perpetrator of the crime intends to reveal five ‘Truths’ focusing on social flashpoints of the affluent Danish society, including homelessness and the treatment of immigrants, especially their lack of integration into the ‘egalitarian’ Danish society. It soon turns out that the truths are only a façade for the perpetrator’s personal vendetta, as he is revealed to be a disgruntled ex-policeman who feels betrayed by his partner and let down by the force. The narrative of season two contains a similar twist. The threat this time comes from a group of ecoterrorists intent on poisoning Copenhagen’s food and water supply. It turns out that the real threat is a powerful medical company conducting illegal experimental drug tests. The ecoterrorists take up much of the police’s time while the real cause of the attacks is the shady power dynamics around the ownership of the company.

Both twists draw suspense from flashpoints of contemporary discontent in Nordic societies: immigration and the environment. These issues are often framed as concerns that occupy a distinct liminal socio-political space in the hegemonic order of these welfare states.

Immigrants who refuse to downplay their differences are perceived as a threat to the stability and homogeneity of the imagined welfare communities (Gullestad 2002), especially as all the main characters are white. At the same time, environmental activists are presented, at least in mainstream film and television, as immature and reckless idealists who cause more harm than good for social wellbeing (Sjöholm 2015). Yet ironically, as one of the most mainstream television shows from the Nordic region, *The Bridge* suggests that the real culprits belong to the core of the Nordic welfare state, as part of the ‘native’ population that its secure and egalitarian rhetoric of wealth and individualism valorizes.

While *The Bridge* seems to condemn the establishment and the foundations of the welfare society, it deploys a predictably ideologically safe strategy designed to confirm the status quo. Certainly, by revealing that corruption is rife amongst native Danes, or amongst those who seem to stand for social order, such as the police, the show can be interpreted as a critique of viewers’ expectations where blame is placed on suspicious Others. Yet this can also be seen from an alternative perspective. Immigrants and the ideologically committed environmentalists are red herrings in the mystery narrative, existing only as representational side effects of a society rife with corruption. Problematically, this perspective allows these groups to exist as stereotypes whose only role is to play the symbolic Other, while most of the real narrative focus is on ‘ethnic’ Danes or those that perceivably contribute to normative notions of societal development.

Whether intentional or not, it is somewhat ironic that a show so focused on borders does not seek to undo them. This is especially interesting in the Scandinavian context where the border between Denmark and Sweden is barely observable during commutes between the two countries – and indeed, the protagonists of the show make few references to national differences, which have only a minor practical impact on the narrative. Ironically, in reality, and outside of the show, immigration has led to a hardening of this border with ID checks on

all nationals attempting to travel from Denmark to Sweden. The border could lead to a range of penetrating thematic content, but the titular bridge and its connotations are not a significant part of the show's critical core, leading one to ask why this transnational theme has been introduced in the first place. Much as with environmentalism and immigration, it seems the border in its own right is not particularly significant. In this show, it acts instead as an appropriate metonym for Scandinavian inclusivity – the society is all about building bridges, but these bridges are only available for those who belong. Potentially contesting perspectives and approaches are subsumed into the homogeneous whole or marginalized as ultimately insignificant distractions.

### **Defining an ecotonal approach to ethnic diversity**

Considering that the Nordic media industries often directly address notions of ethnic diversity but do so in a manner that presumes a set of representational parameters, we suggest that the usual arsenal of critical tools for thinking about immigration and the contemporary Nordic state are not always the most useful. Instead, mobilizing an explicitly ecological approach can uncover new ways of thinking about what role the environment – natural but also urban – plays in these politics of representation. To do so, we adopt the concept of the ecotone to refer to the ways these shows explore the politics of representing cultural contestation and diversity. For Frederick Steiner, 'an ecological view of contemporary human communities helps us fathom the overlapping nature of physical and social relationships' (2016: 74). More specifically, for him, the term 'ecotone' describes the transitional border area between two separate ecological communities of human entanglements with nonhumans (Steiner 2016: 28).

The ecotone has been used as a largely positive term to connote a contact zone that allows different cultures and agencies to interact and influence one another. Yet, adopting a more unconventional focus on urban environments allows us to see these supposed ecotonal

‘harmonies’ in a more critical perspective. By placing the convergence of technology, material culture and ethnic relations at the centre of the discussion, an ecotonal perspective does not take the inclusivity and holistic rhetoric of environmental politics at face value, but rather interrogates how environments play host to the development of hybrid ‘ecotonal’ communities with overlapping cultures, communities, subcultures and fusions. In doing so, we acknowledge that these environments are also inherently spaces where contrasts and contradictions emerge. Thus, the representational logic of the ecotone can be adopted for diverse socio-political means, including using the rhetoric of the environment to advocate for cultural exclusion. The notion of society as an ecotonal hybrid space characterized by affirmative politics is certainly an aspirational idea that is frequently evoked in Nordic mainstream media and gestures to a utopian conceptualisation of blurring boundaries between cultures. Yet, does this sort of blurring of boundaries actually take place in Nordic film and television, or do these screen cultures merely project an idealistic sense of multiculturalist inclusion without thinking through the ramifications of their politics? We argue that the ecotone is not simply a representational tool that marginalizes the Other through visible or narrative means. For us, it is also a methodological means to evaluate some of the specific politics that we see in Nordic screen media – the ways the lived-in environment is represented through material objects and the movements of the human body can tell us much more about the ideological underpinnings of media texts outside of spoken dialogue or narrative conventions. Thus we argue that ecotones—as an ecocritical approach that pays attention to material realities of space and body—can provide a conceptual approach for discussing the cultural, symbolic and socioeconomic boundaries in screen media involving ethnic and non-human Others.

