Based on a True Story: Historical Accuracy and Democracy in *The Unlikely Murderer* (2021)

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On June 10, 2020, the biggest police investigation in Swedish history was closed. For 34 years, the unsolved murder of Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme had consistently been headlining news. A series of suspects and various theories about the murder had nurtured Swedish public imagination, not least through popular culture, thus making the assassination of the Prime minister a part of Swedish historical consciousness. However, when the prosecutor in charge of the investigation, Krister Petersson, announced the closing of the case at a highly publicized press conference, he pointed out a man called Stig Engström as the prime suspect in the murder, although at the same time stating that the evidence would have been too weak for a trial (Thornéus and Rapp 2020). Engström, who had died twenty years earlier, had become infamous in the investigation and in media as "Skandiamannen" (The Skandia Man), as he had claimed to be an eyewitness to the assassination in 1986. Over the years his inconsistent stories and whereabouts on the murder night turned into theories that he, in fact, could have been the murderer (Palmeutredningen – polisens arbete).

Not long thereafter, in December 2020, Netflix announced that they would produce a television miniseries about Engström, boldly proclaiming in the press release that he "was named as the likely perpetrator of the murder of Prime Minister Olof Palme, [and] managed to elude justice right up to his death through a combination of audacity, luck and police sloppiness". In addition, the press release posed insinuating questions like, "how could the police let him get away, even though they were always on his trail?"[1] (Press release 2020) to raise interest for the production, placing it in the crime/police procedure genre.

The announcement immediately sparked a debate about popular culture's reliability, centered on concepts such as historical accuracy and based-on-a-true-story. Journalist Kristina Hultman criticized Netflix's decision to produce the series and claimed that the trend to openly fictionalize reality started in the 2010s, thus pushing the boundaries further and further for what is possible to do in the "drama factory". Hultman firmly interpreted this change as an attack on democracy, claiming that the great liberties that producers took with the past "rais[ed] concerns that fiction is increasingly beginning to function as a weapon" aimed at citizens who are not able to

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[1] All translations from Swedish to English is by the author.

defend themselves as "[their] understanding of the past (and thus of the present) can be manipulated" (Hultman 2020a).

This overall feeling that something had changed is shared by several critics, among them British historian Antony Beevor, who assert that we, as a society, have entered "a post-literate world, where the moving image is king" and where the based-on-a-true-story concept has increased in scope and throughout all media in the last decade, and that this is a "market-driven attempt to satisfy the modern desire in a fast-moving world to learn and be entertained at the same time" (Dyer et al 2015).

While it is hardly surprising that audiences want to be entertained, the question is what happens when entertainment is combined with a didactical perspective that in different ways aim to tell the truth or to present historical facts in engaging ways? What does the concept "based-on-a-true-story" entail, and how does this concept interact with the notion of historical accuracy? And could the use of reality and the past in popular culture really pose a threat to democracy?

The aim of the article is to discuss how popular culture can or cannot affect democracy, with a focus on how the perception of historical accuracy has been influenced by the concept of based-on-a-true-story and thus popular culture's changed role in contemporary society. Of particular interest here is a focus on the national/transnational components in the perception of historical accuracy. This could be described as a process whereby media, in this case television, is not only about consumption and economic value, but also about participation in a democratic dialogue that recognizes cultural, social, and national values of media pertaining to audiences' lived experiences and memories as well as the production realities of the television producers (Dahlgren and Hill 2023: 3).

To achieve this, I will focus on the debates and reviews rather than on analyses of an audiovisual text. Here one recent example will be discussed and analyzed: the Netflix produced and distributed television miniseries *Den osannolike mördaren* (*The Unlikely Murderer*, 2021). *The Unlikely Murderer* becomes an interesting object of study because the mini-series is a Swedish production about a very Swedish subject – the assassination of Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme in 1986 – but since the series was distributed internationally, this creates room for a discussion of the national component from an inside perspective (the national reception) as well as from an outside perspective (the international reception), connected to the perception of historical accuracy, the concept of based-on-a-true-story, and the possible impact on democracy.

Historical Accuracy and the Concept of Based on a True Story

Historical accuracy and based-on-a-true-story are two related concepts. You could claim that historical accuracy is the main perspective taken by critics,

or the audience at large, while based-on-a-true-story is the perspective of the producers who use this as a signal to highlight and market their products *as something that actually has happened* to satisfy an increased demand. This of course implies that the book, the film, or the television series are in some sense in fact true, and by extension historically accurate. However, with an increased production of based-on-a-true-story fictions, the perception of historical accuracy has changed, mainly depending on two interrelated factors.

