The Scandinavian countries are known as being wealthy, egalitarian, and “happy”. Since the first publication in 2012 of the United Nations’ World Happiness Reports, for instance, the Scandinavians have been ranked as the happiest nations in the world. This high level of self-reported life satisfaction is generally understood as caused by the social democratic welfare-state model. Emotionally, however, happiness is not necessarily the most dominant affect characterizing Scandinavians. In fact, the first Happiness Report shows that while Danes ranked no. 1 worldwide when it came to evaluative happiness, they ranked no. 100 when it came to affective happiness (answering the question of how they felt yesterday) (Helliwell et al. 2012). A dark side of happiness and privilege is guilt. Time and again, we encounter narratives in which Scandinavians are confronted with an unhappy, less privileged global other. Additionally, we also see representations of the ostracized self—“one of us”—a fellow Scandinavian who does not fit the image and status of the “happy” Scandinavian. Often, these external and internal others evoke guilt feelings based on a realization that one’s own happiness and privileges are, or have been, attained at the expense of suffering others. Also, in cases where one does not see a direct connection between one’s own privileges and the suffering of others, one may still feel responsible for alleviating the suffering of others—and guilty when not succeeding in doing so. These feelings of guilt may in turn be 1) foregrounded, debated, and attempted dealt with in order to promote social change, or 2) covered up, repressed, and redirected in order to maintain an image of individual and/or national coherence and innocence.

In this volume, scholars from Denmark, Norway, and Sweden critically explore how such guilt is framed in contemporary Scandinavian film, television, and other visual media, including factual and fictional visual narratives, popular and art house genres. How are notions of guilt and guilt feelings evoked in and by narratives of privilege and lack? What does guilt do? How does guilt travel? How do gender, race, ethnicity, class, health, and age play into such narratives? How, overall, do such narratives reflect Scandinavian societies and set a moral compass for Scandinavian spectators (or not)? How does guilt serve to create affective communities?

This special issue explores the visual narratives aesthetically and culturally by, on the one hand, close-reading the works, tending to the medium and genre specificity of film, television, and social media and, on the other hand, by situating the works in a particular Scandinavian context and further tracing guilt, guilt feeling, and guilt aversion across production processes and reception. This contextualization allows us to explore how guilt is redirected, reframed, and coopted for new ideological and rhetorical purposes in the Scandinavian welfare state and beyond. Framing guilt remains a matter of political power struggles.

The title “Framing Scandinavian Guilt” is chosen as the verb “to frame” pertains 1) to the visual media—to camera angles and cropping—as one arranges images to a certain end, and 2) to (falsely) pinning people down as guilty. Our interest, as indicated above, is not in clear-cut (court and crime) cases and verdicts. Rather we are interested in an emotional landscape in which various forms of Scandinavian guilt circulate and in which film, TV, and social media at given points frame particular people, nations, and institutions as guilty of global and national ills. In order to understand this guilt better, we analyze not only how the films, TV-series, and social media frame people and institutions as guilty in a process already indicating ambivalence, but also turn to their production and reception to see how the people and institutions framed as guilty may accept, reject, or in other ways deflect guilt, maintaining that they are in fact innocent.

Historically, guilt has been theorized as individual and collective, as bystander guilt, white guilt, liberal guilt, existential guilt, etc. Its effects, too, have been theorized as constructive and reparative on the one hand, and destructive and paralyzing on the other. While one tends to distinguish between guilt and shame—with guilt pertaining to doing and shame pertaining to being—guilt and shame often converge. What one does reflects who one is. In addition, what was previously considered guilt, now tends to be regarded as shame. Hence, in the context of Scandinavian guilt, the articles also in several instances discuss shame.

The third word of the title, the adjective “Scandinavian,” refers both to the origin of the audiovisual narratives examined, and to the above-mentioned sense of guilt pertaining to Scandinavians.
This is a sense of guilt at being privileged at the expense of oppressed people in other parts of the world, historically through colonization and imperialism, and in the present moment through neo-imperialism, global capitalism, and disregard for climate change (affecting global others as well as plants, animals, and the planet overall). While Scandinavian guilt is a variant of Western guilt in general, we maintain that each nation (and region) has its particular history of privilege and guilt. Also, while there are differences between Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, in this special issue we mainly analyze their narratives of guilt as Scandinavian, and not from an intra-Scandinavian comparative point of view.