### ***A Man Called Ove* and the ‘folkhemmet’ ecotone**

Hannes Holm's Swedish comedy *A Man Called Ove* provides a good illustration of the ways ecotonal means of representation offer an inclusive depiction of a society where humanitarian concerns and collective community 'values' appear to overcome exclusion and racism, but also use these representational powers to homogenize communities through the rhetoric of 'natural' or 'ecological' solidarity. In Holm's comedy, the eponymous Ove (Rolf Lassgård), an elderly pessimist, builds his life around rules and order within his small. Although embittered by the death of his wife and at odds with society's technocratic modern values, Ove represents the intensely moral principles of the idealized Swedish welfare society, where individuals are expected to be duty-bound and responsible. Ove presents a homogenous understanding of togetherness. His sympathetic Iranian neighbour, Parvaneh (Bahar Pars) helps to reconnect him with his community by reinvigorating his dormant value system. Through this set of representations, we come to view Sweden as an organically multiethnic and self-evidently inclusive place, resonant of the prevailing notion of the Swedish imagined community -- an inclusive *folkhemmet*. This concept -- literally translated as 'the people's home' or 'home of the people'<sup>1</sup> -- preached that belonging to the Swedish nation was contingent on identifying and conforming to a specific set of cultural values and customs reflective of Sweden as a familial community (Borevi 2012: 26). In *A Man called Ove*, the values of *folkhemmet* remain unquestioned.

The parameters of Ove's community -- both as a set of physical boundaries and a reflection of Ove's community oriented mindset -- are an embodiment of the principles of the ecotone which preach openness or the illusion of borderlessness but in reality, are still governed by a particular set of rules and expectations. Here, universal themes like love and loss provide a consolidation of mental harmony, effectively injecting themes like 'understanding' and 'universality' into the narrative to overcome cultural differences based on the background of individuals or their ethnicity. The mental sphere (the impression of harmony) combines with

the social (the project of the universal welfare state) and finally, they come together in the ecotonal space of the environment: the community Ove oversees. Yet, even in these apparent hybridizing depictions, cultural and social adaptation is typically presented as a one-way street, where the norms of Nordic societies are rarely in question or subject to transformation. It is a landscape where the anthropocentric tendencies of Ove's dominant social rules and, ultimately, traditional Swedish *folkhemmet* morals are imposed. The focus is on restoring order rather than adapting it to meet the changing norms of an increasingly multiethnic Swedish society.

This is especially true of Holm's comedy where, on closer inspection, the ethnic Other serves largely to bolster the imagined community values of the Swedish welfare state. When Parvaneh encourages Ove, who largely avoids his neighbours, to reintegrate into the community, she effectively becomes his substitute daughter, helping him confront tragedies in his past. Although mentioned in passing, the context of Parvaneh's own past hardships as a former refugee fleeing the tyranny of the Iranian Revolution, serves to strengthen Ove's resolve and reconnect him with his community. In this ecotone, shared understanding and integration are possible, but only once the Other accepts these boundaries and the rules that govern them. While *A Man Called Ove* cannot be accused of outright racism or marginalization of the Other, its representational palette is more insidious, reflecting its hegemonic politics of representation. Such representations frequently position immigrants as individuals at odds with cultural and social norms where they are either expected to inhabit ghettoized ethnic communities or need to accept cultural and social adaptation.

Our contention here is that representations such as *A Man Called Ove* provide an impression of the inclusive *folkhemmet* by using the inclusive connotations of the ecotone, which betray a tone-deaf attitude towards the actual racial exclusion in contemporary Nordic societies, where differences are effectively whitewashed in a way that allows dominant

privileged positions, in this case, white Nordic exceptionalism, to remain firmly in place. We refer to this perspective as the '*folkhemmet* ecotone'. The notion of the 'the people's home' as a vision of familial inclusion and civic responsibility is thus echoed literally and figuratively in *A Man Called Ove* through the way the titular character comes to represent a substitute father figure to Parvaneh and vice versa, with her family as part of his support network. These allegorical statements reflect the *folkhemmet* rhetoric of the 'community as family', and they are strengthened through narrative patterns and visual symbolism drawing on the inclusivist connotations of the ecotone.

These kinds of politics come through, both implicitly, as in the case of *The Bridge* and explicitly, as with *A Man Called Ove*, in much of Nordic film and television content. In many ways, these *folkhemmet* ecotones often operate in similar terms to *A Man Called Ove* by playing up their egalitarianism and reliance on 'welfare capitalism', that is, a sustainable form of capitalism that benefits all, and not only a tiny per cent. Yet the roles it affords to different agents – ethnic minorities or ideologically diverse groups in our examples – show how certain socio-political hierarchies of culture are cognized through narrative and themes of maintaining societal order. Thus, the ecotone, as an encapsulation of these politics within the spaces of the film, works to consolidate this 'harmony.' As we argue that ecotonal ideas have been used to consolidate the conventions of affirmative representations to re-establish a specific hegemonic social order in films like *A Man Called Ove*, it is our contention that the large majority of Nordic screen media depict a normative ecotonal form of representation, emphasizing Nordic societies that are inclusive and open, even when frictions emerge in large parts of the narrative.