The first is connected to changes in the global media market as Web 2.0 was developed around the turn of the last Millenium. Although prominent pay television channels like HBO had previously competed against broadcast television in USA and against public television in Europe, the formation and transformation into what are now numerous streaming services or subscriber-funded-video-on-demand (SVOD) with national as well as global reach changed the rules for television fiction in several decisive ways. Media scholar Amanda D. Lotz points to the fact that SVOD's like Netflix and Disney+ are not dependent on ratings as the commercial networks have been since their inception. This means that mainstream productions have gone from "the least objectionable" to "anything goes" in order to satisfy certain segments of the subscriber base instead of trying to satisfy the (potentially) whole audience (Lotz 2022: 37–39). Essentially, the autonomy from ratings has provided SVOD producers with an artistic freedom that have steered productions into what many scholars have deemed to be a "Golden Age of television", characterized by more graphic dramas, complex narratives, and bigger budgets (Weeks 2022: 3–6). Two other decisive effects of the move from dramas that must be "loved by all" to dramas that can be "loved by some", is that the differentiation of representation have been allowed to blossom (Lotz 2022: 37–38). That is, when it is no longer necessary to fill all four quadrants (male/female, young/old) of network television, the scope of representations have increased, and with this also former niche perspectives based on, for instance, sexualities and ethnicities. Similarly, this niche perspective is applicable to the differentiation of the national origin of the product, and by extension the stories deriving from different national canons when producing audiovisual history.

For instance, Netflix has approximately 240 million subscribers, is available in 190 countries, and has produced content in 41 countries (Lotz 2022: 165), and it could be argued that the whole field of audiovisual history therefore is up in flux and thus fragmentized via SVODs like Netflix. Even so, just between 2015 and 2020, the percentage for US produced commissions has decreased from 80 to 50 percent on Netflix, thus leaving greater room for national none-US productions (Lotz 2022: 93). However, these national Netflix-productions are similarly affected by the outlined changes and although these national productions of audiovisual history, such as *The Unlikely Murderer*, is based on specific national canons, they are often

conveyed from a perspective that leave room for a differentiation of representations, not least vis-à-vis the national component. Likewise, it could be argued that national public service productions, like for example those produced by Swedish Public Television (SVT), equally have been affected by the changes that the "Golden Age" has contributed to.

The fragmentation of audiovisual history has affected the concept of historical accuracy and the concept of based-on-a-true-story. Historical accuracy, above all substantiated using expensive *mise-en-scène*, serves as a currency for audiovisual history that authenticates the historical content as well as the stories told. Hence, historical accuracy is audiences' (and critics') first encounter with the history portrayed, which means that audiences and critics can embrace, or choose to turn a blind eye, to alternative perspectives in television productions based on that currency. Based-on-a-true-story, on the other hand – the producers' calling card to attract audiences – have traditionally built its appeal on stories that mainly have referred to historically unknown people (true crime, sports, exceptional events). However, today the based-on-a-true-story concept is increasingly used to tell stories about known historical events and historically significant persons, but from a novel perspective, thus contributing to the fragmentation of, foremost, nation-based historiography.

A case in point is the Swedish-Danish big budget film *Hammarskjöld* (2023), a biopic about Dag Hammarskjöld, a Swedish diplomat most notable for serving as Secretary-General of the United Nations between 1953 and 1961. With emphasis on a portrayal of Hammarskjöld as a man who struggled with his sexuality, the film blend thriller elements with laconic historical information that leave audiences in the lurch. As one Swedish reviewer clarifies, "despite the elaborate script, politics in real life is rarely as clear as it is in fiction, and it usually takes a great deal of general education or mere pre-understanding to be able to absorb that information fully" (Hedlin 2023).

The second factor is harder to define but could be connected to the fear that Hultman and Beevor expressed. That is, a changed perception of historical accuracy insofar that there is a tendency that audiences do not really care if all historical facts are correct, or in the right place, just as long as they can experience history. Then again, the seemingly indifferent reception and attitude towards facts could largely depend on historical ignorance among general audiences, which in the last twenty years or so has gotten used to anachronistic treatments of history for commercial and entertainment purposes, something that came to prominence with historical films like *A Knight's Tale* (2001) and *Marie Antoinette* (2006), both becoming infamous for their conspicuous use of anachronistic elements such as modern rock music on the soundtrack. Although *A Knight's Tale* was criticized for this "misuse" of the past, some reviewers interpreted the film in line with a democratization of history where the historical verisimilitude is connected to different forms of identity – class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity – which in itself

could be seen as a democratization of history – saying that this was a "lighthearted and loosely tied fantasy following the aged old theme (and American Dream) of challenging the social order" (Anon. 2001).

