Bestseller and Blockbuster Culture

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Introduction

The realm of bestseller and blockbuster culture serves as a steady provider of startling phenomena. With origins as fan fiction published on the web, *Fifty Shades of Grey* grew into three books that have sold millions of copies. *Harry Potter* regenerated children's reading culture. The film adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* caused a major boost for tourism in New Zealand. Thanks to Guy Ritchie, Robert Doherty, and Mark Gattiss and Steven Moffat, Sherlock Holmes has recently undergone three rejuvenating remakes: the films *Sherlock Holmes* (2009) and *A Game of Shadows* (2011), the British television series *Sherlock* (2010-) and the American television series *Elementary* (2012-).

Bestseller and blockbuster culture includes new ways of producing, distributing and experiencing media. Bestseller and blockbuster productions encompass production values in which a new type of pragmatic cooperation with external partners takes place (Waade, 2013). Films and television series are produced as platform productions for different media (cinema, television, mobile media) in combination with merchandise, franchising and destination tourism. To an increasing degree, books are published as e-books,

thus contributing to changes in the culture of reading. Books such as *Twilight* and *Game of Thrones* are combined with fan culture on the internet. Various agents and platforms contribute to new distributive modes of bestseller and blockbuster productions: publishers, bookshops, libraries, the DVD-market, online television channels and international cooperation agents. Book fairs and literary and cultural festivals attract the attention of large audiences supported by local authorities, tourist agencies and various sponsors (Sjöholm, 2011; Reijnders, 2011); and many of these events, in turn, are covered in the media.

In cultural communication, the bestseller concept has become a ubiquitous factor – often unnoticed, but ever present. In local supermarkets, bestsellers are on exclusive display. In bookshops, screens and posters promote the weekly bestsellers. Websites rank contributions according to numbers of users. Top 10 lists and television ratings provide a barometer of the shifting issues and attitudes of society. Despite a built-in need for new candidates, certain genres continually assert themselves: crime fiction, thrillers, biographies, biopics, historical fiction, and family novels and television series.

The corresponding concept in feature films is the blockbuster. Generally, blockbusters are characterised by archetypal stories performed by famous stars in impressive productions. In the wake of Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975), the blockbuster concept assumed a new strategic importance for Hollywood, which targeted international audiences by means of huge promotion budgets (Elsaesser, 2001). During the 2000s, the term spread to television fiction. Here, 'blockbuster TV' refers to quality television addressing international audiences and offering high production values and advanced aesthetics (Nielsen, 2011). The demand for bestsellers adapted for television is urgent; film and television adaptations often form the beginning of television spin-offs (Agger, 2011 b). Remediation and adaptations between media is an old phenomenon, but the conversation about them in cultural journalism and its wider public understanding has not remained the same: today, adaptations are more acknowledged than formerly with corresponding effects on the definition of a blockbuster, which has changed over the years. Besides, one blockbuster rarely stands alone. It is often remade, starting a whole blockbuster initiated cycle, as we have witnessed in the wake of *Jaws*.

Since the 1990s, mergers between publishing houses and other media production companies have created huge media conglomerates (Shiffrin, 2000). At the same time, the digitalization of books and book selling has radically changed the consumer market for books. Correspondingly, digitalization has changed market conditions for the blockbuster. According to Bondebjerg and Redvall "Cinema is no longer the key element in a film's life" (2011, p. 12), and this carries certain repercussions. Television on demand, file sharing on the internet and streaming technologies have emerged, facilitating the production of the same stories on every possible platform. At all levels, the impact of franchising and merchandising should not be underestimated.

For decades, the divide between high and low cultures was a central issue in cultural discourses. However, cultural tastes have changed in the direction of a blending of tastes and a blurring of hierarchies. The cross media phenomenon has been followed by other crossings: the crossing of audiences (books and films for both tweens and adults), and the crossing of high and low cultures (for example, popular film adaptations of Austen and Forster classics, or the cultural recognition of mass culture stories such as the Batman films). Consequently, Collins (2010) notes a new US 'in-between-culture' combining cultivated taste with a popular bestseller culture.

Today, the literary experience often includes a cross media experience. For many audiences, the film adaptation and digital version of the book enjoy equal status. Adaptation equations between media are shifting, particularly in regard to the cultural value of seriality; the concepts of origin and the 'national identity' of narrative fiction have changed over years. The meaning of literacy has changed correspondingly (Mackey, 2007). Instead of the 'death of the book', we see popular culture invading other platforms. The blockbuster concept affects the choice of themes and structure: to enable the diversification of the cinematic product, 'blockbusters tend towards open-ended, inter-textual narratives which can be easily reformulated in other media' (Mazdon, 2000, p. 22). Numerous film adaptations, remakes, novelised prequels or sequels, spin-offs and online fan fiction highlight this tendency, expanding media stories across borders and audiences.