### **An ecotonal approach to Critical Race Theory**

To challenge the hegemonic appropriation of ecotonal representational politics as ‘harmonious’, we adopt tools from Critical Race Theory. CRT diagnoses racism as the result of structural inequalities largely used in narratives, anecdotes and storytelling to underline racial subordination. Developed from legal studies, CRT is emerging as an intervention in film and media studies. CRT recognizes whiteness as the default against which everything else is measured. It also calls out ‘colour-blindness’ (Raengo 2016: 21), pointing out that proponents of liberal multicultural societies often claim ‘colour-blindness’ by falsely assigning racism to earlier historical eras, thus maintaining that racism has been neutralized in current political and cultural narratives. When colour-blindness is touted, all races are viewed symmetrically in a way that erases actual structural inequality or disadvantage, particularly economic and political oppression. Intersectionality forms a significant aspect of CRT relevant to our discussion on contemporary Nordic societies and challenges the *folkhemmet* ecotone’s conception of universal balance. According to Loftsdóttir and Jensen,

The focus on racism in the context of intersectionality recognises that racism takes multiple forms in contemporary societies, increasingly attaching itself to other features such as religion and culture, in the process making these phenomena difficult to disentangle. (Loftsdóttir and Jensen 2012: 7)

At stake here is the embeddedness of institutionalized racism, or how it becomes an integrated norm through the use of representational conventions and power relations. For us, focusing on an ecological understanding of social relations can provide a way of exploring how these multiple forms of racism, for example, of marginalization and Othering, can take place on a systematic level that presents them as ‘natural’ – even banal – in orientation. Our approach to the ecotone allows us to unpack these contradictions. Racism in Scandinavia has

a perverse history, and media culture plays an active role in shaping and reshaping perceptions of ethnic Otherness onscreen through narrative and characterization. To better understand the relationship between CRT, intersectionality and ecotones, we propose that the ecotone reveals how underneath these representations of an increasingly diverse and multicultural Scandinavia, the ecotone as an amalgam of social, mental and material interactions stifles debate and reinforces its own agenda.<sup>2</sup> We focus on how this ecotonal amalgam contributes to diverse yet ‘naturalized’ tactics of exclusion. Drawing from the advances of critical race studies to identify how the processes of structural racism’s ‘naturalization’ evoke ecological metaphors, we consider the ecotone not so much a harmonious space of entanglement, but more as providing an illusion of inclusivity built on dominant egalitarian power structures.

To challenge the way screen cultures rely on this conformist approach to the ecotone and how its three ecologies can be used to deconstruct such conformism, we focus on two texts that show different sides to mobilising the ecotone to depict ‘multiculturalist’ societies. The first is the Norwegian television show *Skam* ('Shame') (2015-17), a programme that embodies both affirmative and progressive politics in its choice of focus on multicultural youth and the problematic conformist connotations of the ecotone in its narrative and thematic scope. To continue with this exploration of urban ecotonal environments, Ruben Östlund’s controversial film *Play* (2011) dispels the image of Sweden as a contemporary imagined community based on the values of inclusivity and multicultural tolerance, progress, development and cosmopolitanism. Östlund’s film, we argue, is not about restoring hegemonic social order. Rather, it confronts the normative ecotone to dismantle dominant perspectives by challenging the conventions of representation that form the basis for much of Nordic screen media.

Both 'Shame' and *Play* unravel a harmonious ecotonal understanding of the social and cultural values at the heart of 'tolerance' and move towards more complex, even hybridized understandings of how culture, immigration and the environment are interrelated, even as they do this in markedly different ways. By focusing on media that emphasise friction and contestation in these ecotonal spaces, we suggest a more complex view of how the ecotone can also function as a form of alternative politics that highlights the fractured and intersectional nature of contemporary Nordic societies. This interrogation of an ecotonal depiction of society in screen media would need to consider the cultural, social, political and environmental fabric of that society in ways that facilitate dialogue between different communities without positioning any of the groups in a hegemonic position that would shape the representational approach. While both examples undoubtedly push boundaries, we argue that *Play* provides a more complex and incisive view on race in contemporary Scandinavia by teasing out the hypocrisies and contradictions of the *folkhemmet* ecotone.

### **The politics of an inclusivist ecotone: 'Shame'**

If mainstream Nordic films like *A Man Called Ove* highlight qualified tolerance through narrative means, we must also consider how these ideas are communicated in media texts that offer – at least on the surface – a much more complex and inclusivist politics. 'Shame', the Norwegian television and social media phenomenon, approaches a set of similar themes from an audiovisual and narrative perspective that makes use of its origins as a 'new media' phenomenon aimed at a generation of consumers who have grown up in multicultural societies, and for whom the notion of white masculine authority may not be as taken for granted as it is in the world of *A Man Called Ove*.