Another nearby media example of how history is employed with intentions that are disconnected from past, are the numerous internet memes of Hitler (Bruno Ganz) raging in a scene taken from the German film *Der Untergang* (*Downfall*, 2004). While *Downfall* is a highly serious audio-visual adaptation of history, these memes keep the original German dialogue but add subtitles in different languages and thereby create wholly new readings of the scene where, according to film scholar Vinzenz Hediger, "the ubiquity of the figure of Hitler, if nothing else, seems to indicate that the trial of accuracy and correspondence can no longer fully do justice to the circulation of images of historical events" (Hediger 2010: 105–108).

The National Reception of *The Unlikely Murderer*

Netflix distributed *The Unlikely Murderer* is a crime drama television series in five episodes about the still unsolved murder of Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme in 1986. The series concentrates one of the main suspects, the so-called The Skandia Man or Stig Engström, a self-proclaimed eyewitness to the assassination. In 2016, amateur detective Lars Larsson singled out Engström as a possible murderer in the book *Nationens fiende* (Larsson 2016). In 2018, this theory was taken up by the journalist Thomas Pettersson in a highly noticed non-fiction book (Pettersson 2018), and as mentioned, in 2020, the prosecutor Krister Petersson named Engström as the prime suspect when closing the case. Soon after the prosecutor's spectacular statement, Netflix announced that they would produce a series about Engström, based on Pettersson's book.

The debate that followed this announcement touched upon the question if historical accuracy and the concept based-on-a-true-story constituted a threat to democracy as television fiction in general and Netflix in particular had pushed the boundaries too far with its manipulations. Hultman even warned that "if we do not look out – we may have a public that knows all about conspiracy theories, but not very much about our past" (Hultman 2020b. See also Gustafsson 2020). In connection to this, Beevor has claimed that Factioncreep – the blurring of the lines between fact and fiction – has increased in audiovisual media, which he in turn connects to a development where the creation of human drama overshadows the component of historical accuracy as audiences are becoming more nonjudgmental (Dyer, Geoff et al 2015).

Nevertheless, criticism that perceives audiovisual history as a mere manipulation of the past, and as undermining democracy, is usually based on the perception that factual history and common knowledge of the past is connected to the democratic process – which is the main reason that children are taught history in school. Typically, this knowledge is connected to national processes and, to paraphrase political scientist Benedict Anderson, to

an imagined common past which supports the notion of the nation in the guise of nationalism (Anderson 2016).

Accordingly, Hultman's attack on *The Unlikely Murderer* before it even was produced can be connected to this sense of a common past. In this particular case, the traumatic murder of Prime Minister Olof Palme, which sent shockwaves through Swedish society and still is part of Swedish historical consciousness, in fact changing the relation between politicians and citizens in Sweden (See, for example Berggren 2010 and Wall 2023).

From a Swedish viewpoint it is important to note that the prime suspect in the assassination had been a man called Christer Pettersson who was sentenced and then acquitted for the murder in 1989. The view that Pettersson was the murderer is also an opinion expressed as a common historical memory by Hultman who states that *The Unlikely Murderer* "is created with the premise that Christer Pettersson cannot have been the perpetrator. The problem with that attitude is, of course, that he can. Pettersson was acquitted in the Court of Appeal, but there is still plenty of evidence left, which makes it perfectly reasonable to stick to the hypothesis that he was guilty" (Hultman 2020).

In connection to this it should be mentioned that another high-profile Swedish thriller, *Sista kontraktet* (*The Last Contract*, 1998), already had acquitted Pettersson, portraying him as an innocent scapegoat to the murder, why it is possible to question if Hultman's opinion really could constitute a common historical memory of the event. In any case, in Hultman's view, the common historical media memory of the event tends to trump the actual legal judgement of the case.

