

## Transtemporality and Transmemory in *Beforeigners*: Or, “Jack the Ripper has timeigrated”, Again

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### Abstract:

The time-travelling or ever-present Jack the Ripper has been one of the recurring tropes in popular culture. At first glance, the second season of the Norwegian series *Beforeigners* (2021) seems to join the never-ending and ever-entertaining chase of the elusive Whitechapel murderer, but on closer inspection, it deprives him of his mythical status. Informed by contemporary migration discourse, scientific advancement and social (d)evolution, the narrative makes the viewers manoeuvre between the 1888 facts, cultural memory of those events, and ‘modern’ murders, thus subverting their ideas of the killer and creating another transmemory of this polymorphous character. However, this article argues that while the series deploys transnationality and transtemporality to enable the detective(s) to trace and demythologise the Ripper, it perpetuates the status of the victims as mere clues to his identity.

**Keywords:** *Beforeigners*, demythologisation, ‘Jack the Ripper’, migration, time travel, transmemory, transnationality, transtemporality, victims.

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Connections between neo-Victorian and crime fiction go beyond “Detecting the Victorians”, to use Louisa Hadley’s chapter title (Hadley 2010: 59). Both genres comment on contemporary societal issues, are sensitive to the class-gender-race triad or injustice to minorities, and challenge dominant narratives. They are also marked by the same critical shifts, such as hybridity, transnationalism, and decentring the Anglophone lens (see, e.g., Primorac and Pietrzak-Franger 2015: 13; Piipponen, Mäntymäki and Rodi-Risberg 2020: 3), which makes them compatible and prone to blending. One such example is the second season of the Norwegian TV crime series *Beforeigners* (2021), directed by Jens Lien, screenplay by Anne Bjørnstad and Eilif Skodvin, which revolves around the infamous late-Victorian Whitechapel killer, thus combining Nordic noir with neo-Victorian

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themes and complementing transnational plot lines with transtemporal perspectives.

The second season of *Beforeigners* opens with a scene from the past. Set in London's Whitechapel in 1888, just after the murder of Mary Kelly, it immediately creates certain associations and expectations for the audience. Since the narrative involves 'timeigration' (see below), logic and general knowledge would dictate that the late-Victorian killer, who was never caught, has 'timeigrated' into the future. Consequently, viewers are on the lookout for familiar tropes and clues. Though relying heavily on stereotypical Ripper trappings, the series not only refrains from glorifying the killer but manages to demythologise him; however, crucially, it fails to give meaningful voice or agency to his victims.

### **1. Transnational Migrations of the Ripper Myth**

The Whitechapel killer spawned a plethora of stories in analogue and digital media, as well as Ripperature, perceived as "an unconventional form of Neo-Victorianism" (Ho 2012: 31) and in my broader understanding incorporating both page and screen narratives. The figure became "a frequent, almost inevitable nodal point, thorough which neo-Victorian and neo-Victorian crossover crime fiction and drama must pass" (Poore 2017b: 6). It has been analysed through the neo-Victorian lens in the context of the Empire (Ho 2012) and sexploitation (Romero Ruiz 2017), as well as the Gothic (Duperray 2012; Maier 2012) or adaptation studies (Pietrzak-Franger 2009/2010). Even though the figure of 'Jack the Ripper' may be labelled "a specifically English fantasy" (Ho 2012: 33) and it is its Anglophone representations that have been most widely discussed (see, e.g., the titles listed in Jones 2017), the Ripper has become a global (neo-)Victorian phenomenon. The translation of the sobriquet – e.g., into Jack l'Éventreur, Jack el Destripador, Hasfelmetszó Jack, Karındeşen Jack, Kobbi Kviðrista, Jack Rozparovač, Kuba Rozpruwacz, Džekas Skerdikas, Jack lo Squartatore, Jack Uppskäraren – and factual reports were followed by the translation of multimedial narratives, which led to the adaptation of the myth itself. Transnational localisations include Jô Soares's *O Xangô de Baker Street* (1995; *A Samba for Sherlock*), a prequel story set in Rio de Janeiro in 1886, or Shichiri Nakayama's *Kirisaki Jack no Kokuhaku* (2013; *Confession of Jack the Ripper*) set in Tokyo; Isabel Allende used the figure of the killer to bring together armchair detectives from around the planet playing an online game in *El Juego de Ripper* (2014;