The depiction of the lived environment of contemporary Norwegian society in 'Shame' provides an interesting case for navigating the representational complexities of multicultural film and television. The show, focusing on a group of teenagers in Oslo,<sup>3</sup> has generated considerable interest for confronting themes such as homosexuality and Islamophobia in ways that appeal to an 'inclusive' adolescent millennial audience growing up in an increasingly multiethnic environment. In season four, the show focuses on Sana (Iman Meskini), a second-generation teen of Moroccan descent, whose life is a balancing act between the liberal pursuits of her friends in high school and the gentle pressure from her more conservative parents. The differences between Sana and her peers are not socioeconomic, as it is only her identity as a Muslim that generates difference. This approach provides the basis for a representational politics that balances between conforming to the norms of the dominant representational ecotone and emphasising Sana's distinct perspective that often challenges these ecotonal norms.

Sana's subjective experiences are constantly communicated to us by material elements of her environment that impede her ability to navigate between 'ordinary' Norwegianness and her Muslim identity. These are conveyed to us by providing access to her subjective perspective, for example by showing us her immersion into prayer, which is communicated audio-visually by a lack of sound and an increase in light density. The balancing act is constant with food and sustenance – pork on a pizza or alcohol at a party – or the *hijab* she wears, offering possible obstacles for a hybrid identity. Her ringtone is an imam's call for prayers and draws disapproving gazes from people on a bus. The ethnosymbolic elements of Islamic culture are shown to be signifiers that fragment any notion of a harmonious ecotone, constantly reminding us that it is not only her personal identity that is the perceived problem, but also the material elements she chooses from the repository of cultural signifiers available to 'all' Norwegians, which are shown as being in opposition to the normative cultural environment

of Norwegian society. While her choices fragment ecotonal homogeneity, these elements are simultaneously used to suggest the more problematic ways representational ecotones marginalize difference. For Sana, they are significant empowering factors but, more problematically, are also shown to cause considerable discomfort to her daily life, including when passengers on the bus react to her ringtone or when she has to reject alcohol at a party. While Sana's values and behaviour challenge the conformity of the ecotone and gesture to hybrid identities, their representation in *Skam* also works in a similar way to hegemonic multiculturalism that consistently thematizes – that is, problematizes – difference.

For Slavoj Žižek, the ideological foundations of this liberal multicultural tolerance conform to the demands of capitalism, where a homogenized understanding of social equality depends on the Other subscribing to specific roles (Žižek 1997: 46). Similarly, transnational film scholar Milja Radovic emphasises how this false sense of solidarity masks and neutralizes systemic divisions caused and perpetuated by the status quo (Radovic (2014: 27-28). 'Shame's ecotonal community reconciles this multicultural tolerance with the type of materialist culture evident in the cosy middle-class confines of the show's normative frame of reference. In line with Radovic and Žižek's understanding, this depiction of an ecotonal Norwegian society uncritically locates cultural difference as materially expressed at the heart of Sana's problems and leaves wider questions about embedded social division unanswered.

These dynamics are present in many parts of the show. The prejudice of society constantly challenges Sana's social compass, but the company of her friends, who remain loyal to her to the end, compensates for these overtones. This is explicitly shown to be the case with the graduation bus<sup>4</sup> that forms the crux of the storyline in episode ten of season four titled '*Takk for alt*' (Thanks for Everything). Sana feels the need to conform to the lifestyles of Western society and of her peers as she takes the lead in the acquisition of a 'russ-bus' or the festive debauchery at the end of the school year, a choice that involves allying with the snobbish

Pepsi Max gang (who are coded as ‘mildly’ racist). The whole exercise eventually fails, but her friends come through by acquiring a smaller bus. The bus is a material object that represents the ecotone of contemporary affluent and open Norway, setting boundaries around Sana's choices, but does so in a way that politicizes the objects themselves. They symbolize a rite of passage for adolescents but nonetheless suggest an implicit culture of conformity.

While Sana gets enmeshed in online bullying and blackmail, losing her friends in the process, they are supportive when it counts. Sana learns a valuable life lesson about tolerance and trust in her peers, concretely gesturing to how Others must learn to trust the welfare egalitarianism of their ecotonal surroundings. It is thus plausible to suggest that her Norwegian peers are the heroes of this story and, it seems, the target audiences of the show. In many ways, the question is whether the show reveals to us anything essential about second-generation immigrants, outside of superficial notions that they ‘are just like us’, except when they are not. Rather than reflecting the complex experiences of the Other, it merely prescribes how we should think about or imagine the Other. This often involves defining immigrant characters through one singular aspect of their cultural identity; in Sana’s case, this revolves around the material objects that symbolize her religion: what she wears, and the various prohibitions dictated by her religion. Once again, the onus is on the Other to adapt and conform to an implicit set of norms dictated by the materialist and ideological culture of her surroundings. In turn, these cultures reflect the hegemonic rules of the contemporary Nordic ecotone – paying lip service to diversity and inclusion while assimilation remains an implicit underlying rule.