Background and structure of the present issue

In 2012, a team of researchers from different departments at the universities of Aalborg and Aarhus and The Royal School of Library and Information Science agreed on a joint venture to promote the study of bestseller and blockbuster culture. The first step was to organise a conference with the theme *Bestseller and Blockbuster Culture – Books, Cinema and Television*. The organisers were Gunhild Agger, Rasmus Grøn, Hans Jørn Nielsen and Anne Marit Waade. The idea was supported by the organisers' departments and the Faculty of the Humanities at Aalborg University. Their funding was supplied by a generous grant from the Obel Family Foundation, and this made the conference possible. A Nordic network was organised to support subsequent research. The conference took place 21-22 March 2013 in Aalborg. The keynote speakers were Jim Collins, Margaret Mackey, Constantine Verevis, Ingolf Gabold and Lothar Mikos. Sixty researchers from different countries attended, most of them with papers. The next step was a subsequent publication in cooperation with *Academic Quarter* – and here it is.

Some contributions are conference papers converted into articles, whereas others are new responses to *Academic Quarter*'s post-conference call for papers. Jim Collins has kindly given us his permission to print his keynote speech. All other articles have passed through the process of peer review. Linguistically, the editors have accepted contributions in British English as well as American.

The prevalent merging of bestseller and blockbuster phenomena on different platforms is mirrored in the structure of the present issue of *Academic Quarter*. We could have chosen to map the area in terms of media. That would have represented an easy and user-orientated solution. However, this would not have reflected the complexity and the interrelations we want to highlight. On that background, we have chosen to arrange the articles in four sections under the following headlines:

1   The industry of bestsellers and blockbusters: Cultural and aesthetic values
2   Bestseller and blockbuster genres
3   Adaptations and remakes across media and cultures
4   Bestsellers and blockbusters reflecting societal and cultural challenges.

1. The Industry of bestsellers and blockbusters: Cultural and aesthetic values

The combination of the six articles of the first section is in accordance with a general point of view in this issue: Today, scholars of popular culture are more or less obliged to combine research across media. At the same time, however, systematic studies demand a focus on one medium at a time. The six articles in this section highlight different media: printed books, e-books, cultural journalism, and television series, but the last four articles also address the question of judgment and assessment across popular media cultures.

Rasmus Grøn's article: 'The Bestseller List and its (Dis)contents. The Construction of "the Bestseller"', concentrates on bestsellers of the classic medium: the printed book. "What is a bestseller?" Grøn asks. In spite of numerous studies over the years, a viable definition has not been reached. A lack of valid data concerning book sales has made studies of bestsellers difficult. Grøn's study is based on one of the few valid Danish data sets: the statistics of Danish bookstores 2008-2011 by Nielsen Bookscan. The construction of a top 40 list leads Grøn to general considerations about making bestseller lists. These considerations involve an ongoing dialogue with central research in the field.

The remediation of printed books into e-books is a new factor in the book market. Will the digital culture finally entail the death of printed books? In 'Digital Books on the Point of Take-off? The Ebook in Denmark Anno 2013', Rasmus Helles and Stig Hjarvard present a new Danish survey comparing e-book reading to paper book reading. They conclude that the reading of e-books in a Danish context is about to reach a 'critical mass'. What kinds of e-books, then? Some might expect the reading of e-books on digital devices to contribute to the bestseller effect, but a striking tendency is that a remarkably large proportion of the readers of e-books have used publicly and freely available collections, such as public libraries. This will probably change with a growing Danish market for e-books.

From the analysis of statistics and the analysis of dissemination of bestsellers and e-books, we move to the critical judgment and assessment of bestsellers and blockbusters. In the article 'Blockbusters as Vehicles for Cultural Debate in Cultural Journalism', Nete Nørgaard Kristensen and Unni From illustrate a steady common interest in cultural journalism and movie industry. Danish reviews

of three blockbusters from 1959, 1995 and 2008 display the importance of cultural journalism for marketing and promotion in the co-creation of blockbusters. The different historical contexts, however, show a change in attitudes to blockbuster culture and its assessment, from a critique of the 'Americanization' of culture to cultural journalism with a more approving attitude to blockbusters.