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*Ripper*), and Adrian Kuszpit set the story in 1888 London but retold it from the perspective of Polish immigrants in *Morderca z Whitechapel* (2013; *The Murderer from Whitechapel*).

The figure and the myth behind it remain universally recognisable. Antonija Primorac argues that a global – or, as I would dub it, transnational – approach

holds out the promise not just of uncovering examples of neo-Victorianism that have gone unnoted in the Anglosphere, but also of fostering dynamic transnational dialogues that can offer new and often surprising interpretations of existing and emerging neo-Victorianisms. (Primorac 2015: 66)

I concur, especially since neo-Victorian Ripper plots are also a part of contemporary crime fiction, which has gained a new name of “world crime fiction” and is said to be “emphatically, a *global* phenomenon” (Gulddal and King 2022: 1, original emphasis). I perceive neo-Victorian crime narratives as particularly mobile because of their hybridised nature and dual appeal to international, transnational and global audiences.

It is tempting, and indeed adequate, to transpose the mechanisms adopted in transnational scholarship to the transtemporal context. The major recent trends in transnational crime fiction studies focus on

the transnational detective whose analysis is often interlinked with a postcolonial perspective on crime fiction; the representation of transnational crime and its problematic dynamics with the institution of the nation-state; the transnational reader of a genre that often functions as a cultural mediator (in the best examples) or a tourist guide for the armchair traveller; and the transnational brand and its most successful creature, the Nordic noir. (Pezzotti 2020: 94)

As this article will demonstrate, the diverse cultural and temporal backgrounds of transnational detective teams tracing a transtemporal killer affect the viewers’ perspective on the Victorian case, creating a transmemory of the perpetrator, while simultaneously condoning the still-prevalent, disparaging view of the victims.

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The premise of *Beforeigners* is timeigration, which should not be mistaken for time travel. The setting is a near-future Oslo that has to face an unexplained, uncontrolled, and apparently unintentional – at least on the part of its subjects – global phenomenon. It manifests in sudden appearances of titular beforeigners, immigrants from past epochs, as varied as the Stone Age, the Viking Age, and the late nineteenth century. Similar to modern migrants around the world, some of them remain on the outskirts of the society, while some assimilate into it, for better or for worse. A representative of the latter group is Alfildr Enginnsdottir (Krista Kosonen), a former Viking shield-maiden and the first beforeigner to join the ranks of the Oslo police department. Despite her often comic social and etiquette blunders, she quickly proves her mettle to her colleagues and superiors and forms an effective professional partnership with Lars Haaland (Nicolai Cleve Broch), a somewhat generic, troubled but sympathetic detective with an addictive personality and a complicated personal life. Together they fight crime, which, as might be expected, involves timeigrants and thus requires the complementary skills possessed by such a duo.

A field that has adapted both transnational and transtemporal approaches is migration studies (Bass and Yeoh 2019: 165). Borders, as we are reminded, “are not value-free” but “context-specific, relational and performative” (Kovras and Robins 2017: 159, 168). Even though this description refers to national borders, it is equally suited to temporal and cultural ones. Crossing them means manoeuvring between “the practices, memories and narratives that differentiate and define the time-spaces they enclose” (Hurd, Donnan and Leutloff-Grandits 2017: 1). The perspective of a timeigrant allows viewers to envision what happens when the Victorian Whitechapel time-space is traversed from a neo-Victorian entry point and how it informs the cultural memory of the 1888 case. More importantly, since neo-Victorianism itself is also a form of quasi-timeigration, it facilitates the examination of how this movement affects the border-crosser. A border, after all,

invites a flâneur-like gaze on memory and mobility; a variety of signs present a palimpsest of meanings and historical referents, revealing the strangeness of a ‘blocked temporal passage’ between different types of border regimes. The flâneur recounts the spatial experience of relics of the past,