While Sana’s consistent discomfort could be interpreted as a means to challenge precisely such methods of superficial inclusivity, the final scene of the show reorients the narrative to the *folkhemmet* ecotone<sup>5</sup>. During another party, Sana and her friends experience what appears to be a moment of inclusive ecotonal balance. John Lennon’s *Imagine* plays over images of

all the protagonists seemingly 'coming together as one' in line with the song's universal sentiments. A scene like this is surely intended to facilitate an ecotonal impression of a multicultural Norway coming to understand its differences. Yet we are left with a sense that 'living as one' will involve Sana conforming to affluent middle-class Norwegian 'values'. While a hybrid ecotone seems to be constructed here, one that could be read as progressive in allowing Sana to be herself in this multicultural Norway, it is also implied that being herself is not quite the same as being 'one'. By not being part of this illusory whole, the characters are invariably different in ways that creates drama appropriate to a show like 'Shame'.

To illustrate, there is a certain prescriptive 'aspirational' element to 'Shame's depiction of Norwegian teen culture that raises questions about its approach to multiculturalist politics. The show is commendable for the ways Sana is able to address the prejudices of Norwegian society, an attitude that merges well with its liberal outlook. She argues that 'in Norway, they talk about freedom of religion and speech, but I am not able to wear an extra piece of clothing as everyone will think I am different or brainwashed'. Here, difference is presented as an obstacle to freedom, which, in turn, is depicted as the hedonist lifestyle of her non-Muslim friends. The narrative also uses environmental metaphors to address similar points of contention. A particularly pertinent symbolic moment has Sana discuss sister species while revising for a biology exam. In her explanation, these species can resemble one another morphologically, but be genetically different, suggesting that Norwegians and second-generation immigrants are part of the same biological family. Problems arise when cultural difference arrives on the scene as species are separated by the way they choose to represent their identity. The show's representational tactics reinforce the connotations of Sana's comments to indicate multiculturalist tolerance as a means to overcome such issues, but 'Shame' does not fully carry through with these implications. The problem with its approach is the constant thematization of her Otherness, a notion made obvious by zooming in on the

way the material elements of her physical presence in the Norwegian social environment are constantly at odds with the normative cultural frames of reference. While 'Shame' is refreshing in that most of its critique focuses on tolerance, ensuring that such differences are not brushed over with a homogenizing sense of multiculturalism, it also indicates that the promotion of multiculturalist politics and the visualization of the alternative mental spaces of the other, or of those who try to conform, often encounter a paradoxical sense of insider-outsiderness. The result, as Sana's narrative reveals, is often a form of liminality of the type discussed by postcolonial scholar Homi Bhabha, where the Other has to consolidate an identity that is simultaneously inside and outside the hegemonic culture, and where it is often precisely their outsiderhood that forms the cultural boundaries of this hegemonic culture (Bhabha 1994).

In many ways, the *folkhemmet* ecotone embodies this sense of appropriation where these representational techniques twist the liminality of the Other to conform to its own exceptionalism. Accordingly, 'Shame' seems to suggest that Norway comes with its problems, but they can be overcome with a little bit of tolerance – though often it is the Other who must do a large part of the tolerating. This equates to maintaining dominance by politically emphasizing apparent cultural or social incompatibilities while simultaneously reverting to a multiculturalist sense of 'understanding' the Other. 'Shame', in the end, does not tell us anything new about the experience of second-generation immigrants, only that they are an Other in society. The ecotonal sense of belonging is conditional for Sana: she can be who she is, but this will always be an identity characterized by impressions of difference.

### **Stockholm syndrome: fragmented ecotones in *Play***

Despite its many beneficial advances on charting more complex perspectives of second-generation immigrant lives in Nordic societies, 'Shame' undercuts *Skam* these advances

through representational and narrative means. The narrative conventions of the normative Nordic ecotone still structure its approach. To conclude this exploration, we turn to a case study that resists ecotonal complicity. Ruben Östlund's provocative film *Play* is undoubtedly one of the most complex films about multiculturalism to emerge from the Nordic countries. It plays with cultural and political boundaries and uses them to mock the beliefs and expectations of the liberal multicultural status quo, which prizes the values of tolerance and inclusivity attacked by Žižek. *Play* subverts and satirizes the social roles assigned to different ethnic groups as it draws attention to the ways the conditions of their social setting structure them. Östlund explores the social-ecological relations of contemporary Sweden through a variety of transitional urban locations, a shopping mall, a skateboard park, construction sites and public transport. Furthermore, the use of objects and materials allows the film to attack the foundations of how the ecotonal norms of Nordic screen culture operate, where there are implicit 'conditions of belonging' to which ethnic Others are expected to subscribe. We will focus on the ways the film recharges the uses of potentially disruptive representational conventions seen in shows like 'Shame' to refute the possibility of contemporary Sweden as an ideologically conformist ecotone, the '*folkhemmet* ecotone.'