The articles presented here are the result of a workshop on the topic, arranged as part of the project Scandinavian Narratives of Guilt and Privilege in an Age of Globalization (ScanGuilt), financed by the Faculty of the Humanities at the University of Oslo.4 Within the project we have previously published two open-access anthologies focusing on Norwegian narratives of privilege and guilt: Skandinaviske fortellinger om skylld og privilegier i en globaliserings tid (Scandinavian Narratives of Guilt and Privilege in an Age of Globalization, 2016) and Åpne dører mot verden. Ungdommers møte med fortellinger om skylld og privilegier (Open Doors Towards the World. Young Adults’ Encounter with Narratives of Guilt and Privilege, 2017). We are also working on other publications, including special issues of Scandinavian Studies and Kultur og Klasse. Our aim with this particular collection of articles is to focus on a contemporary Scandinavian film and visual media landscape in which Scandinavians are gaining worldwide attention, on the positive side for their aesthetics, innovation, and “Nordic Noir” style, and on the negative side for their social values and what is often perceived as misguided attempts at saving the world. The articles have been divided into the following four sections:

Section 1: Scandinavian guilt towards the global (African) other

As mentioned above, the original intent behind the ScanGuilt-project has been to capture the sense of guilt experienced by Scandinavians who are reminded daily of their own fortune in a world marked by global injustice. Relevant, broader terms are white guilt, colonial guilt, and global guilt. The suffering other imagined at the opposite end of the privileged Scandinavian is largely someone in the “Global South,” or “Third World,”—especially someone from Sub-Saharan Africa. The image of the suffering African in need of the Scandinavian’s care and attention harkens back to missionary campaigns and on a more mundane level it turned into a daily reminder of “the starving children in Africa” serving to motivate privileged children to eat everything on their plate—and feel grateful for what they have. What types of film do such guilt and guilt feeling produce?

In “Guilt-Based Filmmaking: Moral Failings, Muddled Activism, and the ‘Dogumentary’ Get a Life,” Mette Hjort answers this question by analyzing Michael Klint’s documentary film Get a Life from 2004. The film is a Lars von Trier-inspired “dogumentary” about a flesh-eating disease, noma, currently striking children in Africa’s poorest countries, including Nigeria, where Get a Life was made. Holding the director’s self-proclaimed motivation—guilt feeling—and intentions of “making a difference” up against the end product, Hjort finds that the film fails on moral grounds. Rather than having thought through his project as a piece of activism, Klint ends up framing a sense of guilt that is primarily narcissistic. Arguing this point of view, Hjort places Get a Life in a tradition of ethnographic documentary film making going back to Robert Flaherty’s Nanook of the North (1922).

Elisabeth Oxfeldt likewise discusses Scandinavian guilt in its productive and counter-productive variants in “White Guilt and Racial Imagery in Annette K. Olesen’s Little Soldier.” The film from 2008 is a contemporary fictional drama set in Denmark, revolving around a brothel owner, his daughter who has just returned from the war in Iraq, and his Nigerian prostitute. Like Hjort, Oxfeldt investigates the director’s proclaimed intentions regarding the portrayal of the Nigerian prostitute. In terms of film tradition, she situates Little Soldier within an American tradition of post-Vietnam-war films, reading it as a postfeminist, globalized version of Martin Scorcese’s Taxi Driver (1976). Theoretically, she uses Shelby Steele to explain the film’s critical depiction of the soldier’s self-preoccupied white guilt, and Frantz Fanon to show how the film nevertheless perpetuates racial stereotypes.

With Lill-Ann Körber’s “Gold Coast (2015) and Danish Economies of Colonial Guilt” we are in an African setting, this time through Daniel Dencik’s historical drama and art film Gold Coast. Capturing a final phase in the history of Danish colonial history in present-day Ghana through the perspective of a Danish, white botanist, the film, as Körber sees it, becomes a project of “maintenance of innocence.” Körber situates the film within a greater contemporary discussion of Danish colonialism, referencing (non-)apologetic statements of Danish officials. Theoretically, Körber draws on Gloria Wekker to discuss the tendency to insist on “white innocence” as well as “colonial innocence” and on Thomas Elsaesser to discuss “guilt economies” as they appear medium-specifically in film. The article includes a discussion of director intentions and a production
process that seems to have quelled any opportunity for African voices to be heard.