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whose afterlives awaken the observer to new conceptual constellations. Indeed, the juxtaposition of arbitrary relics, randomly witnessed, denaturalises assumed truths about the present and about borders, including the spatial power relations of conflicting border regimes. (Hurd, Donnan and Leutloff-Grandits 2017: 4)

What is particularly relevant for this discussion of *Beforeigners* is the flâneur-like gaze of a transtemporal border-crosser on the cultural memory of the Whitechapel killer. Migration is also a relevant theme in contemporary crime narratives as it “questions or disrupts” countries’ legal, moral and social “values, highlighting the oppression at the ‘normative centre’ of society as well as interrogating the meanings of mobility and agency by promoting a transnational outlook”; moreover, migration also “illustrates crime fiction’s central functions, namely making visible that which was previously hidden or concealed and achieving justice for victims” (Beyer 2020: 379, 380). While the first part of Beyer’s statement is applicable to *Beforeigners*’ transtemporal approach and its timeigrants in general, the second, as will be demonstrated, poses a problem, since the series re-objectifies and remarginalises the Ripper victims.

## 2. The ‘Real Jack’

The Ripper character enters the narrative in the middle of the season, having been gradually introduced through his new crimes and various references to the 1888 case. The autopsy of his first Oslo victim reveals that he has knowledge of anatomy and is also adept at using a knife. The team discovers a connection to a similar but classified murder in England, presumably committed by a timeigrant of nineteenth-century origin whose East-End victim suggests the modus operandi of the Whitechapel killer. These assumptions evoke the ‘facts’ established during the early stages of the Victorian Whitechapel investigation and sound familiar to viewers who possess even rudimentary knowledge of the historic case. Furthermore, online research conducted by Alhildr might satisfy their visual memory – the computer screen contains images of Frederick Abberline, a detective in charge of the on the ground investigation; James Maybrick, one of the suspects especially popular in 1990s Ripperature; a scene showing a bobby with a bull’s eye lantern finding a body; and a drawing of a suspicious

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character followed by a group of men, two of whom resemble Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson. The search would not be complete without screenshots from casebook.org, one of the most popular sites dedicated to the case, and photographs of the canonical victims, Elizabeth Stride and Mary Jane Kelly. The sequence ends with a close-up of the most intriguing piece of the puzzle – a statement that “Jack the Ripper was never caught” (Lien, Bjørnstad and Skodvin 2021: S.2 Ep.1, 45:05).<sup>1</sup>

Viewers hungry for more know what to expect when an envelope addressed in brown ink is sent to *The Citizen*, a newspaper catering to the nineteenth-century timeigrants. The opening line sounds familiar: “I send you this bloody piece of womanly flesh to inform the public that dusk has fallen”, and the note concludes with “Greetings From Hell” (Lien, Bjørnstad and Skodvin 2021: S.2 Ep.2, 06:57-07:10). Haaland comments on the missive’s remarkable similarity to the *original* Jack the Ripper letter, which might be just a mental shortcut or a testimony to the extent to which fact and fiction have intertwined in the collective memory of the Whitechapel murders case. When the journalist to whom the letter was addressed is shown a copy of the so called ‘From Hell’ letter received in 1888 by George Lusk, the media frenzy commences, complete with a timeigrant newsboy hawking *The Citizen* shouting, “Famous killer on the loose in the capital! Read all about it! Is Jack the Ripper behind the murder?” (Lien, Bjørnstad and Skodvin 2021: S.2 Ep.3, 19:47-19:55).