*Play*'s narrative revolves around a group of black teenagers<sup>6</sup> who pull off an elaborate robbery, known as the 'brother trick', on three other boys, two white, Sebastian (Sebastian Blyckert) and Alex (Sebastian Hegmar), and one East Asian, John (John Oritz). The black teenagers Kevin (Kevin Vaz), Anas (Anas Abdirahman), Yannick (Yannick Diakité), Abdi (Abdiaziz Hilowle) and Nana (Nana Manu) approach their intended victims, falsely accuse them of phone theft and then escorted to meet with a fictional older brother who will 'resolve' the issue. The victims are intimidated, mocked, bullied and eventually cajoled into handing over their possessions. Although the rules of the brother trick appear to play up stereotypes and cultural expectations, the game blurs the conventional, one-dimensional roles

often assigned to immigrant characters. Here, Kevin is both the mediator, a rational voice who attempts to assure the victims that if they comply all will be well, and the ringleader of the scam. This good cop bad-cop dynamic presents a complex picture of Swedish society where the group use coercion and trust boundary exercises to manipulate the three victims. John, Sebastian, and Alex develop a hesitant dependency on the gang's promise of a resolution.

The racial divide between the two groups, where the black boys play the villains, provoked fierce criticism from voices on the left, with prominent critics like novelist Jonas Hassen Khemiri (2011) and Åsa Linderborg (2011), a cultural commentator for the tabloid newspaper *Aftonbladet*, branding the film racist. We argue, however, that the film is neither a straightforward presentation of racist stereotypes nor an affirmation of multicultural ecotonal values. *Play* centralizes issues of Otherness and exclusion, but does so in a way that undermines the rhetoric evident in Swedish multiculturalism. It uses borders and boundaries strategically and symbolically to exclude while also drawing attention to political divides, where each perspective plays off against the other.

### **Performing race in *Play***

According to Helena Karlsson, *Play* presents us with multiple forms of Otherness: the Asian boy, John, whom she refers to as an 'Asian adoptee' (2014: 44); a Native American musical quartet that appear and perform intermittently in a seemingly redundant sub-plot; and the black adolescents. Karlsson links these Others by claiming they effectively represent varying levels of appropriated Otherness. For her, John, the assimilated Other, is accepted on one level, but also singled out by his ethnic identity when it is convenient, such as when his two white friends suggest he should be the one to confront the gang. The Native American troupe are accepted only because they conform to an exotic essentialist fantasy, qualities that are

exaggerated by their dress which conforms to Westernized stereotypes of Native American heritage. Finally, the black boys embody the ultimate Other, visible, but only through their stereotypical, transgressive behaviour (2014: 49-51) Her discussion touches on similar points to our deconstruction of the *folkhemmet* ecotone by framing the discrepancies and hypocrisies evident in this racial hierarchy. More specifically, their role as subordinate transgressors is key to how *Play* dismantles the *folkhemmet* ecotone, showing how the incorporation of race into its own narrative is ultimately ironic.

*Play* refuses to fully conform to any widely held pattern of representations or dominant ideological narratives on immigration. The black boys' transgressive behaviour is not simply a re-enactment of today's headlines, nor do they play the 'good victims' (as is often the case in other films about immigrants), as this would also serve to reinforce dominant exceptionalist ideas about the Nordic countries. *Play* suggests that they are victims, but not in a conventional, sentimental sense. The black youth play with personas and conventions associated with negative stereotypes where their self-awareness plays a key role. They are all too aware of their marginal position as victims of exclusion and the expectations placed on them because they are black, a negative role already carved out for them. Ultimately, the only real recourse to exclusion and the illusion of ecotonal equality is to play the villain. The film continually draws attention to the imprecision of treating Others as homogenous entities, for example by highlighting the conflicted hierarchy among the black youth. Not all of them want to participate in the harassment.; when Nana attempts to leave, his friends badly beat him. Although it is not readily apparent throughout the film, sympathy for the black boys manifests in other ways when we consider the wider context of their position and motives in the gameplay. Amanda Doxtater characterizes the relationship between the material culture and the black boys as blatantly ironic. In her analysis, the status and sense of ownership associated with these goods, that is, the objects Lauren Berlant equates with 'clusters of

promise' (2011: 23), signify nothing more than an illusion of the neoliberal 'good life'. Contextually, the black boys are doubly excluded from this lifestyle. Although they covet the material goods, their acquisition of them equals nothing more than a 'fleeting experience of power in a society in which they are actually disenfranchised' (Doxtater 2016: 196).

*Play* includes several scenes where the gameplay is momentarily suspended and all the boys appear united in their dislocation. According to Doxtater, one lingering shot of the boys sitting on a bench while a worker sweeps the floor beneath them captures a 'collective non-action' (2016: 201). The film's strategic use of framing also exaggerates their isolation and dislocation, often placing them off-centre or at the margins of the screen, for instance when they are first introduced (Doxtater 2016: 199-200). For our purposes, these brief moments of unity between marginalized individuals lend *Play*'s relationship with the ecotone a further layer of complexity. Unlike *A Man Called Ove*'s collective unity, where the utopian balance of the ecotone is fervently reinforced, the unity between the boys in *Play* is observed only in their shared disillusionment with this imagined community. John's Asian ethnicity is similarly no coincidence and further complicates the racial division, since the behaviour of his white friends conveys that they see him as not quite like themselves. If only for a moment, the film turns its gaze on white racism – a gesture it repeats in the finale – but this is only a brief interlude from playing out a range of narrative tropes of ethnic Otherness.