Section 2: Scandinavian guilt towards the Scandinavian (ostracized) self

Scandinavian guilt feelings may also be inwardly directed, focusing not on suffering global others, but those suffering among the in-group. These could be any citizens not fitting the image of the “happy” Scandinavian whose wellbeing is fostered by the Scandinavian welfare state, such as immigrants, those unable to work, or the Scandinavian poor. In the articles presented in this section, the unhappy, suffering Scandinavian is the white, Scandinavian male who ends up feeling lonely and ostracized, while the rest of society experiences a sense of communal bystander guilt.

In Norway, the Oslo Massacres of 22 July, 2011 left an entire nation asking how the perpetrator of the massacres could turn so violently on his own community—and whether in some way the nation could be held responsible or guilty for having created a terrorist, if nothing else, then through acts of omission. Anne Gjelsvik attends to these questions in “Outsiders and Bystanders in Erik Skjoldbjærg’s The Pyromaniac (2016).” The film is an adaptation of a novel about an incident that took place in southern Norway in 1978. A local young man turned into a pyromaniac who set fire to buildings in his own small community. As Skjoldbjærg started filming after the Oslo Massacres in 2011, his project became inflicted by questions regarding the making of a terrorist pertaining to Anders Behring Breivik as well. Gjelsvik shows how the film focuses on questions of guilt and shame regarding the perpetrator, his family, and his community at large. Concerned also with audience effect, she sees it as a film that asks spectators to reflect on their own guilt.

As Anders Marklund turns to Swedish blockbuster films, he conversely finds that their happy endings let audiences off the hook, as it were, regarding guilt. In “No Country for Old Men: Utopian Stories of Welfare Society’s Shortcomings in A Man Called Ove and The 100-Year-Old Man,” Marklund wonders why these films about elderly men gained such immense popularity. Hannes Holm’s A Man Called Ove (2015) contains a sharp critique of the welfare state and its mechanisms of exclusion through ideologies of state individualism and self-sufficiency. Society lacks civic engagement and not until an immigrant woman representing neighborly care moves in, do things turn around. Similarly, Felix Herngren’s The 100-Year-Old Man Who Stepped Out of the Window and Disappeared (2013) is about a lonely, institutionalized elderly man who finds happiness precisely by leaving the Swedish welfare state and finding a surrogate family abroad. Critical of the welfare state, the films nevertheless rely on happy endings that let audiences disregard their own complicity in the social development that makes the protagonists unhappy in the first place.

Section 3: Scandinavian post-humanist guilt

While guilt in the previous sections is turned towards the Scandinavian (human) other or (human) self and thus remains grounded in a humanist tradition, the TV-series analyzed in this section turn post-humanist, as the perspective is that of robotics and transhumanism in one article, and the planet in the other. They are also for the most part set in the (near) future. Relevant forms of guilt become eco-guilt (accompanied by eco-shame where “eco” is short for ecology) as well as guilt towards laid-off workers replaced by machines. Julianne Q. M. Yang’s “Negotiating Privilege and Social Inequality in an Alternative Sweden: Real Humans/Äkta människor (SVT 2012–13),” which is about SVT’s sci-fi series Real Humans, straddles this and the previous section. Interpreted allegorically, Real Humans, like Marklund’s examples, thematizes Swedish welfare-state guilt regarding questions of egalitarian values. Here, too, we find families living within a social structure that encourages them to outsource care of the elderly. Yang’s main focus is nevertheless on the outsourcing of household and care work to a gendered and racialized robot (“hubot”) that resembles a human au pair. This opens for a discussion of how one negotiates privilege in a morally sound manner in a Swedish family. As in Gjelsvik’s article, maternal guilt is also at stake in various ways. Interpreted literally, as a story about human robots, Real Humans addresses dilemmas pertaining to emerging technologies, depicting a future in which machines render human labor—and thus laborers—superfluous. In this case, Yang shows her reader, the vulnerable, ostracized person is the white middle-class male.

Jørgen Bruhn turns to eco-guilt in “Ecology as Pre-Text? The Paradoxical Presence of Ecological Thematics in Contemporary Scandinavian Quality TV.” In contemporary TV-series from Denmark, Norway, and Sweden (DR’s Follow the Money, NRK’s Occupied, and SVT’s Jordskott), Bruhn finds that the opening sequences suggest a focus on ecology and climate change that is subsequently repressed and ignored. Inspired by Timothy Morton, Bruhn looks for “Anthropocene presence,” wondering why it is not developed beyond the opening sequence so that it might leave audiences with a sense of guilt and shame that could serve as a productive agent for
change. In his conclusion, Bruhn suggests two readings of the (pre)texts. On the one hand, they result in climate change denial, allowing viewers not to feel guilty for their lifestyles, for the Anthropocene, and for general political passivity towards climate change. On the other hand, they vaguely recognize the Anthropocene condition, inducing a mild sense of guilt in viewers and thus constitute a step in the right direction.