All these trappings set the scene for the appearance of John Roberts (Paul Kaye), whose proper introduction consists of scientific, philosophical and artistic references. The first glimpse into his personality is offered at the very end of Episode 3, in an epigraph from a book he authored on *The Origin of Timeigration*: “My mission is to kill time, and time’s to kill me in its turn./ How comfortable one is among murderers” (Lien, Bjørnstad and Skodvin 2021: S.2 Ep.3, 44:07-44:12). (The Darwinian implications of the timeigration title will be discussed shortly.) Roberts is later shown reading Emil Cioran’s *The Trouble with Being Born* (1976), the source of the quotation. The killer seems fascinated not only by philosophical pessimism, but also by Edvard Munch’s morbid expressionism. Having found himself in the artist’s city, he visits the National Museum and spends a protracted period admiring *The Scream* (1893). The painting’s distorted background is recreated in a scene following the second Oslo murder in Episode 4, but this time the figure’s face expresses contentment rather than anxiety or fear,

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reflecting the killer's innerscape. A vocal addendum to the painting is sent by Roberts to the police with a covering message that reads "Check out my new single / Jacques the Rapper" (Lien, Bjørnstad and Skodvin 2021: S.2 Ep.5, 23:11-23:15), while the recording is short but effective – a woman's piercing scream.

Roberts's interest in the Norwegian artist may be interpreted as anchoring him in the new culture and new context. He admires Munch's work, almost blending in with the rest of visitors, an impression that continues when he is wandering around an amusement park, going so far as to steal candyfloss from a boy. Even the unplanned murder of the park's soothsayer does not make him overtly conspicuous. It is the aforementioned recreation of the scene from the painting that reveals Roberts's distorted state of mind and defamiliarises the character again. This sequence seems reflective of the way Jack the Ripper has been adapted over the years: from the onset malleable to any background or trending theory as to his identity, but eventually incomprehensible, alien as a human being capable of extreme violence.

Alfhildr's search reveals that the killer used to be a controversial physics professor who resigned from his post after a #MeToo scandal and disappeared. In a private hotel bar conversation, Roberts presents himself as someone consumed by "work": "It used to be quantum physics, but then I got bored and now my interests have drifted somewhat" towards "close encounters with the female anatomy" (Lien, Bjørnstad and Skodvin 2021: S.2 Ep.4, 32:40-33:55). His female interlocutor understands his words as an invitation to his room – something she has been actually looking forward to. She feels used afterwards, but her life is not threatened. She is not, after all, a beforeigner from Victorian Whitechapel.

When the motivation behind the East End murders is finally revealed, it turns out that the girls had to be killed because they all saw Roberts when he travelled back in time. On the one hand, backwards travel is an important deviation from the main storyworld assumption that only future-oriented timeigration is possible (something disproved by Alfhildr as well, which will be discussed in the next section). On the other hand, it partly brings viewers back to the familiar ground of the Jack the Ripper conspiracy theories involving Scotland Yard: Roberts travelled in time as part of a top-secret London Metropolitan Police undertaking called Project 19, sending agents back to the nineteenth century. Thus, the series' Ripper dons the "mad scientist working for a corporation" costume: to prevent the girls from

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exposing the operation, he treated them like “guinea pigs to test [his] improvised time-travelling device”, and the mutilations were “just” a means of “covering [his] tracks. Creatively” (Lien, Bjørnstad and Skodvin 2021: S.2 Ep.5, 40:40-40:50). Roberts considers these actions necessary at the time, as his ultimate objective is something altogether much grander: the eradication of the entire human race. This is why his book title’s Darwinian allusion is relevant. Roberts wants to travel back in time “to stop that first little fish from crawling to shore”, preventing the very evolution of mankind – or rather rectifying its side-effect, moral devolution, as his mission statement includes the obliteration of slavery, the Holocaust, and “break[ing] the never-ending chain of suffering” (Lien, Bjørnstad and Skodvin 2021: S.2 Ep.5, 2:44-2:48; S.2 Ep.6, 35:30).