The assessment of popular culture is a key issue in the last three articles of this section. If it is not possible to grasp the 'essential' concepts of bestseller and blockbuster, sociological or reader-response approaches might represent a viable alternative. In his article 'Fieldwork. Paul Auster as a Popular Postmodern Fiction Writer', Bent Sørensen is inspired by Pierre Bourdieu in his discussion of Paul Auster's fiction in relation to 'position taking' in the literary field. Auster's work is interesting because some of his novels may be classified as popular fiction (for example, detective novels), and at the same time as 'autonomous' quality literature. Auster's 'position taking' represents a complex question of negotiations between reviewers, publishers, and readers.

The ambition of Birgit Eriksson's 'Pure and Public, Popular and Personal – and the Inclusiveness of *Borgen* as a Public Service Blockbuster' is to draw attention to the 'blind spots' of the long critical traditions from Kant to Adorno and Habermas. Eriksson aims to 'reevaluate the social and communicative potentials' of bestsellers and blockbusters, with the Danish television serial *Borgen* as an example.

In the last article of the section, 'Frye and the *Opposition* between Popular Literature and Bestsellers', Brian Graham points to Northrop Frye as a source that might illuminate our efforts to find valid standards for the critical judgment of bestsellers. Graham suggests that Frye's distinction between different types of popular literature might overcome the common dichotomy between high, serious culture, on the one hand, and low popular culture, on the other.

2. Bestseller and blockbuster genres

The headline of this section may at first hand appear tautological as bestsellers and blockbusters traditionally are strongly correlated with the genre concept. The field of genres however, is a highly dynamic one, and the section's eight articles all provide new insights into the ways in which current genre developments, mutations,

hybridizations and re-interpretations in various ways relate to best-sellers and blockbusters.

In her article 'Genre-Hybridization – A Key to Hyper-Bestsellers?', Kerstin Bergman analyses how the majority of recent 'hyper-bestsellers' are characterised by a functional mixture of popular genre elements. Uncovering various genre traits in Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* and Stieg Larsson's *Millennium*-trilogy, Bergman argues that this hybridization should be seen as a key to the global impact of the two works, as it enables them to attract a larger and broader audience.

The topic of Maria Nilson's 'From *The Flame and the Flower* to *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Sex, Power and Desire in the Romance Novel' is genre-internal hybridizations. In light of a critical study of the historical development and reception of the Romance genre, Nilson characterises James's (in)famous bestseller as a mesh between romance, chick-lit and 'bodice ripper' genres. This mixture has proven commercially successful, but it also represents a regression to an old-fashioned perspective on heterosexual romance.

Anker Gemzøe's article 'The Family Saga as Bestseller Strategy' focuses on the large number of critically acclaimed and highly popular family saga novels that have been published in Denmark during the last decades. Apart from a number of cultural factors, Gemzøe explains the success of the genre by its 'biographically oriented best-seller strategy, aiming at a fusion of literary quality and a broad appeal to the readers'. This strategy illustrates the current loosening of the boundaries between genre literature and 'literary' literature in 'the culture of bestsellerism', but it might also suggest a recurrent 'bestseller determinant' in modern literary history.

In Steen Christiansen's 'Hyper Attention Blockbusters', Christopher Nolan's *Batman* trilogy is seen as a current example of the spectacle as an integrated part of the Hollywood blockbuster. But Christiansen extends the scope by analysing how Nolan's spectacle generates affect and apprehension in its audience in ways that are closely related to a reconfiguration of our senses in the 21st-century media environment. Christiansen thus points to a connection between the blockbusters' aesthetics of the spectacle and a more general cultural condition inscribed within a (hyper)attention economy.

In 'Tonally Teen?', Anders Lysne examines the concept of cinematic *tone*. Defined as the way in which the movie presents its emo-

tional orientation towards its characters and subject, tone is a key in explaining the divergences in the ways movies target and appeal to their audiences. Lysne explores his thesis in a close comparative analysis of two Danish youth film, one commercially successful and the other unsuccessful. His analysis reveals that the latter movie contains a complex and ambiguous tonality that undermines the spectator's emotional involvement and essentially targets an adult audience instead of teenagers.

Based on interviews with filmmakers, Kim Toft Hansen's 'Blockbuster Genres in Danish Independent Film' provides a survey and a characterisation of a hitherto neglected area – Danish independent cinema and its approach to genre movies. The article reveals a striking paradox: the Danish independent cinema environment as a field of production demarcates itself from mainstream Danish cinema largely by delving into 'mainstream' US based genres usually pertaining to blockbuster movies (horror and gangster drama, among others), inasmuch as these genres are allegedly neglected by the establishment of Danish cinema.