The Unlikely Murderer was released in November 2021 and the producers exploit a variant of the based-on-a-true-story concept where they have it both ways regarding historical accuracy and truth. Each episode starts with the introductory text, "Based on an unsolved crime", which is then combined with a disclaimer that closes each episode, "It has not been proved that Stig Engström murdered Olof Palme, but the Swedish police and Prosecution Authority suspect him". This ambivalent wording simultaneously points out the mystifying aspects of the unsolved murder and the fact that the police and the prosecutor suspected him, thus exonerating the producers of any wrongdoings at the same time as the finger heavily is pointed at Engström as the culprit. In addition, after the "Based on an unsolved crime" text in the first episode, the time indication "February 28, 1986 – 11.21 P.M." is shown and while the screen is still black, two gunshots are heard, and then audiences see a distressed Engström, gun in hand, and Palme in a pool of blood on the street. Although the series, in the end, is somewhat inconclusive as to whether Engström really killed Palme, the overall impression is that he was guilty.

The great majority of Swedish reviewers appreciated the series, especially the *mise-en-scène* and the acting, ingredients that increase the sense of historical accuracy in historical fiction, thus making it credible (Toplin 2002:

47–50. See, for example, Larsed 2021; Lindblad 2021; Sundell 2021). At the same time, they dismissed or even rejected the idea that Engström actually was the murderer, or as one reviewer framed it: "[b]y drawing a believable and engaging portrait of him, the series – in absence of the definitive answer to the murder mystery we will never get – provides a colorful picture of who Engström was, and a satisfying explanation for why he is now considered the likely killer" (Fjellborg 2021. See also Minell 2021; Tapper 2021). Hence, the appreciation of the meticulous recreation of Stockholm in the 1980s and the acting abilities of foremost Robert Gustafsson as Engström, a comedian acing in a serious role, does not seem to have changed the overall historical view of the event. What emerges is a more nuanced view of *The Unlikely Murderer* as a well-produced piece of entertainment in correspondence with the long line of Nordic Noir productions that have flooded the national and international markets in the last twenty years (For an overview, see Toft Hansen and Waade 2017).

However, what the reviews did agree upon as historical accurate was the failed police investigation:

> The series paints a picture of an incompetent police force that was clearly not prepared for a case of such dimensions, and/or did not have routines for it. Internal power struggle and prestige destroyed the investigation, and both the PKK and Christer Petterson became critical red herrings. It can be argued that this was at a time when the police in the Nordic countries still lived in the age of innocence, with a completely different crime rate than we have in 2021 (Aavatsmark 2021. See also Tapper 2021).

When the case officially closed in 2020, the assassination of Palme and the numerous theories of who had done it had been headline news for 34 years in Sweden. The obvious failure of the humongous police investigation, the largest in Swedish history, had thus become an established historical fact that the producers of *The Unlikely Murderer* could build their story, and therefore historical credibility, on in a way that circumvented the question of liability in a double sense.

Even so, relatives to Engström as well as relatives to another character – a gun collecting neighbor who in the series provides the murder weapon to Engström – reported the series for defamation of deceased (Lindkvist 2021; Laurell 2021). In response, Netflix put out a statement: "Dramatizing a theory connected to one of Sweden's biggest national traumas is challenging – and we respect that the image painted by some of the characters is not shared by everyone. The series is inspired by an already existing story […] and does not claim to present a solution to the case – something that is also made clear in connection with each episode" (Anon. 2021b). The preliminary investigations were dropped without action and, furthermore, these allegations did not spark any further debate about the requirements for historical accuracy in popular culture.

The International Reception of *The Unlikely Murderer*

Although *The Unlikely Murderer* is a local production, the Netflix involvement meant that it was distributed internationally, thus making it possible to compare the Swedish reception with the international reception regarding historical accuracy and the based-on-a-true-story concept from an outside perspective. Using reviews from four different countries: Denmark, Germany, Norway, and UK, the first thing that can be established is that the Swedish television series did not ignite any debate concerning popular culture and democracy and its relationship to historical accuracy. This probably depends on the circumstance that, although both Denmark and Norway are culturally and geographically close to Sweden, the assassination of Olof Palme is not part of the historical consciousness of these countries. This can be exemplified by the fact that the convicted but acquitted Christer Pettersson – so clearly a part of the Swedish historical memory of the event – is not discussed or even mentioned once in the reviewers' assessment of the series' historical credibility where, as in the Swedish reviews, the *mise-en-scène* received praise and thus contributed to the series' historical credibility (See, for example, Armknecht 2021).