The series is not the first screen depiction of a time-travelling Ripper in relation to evolution and devolution. As argued by Harvey O’Brien, the protagonist and antagonist of Nicholas Meyer’s *Time After Time* (1979), i.e., H. G. Wells and John Stevenson respectively, “represent the dialectically opposed forces of evolution and degradation or degeneration: the twinned anxieties of the Victorian period about the shape of the future” (O’Brien 2016: 85). Destruction has been a relevant factor shaping the twentieth century, and while Stevenson is not only accepting of, but even wallows in the twentieth-century violence he sees on TV and the laxity of moral standard he observes in his new hunting ground, Roberts is a nihilist disappointed with humanity at large. Seeking but not finding solace in science, Roberts devotes his energy to murder, targeting the whole of humankind rather than ‘just’ anonymous Victorian East End girls.

Nonetheless, an apparent similarity might be discerned between the *Beforeigners*’ antagonist and the movie killer. This similarity relies on our perception of the Ripper character as the typical “sympathetic monster” of many horror films, who

embodies a deep-seated devolutionary agency that selectively expunges the contagion that threatens the body politic: destructive, repressive, dangerous, and yet, as are all monsters, endemic to the human condition. In this sense he hates himself, of course, as much as he hates women, prostitutes, procreation, and humanity. (O’Brien 2016: 99)



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The question is whether Roberts actually hates himself if he perceives his actions as saving humanity from itself. Moreover, the very analogy of the monster seems to have entered a devolution phase since *Time After Time*. Meyer's film was produced when "Jack the Ripper had been homogenised into another standby for the fantasy factory, a mass-produced monster suit which could be tailored to fit any occasion" (Denis Meikle 2002: 217). Although the creators of *Beforeigners* use certain generic trappings of Ripperature, they subvert them, for the deranged killer, hell-bent on obliterating humanity itself, cannot be deemed an enigmatic character escaping punishment. John Roberts belongs to none of the dominant ways of depicting Jack the Ripper in time-travel narratives categorised as

- 1) a timeless force, with no beginning and usually no end, existing alongside humanity; 2) a fleeing killer, who manages to escape his Victorian pursuers into the future; 3) a killer to be beaten, with time travel used as the means of preventing him from committing the murders; and 4) a useful tool in the hands of future generations. (Krawczyk-Żywko 2017: 208)

Though Roberts initially seems to fall into the second category, he does not flee into but rather comes back to the future, his point of origin. Unlike the majority of Ripper characters on page or screen, this one is detected and killed, and his memory, though revived, is no longer celebrated. This is made possible by a transtemporal detective – in certain ways, the only counterpart character whose skills correspond to those of the culprit.

### 3. Transnational Sleuths

Representation of the police force in any Jack the Ripper narrative is hardly ever positive. Individual Scotland Yarders, however, deserve some respect, especially when struggling against their superiors, who are usually involved in a conspiracy or a cover-up. To a large extent *Beforeigners* follows this tradition by drawing a clear line between the management level and individual detectives, be they members of the force or police consultants. It also deploys transnationality, depicting the Norwegian-English (pseudo)partnership – two teams working towards ostensibly one goal, whereas in fact the former aims at solving and the latter at closing down the

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investigation. While a timeigrant perspective is of great help, it is transtemporality that is needed to both catch and demythologise the killer.

Upon discovering that the Oslo murder might be connected to a similar crime committed in England, Lars Haaland – at this stage no longer part of the official police force but one of its external consultants – asks for help with obtaining classified information. After some subterfuge, genuine Scotland Yarders enter the investigation, and Haaland soon realises that chances for a proper international cooperation are slim. Precious Clarke from Homicide and Senior Investigator Henry Black from Counter Terrorism may share some facts with their Oslo colleagues during a video conference or even host Enginnisdottir and Haaland at the New Scotland Yard, but they decide to act only when the Norwegian detective duo gets too close to discovering the connection between the murders and Project 19. The exchange of a kidnapped girl for SI Black does not go according to plan; a conversation between Roberts and Black reveals to the viewers – and only to them – that not only did they cooperate on Project 19, but the two men used to be friends, too.