In 'Nordic Noir Production Values. *The Killing* and *The Bridge*', Anne Marit Waade and Pia Majbritt Jensen concentrate on the widespread success that Scandinavian crime series have enjoyed during the last decade, with renowned television series like *The Killing* and *The Bridge* rising to international cult status. According to the authors, this success should largely be ascribed to the regionally oriented production mode, where the aesthetic elaboration of place creates a specific 'Nordic noir' genre in which 'the exoticism of the Danish settings, landscapes, light, climate and language become deliberate promotional tools'.

Bestseller studies are mostly dedicated to research into works of fiction, but in 'Character and Topical Diversity. A Trend in the Nonfiction Bestseller', Rune Eriksson undertakes a heuristic study of common traits in nonfiction bestsellers. To serve this purpose, Eriksson reads two bestselling nonfiction titles through the lenses of Jørgen Dines Johansen's theory of literary motifs. Both works are shown to possess significant 'literary' qualities, as they use most of the essential motifs integral to literary fiction, first and foremost by letting their factual topics be perceived by 'round' and trustworthy characters with whom audiences easily identify.

3. Adaptations and remakes across media and cultures

Bestseller and blockbuster culture inevitably invites adaptations and remakes. Tie-in phenomena in and across media are widespread, and success in one medium may lead to subsequent success in other media, just as popularity in one country may lead to remakes in another cultural context. In which ways do these mechanisms work? How can we analyse them? These questions constitute the focus of this section.

In her article 'Finding the Next Book to Read in a Universe of Bestsellers, Blockbusters, and Spin-Offs', Margaret Mackey borrows a term from Peter Lunenfeld to point out that contemporary culture is characterised by the aesthetics of 'unfinish'. Often it is hard to tell where a phenomenon begins and where its ramifications end. The case of *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* proves the extent to which media tie-ins thrive: 'It's not a diary, it's a movie', but it is also a website and a computer game. *Fifty Shades of Gray* appeared as a self-published e-book but resulted in a long list of spin-offs including sex toys and a CD soundtrack of classical highlights. Today's media environment, including the bestseller lists and all the repetitions and adaptations surrounding them, represents a challenge to the reader's attention: When confronted with so many options and distractions, how do readers choose what to read?

This intriguing question is further pursued by Thessa Jensen and Peter Vistisen in their article 'Tent-Poles of the Bestseller'. The article examines how the passive audience of a media event is turned into 'active stakeholders', and it investigates the degree to which a fan-audience can assume the role of co-creators. Further, the article offers a theoretical framework and two models for understanding the stages in the transition from a traditional audience to a dedicated, co-creative audience.

The fantasy genre as it was conceived by J.R.R. Tolkien is the basis of many bestsellers and blockbusters. Moreover, it is also at the core of most online role-playing computer games. In his article 'It's such a wonderful world to inhabit', Claus Toft-Nielsen takes his point of departure in empirical data from a very dedicated audience – a group of *World of Warcraft*-gamers. Via focus group interviews, he explores what the fantasy genre *does*. Part of the answer is that it creates a 'believable fantasy world' permitting emotional immersion as well as rational reflection. Consequently, one of the reasons for the

vast appeal of *World of Warcraft* is its ability to unite 'lived space' with the notion of place – an experience, according to Toft-Nielsen, that the game shares with the surrounding fantasy matrix.

In his article 'Blockbuster Remakes', Constantine Verevis focuses on remakes in one medium – the film. Steven Spielberg's blockbuster *Jaws* (based on Peter Benchley's best-selling novel) established a blockbuster prototype – but what preceded it, and what happened later? The prevalent media environment encourages a constant revising, re-inhabiting and re-modeling of existing material. With references to a large number of blockbusters, Verevis pursues the prequels and the sequels of *Jaws,* demonstrating its impact on the whole disaster cycle, including films such as *Grizzly* (1976), *Tentacles* (1976), *Orca* (1977), *Piranha* (1978) and *Deep Blue Sea* (1999).

Lynge Agger Gemzøe's article '*Brødre* vs. *Brothers* – the Transatlantic Remake as Cultural Adaptation' scrutinises an American remake of a Danish film from a cross-cultural point of view. Drawing on Verevis's theoretical framework and the cinematic traditions of war or occupation films in the USA and Denmark respectively, Gemzøe presents Susanne Bier's *Brødre* (2004) as a film with inherent genre features that can be traced to both contexts. In many ways, the American remake adopts the Danish take on the war, but the setting has changed substantially, as has the relationship to previous wars. In *Brothers,* the Vietnam War is pointed out as the immediate parallel to the war in Afghanistan, making the role of the son duplicate that of his father. Consequently, local (Danish) detail has been replaced by an interaction with the American cultural and historical environment.