What is mentioned and even discussed as the prime objective of the television series is the failed police investigation. A German reviewer states as a fact that the "police's bungling of these murder investigations cannot be denied" (Mirschberger 2021), while a British reviewer points out that "the actual murder isn't the core subject. It's merely the starting point. The actual subject is the very flawed investigation into finding the murderer" (Adelgaard 2021. See also Seale 2021; Armknecht 2021). Unlike the Swedish reception where the failed police investigation was part of the historical memory, here it is foremost the presentation and narrative structure – where the two last episodes concentrate on journalist Pettersson's investigation into the murder – of the television series that "convinces" the international reviewers of the accuracy. And in line with this understanding, since Pettersson's investigation clearly points out Engström as the perpetrator, a clear majority of the international reviewers buys the series' setup with Engström as the de facto killer. Danish reviewer Bo Tao Michaëlis goes so far as to claim that "the series […] feels a bit like watching a kind of propaganda film that will convince everyone to be the definitive truth about the Palme Murder" (Michaëlis 2021. See also Armknecht 2021; Mirschberger 2021; Seale 2021). Only one reviewer doubts Engström's guilt, based on the series' portrayal of him as a failed bumbling attention seeker (Borup 2021).

In addition, the international understanding of *The Unlikely Murderer* is framed by the circumstance that it was perceived as belonging to the True crime genre, which affects the interpretations in relation to the historical accuracy and the based-on-a-true-story concept (See, for example Adelgaard 2021; Armknecht 2021; Hedenstad 2021). Although True crime usually is produced as nonfiction, in recent years this genre has transcended its

documentary aspects and extended its popularity to fictionalized television series such as *Dahmer – Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* (2022), and here Netflix has become one of the most influential streaming services regarding its wide selection of True crime content. Paradoxically, the fact that *The Unlikely Murderer* was perceived within the realm of True crime led to the unintended consequence that some reviewers considered the series to be boring because "it cannot hide the fact that everything has actually been said right at the beginning" (Armknecht 2021). In other words, the opening scene both revealed and confirmed that Engström was the killer, thus ruining the suspense factor of the True crime genre.

Conclusions

Audiovisual history used to be a specific national affair, the only exception to this rule has for a long time been American productions with a transnational approach to world history. However, with the advent of Web 2.0 and the formation of streaming services – especially transnational SVODs like Netflix, Prime Video, and HBO Max – the national outlook on audiovisual history has changed in that the national component now is thrown out in an international context where what were considered specifically national ingredients now are changing or even losing their meaning.

    The Unlikely Murderer is a case in point with its very specific story about the unsolved murder of Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme – a national trauma that still creates headlines almost forty years after it happened. When analyzing the national and international reception of this miniseries it becomes apparent that some components of this historical fiction, i.e. the *mise-en-scéne* and the acting, are generally perceived as historically accurate while the based-on-a-true-story concept generated different viewpoints, depending on nationality, on how to interpret the historical content and how the story was conveyed. While the Swedish debate and reviews saw the series as a piece of audiovisual history based on a true story, thus dismissing Stig Engström as the murderer at the expense of other theories – where the acquitted Christer Pettersson continued to be the top suspect – international reviews perceived *The Unlikely Murderer* within the genre of True Crime, thus accepting Engström as the culprit but also complaining that the set-up with the revealing of the murderer already in the first scene ruined the build-up and excitement that True Crime is associated with. This viewpoint is confirmed by the fact that international reviewers generally are talking about the series as entertainment (Armknecht 2021; Michaëlis 2021; Seale 2021) in a way that does not happen in Sweden, where the weight of the historical content (the trauma) takes on a more serious meaning, verified by the debate where Netflix was accused of using historical fiction as a weapon, thereby threatening democracy with manipulations and lies.

    However, this debate and its reverberations on democracy were solely connected to the portrayal of Engström as the murderer of Palme, and not to

the series as a whole, shown by the general approval of the portrayal of the failed police investigation. Thereby, the attacks on *The Unlikely Murderer*'s historical accuracy by Swedish reviewers could be interpreted as a defense with nationalistic implications that simply evaporated in an international context. *The Unlikely Murderer* could therefore be characterized as belonging to a Swedish historical culture that uphold nationalistic and community-creating notions and activities.

Finally, debates about historical accuracy versus artistic freedom will continue to rage, but what this article has established is that the perception of historical accuracy influences the understanding of history, and that this understanding depends on a certain knowledge of the national component. Hence, the perception can affect whether audiences will perceive historical fiction as pure entertainment or as a threat to democracy.

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