All these elements confront normative expectations regarding ethnic minorities in Nordic screen media. The protagonists self-consciously perform these roles, yet instantly undermine the expectations spectators may have of their role in the harmonious ecotone of Nordic media where, for the most part, different ethnic groups have their place firmly mapped out. The elaborate brother trick is thus a satirical play with the victim-villain dichotomy, acknowledging the border between social roles and 'accepted' behaviours. However, even as the black teenagers appear to transgress the boundaries of liberal multicultural thinking by

refusing to play 'good' victims, they are still contained within a wider illusory narrative of ecotonal expectations. Their 'acting out' is simply presented as part of a cultural incompatibility, so the institutional powers of political and economic exclusion remain invisible. Their self-awareness of this barrier draws our attention to the social borders at work, and to the conventional homogenizing tendencies envisioned through the multiculturalist connotations of the *folkhemmet* ecotone.

### **Objects, materials and places**

By challenging conventional race and class identity politics, *Play* introduces a wider ecological perspective on the extent of inequality and racial segregation in neoliberal Sweden. By breaking away from an ecotopic understanding of what it means to be Swedish, *Play* goes much further, and much deeper, than 'Shame' in its critique. The film's challenge to representing contemporary Sweden as a *folkhemmet* ecotone emerges in its strategic use of objects, locations and bodies. The phones and possessions act as tokens of this hegemonic capitalist culture – they are part of the membership. However, unlike 'Shame', where the politics of belonging manifests itself through the use and function of material objects, belonging in *Play* is not contingent on these objects. The film suggests that specific expectations and social statuses are attached to both groups and encourages rethinking the role of these cultural commodities in wielding dominance over people.

Unlike 'Shame's aspirational urban environments, *Play's* vision of metropolitan Sweden is oppressive and exclusionary. The contemporary, motivated lifestyles implicit in 'Shame' are swapped for a different kind of role-playing exercise. Here, immigrant Others are not faced with a choice between conforming to the cultural identities projected onto them by the mainstream or assimilating with the normative culture. Although like Sana in 'Shame' they are separated by their clothing, behaviour and the way they interact with their environments,

in *Play* they are explicitly, and often very uncomfortably, separated by the colour of their skin. Karlsson draws attention to physical spaces like glass walls and panelling, signifying the various visual border zones used to divide the two groups of boys. The effect also contributes to the appearance of borderlessness:

Apart from signalling the obvious border between white and racialized Swedes in multicultural Sweden, considering that the camera often suggests we are actual witnesses to the happenings represented on the screen, the glass also signals the border between spectator and cinema screen, between screen and reality. Representation or reality, there will always be an interpretive and prejudicial filter between subjects, i.e. we will mostly fail to see the Other in her or his full humanity. The racial adds an interpretive layer between people. The black boys are aware of the racial filter through which they are interpreted and they use this knowledge in their play. (Karlsson 2014: 74)

In the final moments of the boys' ordeal, John is forced to swap his more expensive clothing with Kevin's. As Karlsson points out, this act represents the ultimate form of roleplay: although Kevin now bears the status symbols of middle-class identity, this power is only temporary, signifying that although the black boys exert control over their victims, they remain powerless in society as a whole. The theft of these possessions helps perpetuate the cycle of victimization and infantilization that appears in the final argument. The possessions and roleplay with class identity politics are, in the end, just that: a form of play that does not extend to anything else. Simultaneously, John is now forced to embody Kevin's poorer, working-class identity, thus effectively highlighting his own ethnic Otherness (2014: 50-51).

If 'Shame' suggests that the solution to socio-cultural integration lies in the ability and willingness of the Other to compromise and conform to the social norms, or in our argument, the homogenising ecotone of affluent suburban normalization, *Play* directs our attention towards urban spaces where the simplicity of a community does not exist. The roleplaying, facilitated through the objects and locations, highlights how the *folkhemmet* ecotone relies on immigrant identities performing in specific ways. Yet when these norms are subverted, as in Kevin's roleplay, the coordinates of the normative ecotone are jumbled by challenging, first, the cultural norms on which it relies – Kevin ascending in terms of class and social status by wearing a new set of clothes – and second, by showing how easily material symbols displace the human into distinct class-based marginal positions. We know this ascendancy is only temporary, but for a moment, the ecotonal haze is lifted and we are allowed to observe the machinations that maintain the status quo.

The film ends with an argument between two white Swedes. This scene is key to understanding the political-economic dynamics at work beneath the surface of polarized public opinion and represents the socio-cultural deadlock over multiculturalism in Sweden. Towards the end of the film Nana, now separate from his gang mates, is confronted by the father of two white victims. These are not the same boys we have been following throughout the film, which suggests either that the brother trick has repeatedly been played or that the angry man simply picks any black boy to blame. As the man angrily challenges Nana, he is interrupted by a woman, also a white Swede, who reprimands him for his attitude towards the boy. The ethnicity of the young robber provokes further consternation between the adults, where the woman argues that he's 'just an immigrant, and he doesn't understand'. Her stance is by no means intended to offer a more balanced or alternative view for debating social-ecological relations. The problem is perceived as a cultural barrier: the white woman's stance implies that the boy simply needs to be assimilated into the status quo and properly

acclimatize to Swedish socio-cultural norms. From the father's perspective, the woman infantilizes the boy, and her (distant) sympathy is that of the naïve liberal. Indeed, her righteous indignation is also one of Östlund's key targets. Instead of reinforcing the cultural superiority of the status quo, the scene demonstrates that the ecotonal coordinates of contemporary neoliberal Sweden, albeit often invisible, remain in place.