4. Bestsellers and blockbusters reflecting societal and cultural challenges

Besides being part of a highly market-oriented transnational cultural industry, bestsellers and blockbusters are also a significant part of everyday culture. Bestsellers are usually accounted for in terms of their striking ability to be 'snapshots of the age' (Sutherland, 2007, p. 3). They reflect basic cultural, ethical and social challenges in the lives of individuals as well as of nations, and they express political, economic and global challenges in institutions. For instance, crime fiction is a typical bestselling genre that tends to deal with basic ethical and existential issues, such as law and order, right and wrong,

and life and death (Hansen, 2012). Horror typically reflects gender and erotic conflicts, while political thrillers tend to express power conflicts; melodrama, another significant blockbuster and bestseller genre, typically deals with moral dilemmas within families and close relationships (Agger, 2011 a; Grodal, 2003). The articles in this section illustrate a series of societal and cultural issues or dilemmas that play a role in contemporary bestseller and blockbuster culture.

Gunhild Agger's article 'The Role of History in Bestseller and Blockbuster Culture' focuses on the relationship between history and popular culture and on how history is reflected, understood and created in popular film and television drama series. The author proposes a methodological distinction between three levels: 1) a historiographical level, 2) a user-oriented level focusing on the functions of history in film and television drama series, and finally 3) a genre-oriented approach to historical films and television drama series. The bestselling biography of the Danish artist Marie Krøyer and Bille August's film about the same life are used as analytical examples.

In her article 'When the Ocean Strikes Back', Mirjam Gebauer focuses on the eco-thriller as a contemporary bestseller and blockbuster phenomenon, using Frank Schätzing's voluminous page-turner *Der Schwarm*/*The Swarm* (2004/2006) as an example. The disaster scenario is a general bestseller and blockbuster feature, which is also significant in the eco-thriller, along with science fiction elements. However, Schätzing combines explaining and telling, transforming geophysics and microbiology into mainstream knowledge. Schätzing challenges the privileged position of humankind over nature. Finally, Gebauer draws attention to the way in which the notion of 'alienness' in *The Swarm* differs from other representations of the same phenomenon in popular disaster culture.

Mikkel Fugl Eskjær's contribution 'The Climate Catastrophe as Blockbuster' includes a more general discussion of the relationship between ecology, popular media culture and a disaster scenario. Focusing on the relationship between popular culture and political communication in the news media, he shows that news is structurally orientated towards the actual sphere whereas popular culture is orientated towards the virtual sphere. Disaster reporting in a global context is a stable feature of most news media, just as films imagining global catastrophes abound. A common denominator is

spectacular events and settings, recognizable patterns of identification and heroic deeds. Eskjær shows how blockbuster disaster films can be considered as the inversion of news: where news coverage generally provides fragmented scientific facts, disaster films offer coherent narratives.

Finally, Anna Estera Mrozewicz's article 'Porous Borders – Crossing the Boundaries to "Eastern Europe" in Scandinavian Crime Fiction' focuses on cultural and political conflicts and the alienation of 'Eastern Europe' in Scandinavian crime fiction. Referring to Henning Mankell's *The Dogs of Riga* (1989) and Leif Davidsen's *The Russian Singer* (1991), the author argues that two basic perspectives on Eastern Europe prevail: firstly, a traditional way of understanding national borders and cultural distinctions (Davidsen), and, secondly, a global perspective on boundaries involving a dynamic view of the relationship between the neighbors across the Baltic (Mankell).

It seems appropriate to end this section with Jim Collins's keynote lecture 'Fifty Shades of Seriality and E-Reader Games' focusing on serial narratives and e-readers and consequently all the changes caused by the ways in which audiences engage in cultural communication.

The End?

The articles in this volume reflect a common ambition to better understand prevalent tendencies in current culture. We believe that this entails taking into account the ever expanding domain of bestseller and blockbuster culture with its innovations and ramifications in seemingly endless recreations and rearrangements, and its intertextual and cross-media dialogues.

Print culture may be replaced by e-books, and cross-media phenomena have certainly changed the role of every single medium. However, this does not necessarily mean the death of the book, the film or the television series. Cross-media development is opposed by another tendency – the 'long tail' (Chris Anderson, 2004). The growth of internet trading provides access to a larger choice of specialised books, films and other products, promoting cultural diversity. The research area is abundant with similar apparent contradictions calling for conceptual and empirical clarification.

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