Section 4: Reframing Scandinavian guilt across media and national borders

The last section returns to the type of guilt discussed in the first section, namely the guilt Scandinavians may feel vis-à-vis global inequality and suffering others. This time, however, feelings of guilt, shame, and responsibility are embodied by specific real-life people who are either already publically known (as in the case of celebrities) or who gain fame (and notoriety) as they go public with unconventional guilt feelings. The articles in this section trace the story of the person feeling guilty and/or responsible across various media, as their initial stories and endeavors are framed and reframed within various discourses and ideologies, rendering their guilt feelings ridiculous rather than virtuous.

In “The Virality of Norwegian Guilt. How a Story of Male Rape from Norway Made International Headlines,” Adriana Margareta Dancus traces Karsten Nordal Hauken’s mediated guilt from when he came out in the NRK documentary series Me against Myself (2016) as a male victim of rape, explaining that he felt guilty when his rapist, an asylum seeker from Somalia, was deported after serving his jail sentence. Hauken felt that his rapist was a victim of social inequity and thus experienced a sense of Scandinavian guilt at being structurally privileged. Hauken published his story through a column on NRK’s opinion website after his confession on TV. The story subsequently went viral and was reframed by international tabloid media as an outrageous story about a “Norwegian syndrome” and a feminized Norwegian (or European) political Left raped from behind by the very immigrants it seeks to protect.

Camilla Mohring Reestorff analyzes a somewhat similar process of reframing and vilification as she traces Danish pop singer Medina’s engagement with the NGO Act Alliance in a humanitarian campaign to help refugees. Act Alliance wished to use Medina’s celebrity status and popularity to reach young Instagrammers. Medina’s humanitarian engagement was subsequently the topic for an episode of Access with Abdel, a DR TV-series hosted by journalist Abdel Aziz Mahmoud (2016). The episode prompted a slew of angry and spiteful comments in which Medina was described as stupid, a media whore, and a national traitor. Analyzing this through “a politics of guilt,” Reestorff argues that the collective shaming of Medina, reducing her to an “icon-body”, served to reject what might otherwise be considered an example of Scandinavian guilt related to global inequality and the suffering of others.

In terms of media, the articles progress from discussing various types of films (documentary, family drama, historical drama, blockbuster feel-good adaptations), through analyses of TV-series, and finally to the investigation of multi-media cases traveling through documentary TV, social media, and online newspapers.

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Notes

1. The social problems, as we shall see, include racism, colonialism, sexual exploitation, trafficking, terrorism, dehumanizing welfare-state institutions, gender inequality, and climate change.
2. The topic of whether one can or ought to feel guilty for other people’s misfortune (e.g. collective guilt, historical guilt, bystander guilt, and existential guilt) has been treated by theorists of affect such as Sara Ahmed, Lauren Berlant and Judith Butler (cf. Oxfeldt 2016). White guilt, in particular, has been discussed by Shelby Steele. The authors of the articles in this issue draw on a wide variety of theories in their discussions of guilt (and shame); Sara Ahmed is nevertheless most commonly referred to (see Dancus, Körber, and Reestorff).
3. Anthony Giddens, for instance, writes that “in conditions of modernity, shame rather than guilt tends to come to the fore as a feature of psychic organisation” (1991, 69). Norwegian psychiatrist Finn Skårderud has commented on the same tendency (2001, 41), and Ruth Leys discusses the movement critically in From Guilt to Shame. Leys’ concern is that shame may lead to political paralysis as it is more difficult to change who one “is” than what one “does” (or has done) (Leys, 2007).
4. For a more thorough introduction of the ScanGuilt project, see Oxfeldt 2016 and Oxfeldt, Nestingen, and Simonsen 2018 (Forthcoming). This project also has an international “sister” project supported by The Research Council of Norway: “Scandinavian Post-1989 Narratives of Guilt and Privilege: Men at War, Global Women, and Sacrificed Children.” This latter project has supported the research presented in this issue by Körber, Oxfeldt, and Yang.
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