By concluding with a resort to white voices, Östlund, the auteurist provocateur, reveals himself to be part of the same system he is criticizing. The point of Östlund's commentary seems to be that, within this ecotone, the black children have no real voice that extends beyond role-playing exercises. The bullying allows the boys to exert power, but this control is only temporary. Perhaps by breaking with convention and giving the boys a voice, Östlund would simply be guilty of perpetuating the same idealistic exceptional stance seen in other examples. Östlund nevertheless speaks from a position of privilege, a point taken up by Stuberudd and Ringrose's critique of *Play*. For these scholars, Östlund's interpretation is not without its flaws because he continues to engage in a similar form of exclusive politics, aiming his criticism at white, middle-class Swedish audiences (Stubberud and Ringrose 2014: 71). Here, privileged classes and audiences reflect back on themselves in a way that denounces racism but ultimately continues to prioritize their perspective. The conflict between the two adults is part of this system. At face value, we appear to gain nothing from their argument, no insight, no answers or solutions. We simply end up back where we started where, presumably, the cycle of robbery, victimization and infantilization will continue. However, the apparent pointlessness of this encounter is highly significant. These overlapping perspectives show us how, on the surface, clashes between the white middle-class elites are contained by perceived cultural borders that prevent either party from seeing beyond the status quo or questioning its role in the division. This is the multiculturalist ecotone in operation, once again comprehensively reasserting itself in the affluent confines of

*Play*'s urban cityscapes, which upholds a dominant agenda while simultaneously preaching a symmetrical understanding of Scandinavian society.

## **Conclusion**

By addressing the ways these representations of multiculturalism employ the material environmental as well as ecological metaphors (often in unacknowledged ways), we have identified critical examination of representational patterns and tendencies on a much more profound level than simply recognizing racism in films or identifying patterns of marginalization on television. In *Play*, the complex role-play with boundaries, stereotypes and the exposure of structural segregation in contemporary urban Sweden challenges any harmonious conceptualization of multicultural inclusivity. In fact, *Play* shatters the collective grand narratives of multicultural ideology. In 'Shame', this collective narrative remains in place and Sana's dilemmas derive from having to choose between two cultural and social narratives, the aspirational affluent Norwegian model and the more conservative Islamic version. Our analysis shows that beyond the patterns of normalization, innovative texts can make us question our self-perception of humanity and consider themes of borders and territory as part of the ecological dimensions of exclusion – who is included and excluded – and how these factors are contingent on dominant hegemonic systems. But ultimately, these interpretations are, of course, subjective in themselves. Both 'Shame' and *Play* can and should be interpreted very differently, which testifies to the fact that they uncover tensions in Nordic society, conflicts that are much too easily glossed over in texts like *The Bridge* and *A Man Called Ove*. In contributing to this discussion and by privileging the complexity of *Play* over 'Shame', our point is to emphasize that the ecological metaphors employed by these texts – often in unacknowledged ways – portray an inherently sanitized view of socio-environmental

complexity. Nordic societies have always been as messy as nature, and if film and television strive to represent them, it is to this messiness they need to turn.

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<sup>1</sup> The concept originated in the Social Democratic Party Leader Per Albin Hansson's famous 'folkhemmet speech' in 1928, where he outlined the basic tenets of universal equality and inclusivity. *Folkhemmet* intended to deliver to all people. However, there is a distinct and narrow ethnocultural dimension to *folkhemmet* implying that 'the people' in question exist in superior contrast to others (Barker 2018: 63-64).

<sup>2</sup> We are here indebted to Felix Guattari's (2000) work on the 'Three Ecologies' as a means to distinguish between different ways of conceptualizing humanity's engagement with the lived environment.

<sup>3</sup> 'Shame' is set in the affluent West-side district of Frogner, childhood home of right-wing extremist Anders Behring Breivik, who was responsible for the 2011 attacks perpetrated against the Norwegian Labour Party's Youth League (Arbeidernes Ungdomsfylking). Despite the show's implicit messages of tolerance and acceptance, there are no references to Breivik's Islamophobic ideology or the unprecedented socio-cultural impact of these events. There have been numerous debates about Breivik as the product of the same egalitarian 'value system'. Despite this, the 'normative' frame of reference for Sana remains unchallenged. For more information, see Åsne Seierstad's *En av oss (One of Us)* (2013).

<sup>4</sup> So-called Russ buses are part of the *russefeiring* celebrations in Norway, where students celebrate their high school graduations. Here, buses are used as mobile party venues but also function as status symbols decorated in accordance to different schools, subjects and vocations. They have become part of a cultural rite of passage for graduates.

<sup>5</sup> While the *folkhemmet* is not used in the Norwegian context, Norway has the term *likhet* (sameness), defined by Gullestad (1992, 2002) as equating to equality as sameness, or where to be considered equal, one must be the same. To us, the concepts share similar cultural-philosophical ideas about how their respective societies should be run.

<sup>6</sup> For more on the representation of childhood in *Play*, see Doxtater (2016: 192- 211).