The transnational police venture fails mostly due to one party being involved with the killer and acting to protect its top-secret enterprise, which is a sign of the series' reiteration of various conspiracy theories surrounding the Ripper case. However, the depiction of the Norwegian side is not idealised either. The impulsive and sometimes reckless beforeigner-consultant duo are presented sympathetically as the series protagonists, but other members of the team are more ambiguous. There is a secret temporal agent serving as a mole to the Scotland Yarders, feeding them information and attempting to obscure it from his Norwegian colleagues; a senior officer who knows how to organise snacks for the visiting English but is often clueless as to the proper course of action when actual crimes are involved; and the Chief of Police, responsible for the actions as well as the image of the department, who at times seems inordinately preoccupied with PR. The Chief's perspective is justifiable, though, taking into account the Victorian press reaction to what they perceived as Scotland Yard's inaction during the 1888 investigation. All this corresponds with the culturally established and generally accepted representation of the official force as purposefully or inadvertently incompetent. Still, transnational cooperation does not fail completely, as the Oslo team does receive some valuable help from an Anglo-Jewish timeigrant source.

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The previously mentioned opening scene of the series, taking place in Whitechapel, is not built around the killer, but rather around an anonymous man (Billy Postlethwaite): informed by a plainclothes policeman about the murder of Mary Kelly, he enquires about the other girls and attempts to locate them. Suspected of being the killer himself and dubbed a “nosey Jew” (Lien, Bjørnstad and Skodvin 2021: S.2 Ep.1, 2:28), he reappears in the modern storyline posing as Scotland Yard’s special consultant by the name of Isaac Rubinstein. Revealed to be an impostor by genuine British officers and (re)introduced as Isaac Ben Joseph, he is discredited as a paranoid schizophrenic who suffered a breakdown after learning about the Holocaust, a member of a neo-Luddite organisation, and a possible accomplice of Roberts. Nonetheless, he still manages to steer the Oslo team towards the real culprit, despite the Scotland Yarders’ attempts to silence him and expedite his extradition. Believing himself to be on a mission from God in following the Ripper, Joseph perceives Alfildr and Lars as “fellow truth seekers” (Lien, Bjørnstad and Skodvin 2021: S.2 Ep.4, 8:52) and feeds them ambiguous but vital clues, including Roberts’s book on timeigration. Haaland is particularly eager to believe Joseph: as he himself is reduced to being merely a consultant at this point and possesses a generally transgressive character, one that challenges prescriptive rules and methods, he follows leaked and semi-scholarly sources to get to the truth. However, the final confrontation between the Ripper and the detective does not involve Haaland, but rather his transtemporal partner.

#### **4. The Transtemporal Detective**

Migration studies describe the “multiple ties and connections between home and host country” of migrants “living ‘transnational lifestyles’ across and beyond nation-state boundaries” (Bass and Yeoh 2019: 162). The *Beforeigners* series transposes transnational into transtemporal, but the general mechanism remains unchanged: the ties and connections between home and host time periods result in beforeigners of diverse origins leading transtemporal lifestyles across and beyond the boundaries of their own time. Moreover, the transtemporal detective needs to negotiate her identity and prioritise the values dominant in two diverse cultures. Alfildr’s surname – Enginnsdottir – sounds like a proper patronymic but actually means ‘No-one’s daughter’. As the second season reveals, it denotes more than her being a foundling: though she was discovered floating in the sea in the Viking Age,

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she was not born then but rather timeigrated from an unspecified future. It means she had to integrate and assimilate twice: first as a child, in the past, and then as an adult, in the present. Neither of these adaptation periods must have been easy, and neither is witnessed by the viewers, but the assumption is that both were successful – she became a fierce shield-maiden then and the first timeigrant to enter the Norwegian police force now. However, what matters most is the effect her transtemporal experience has on the contemporary case.

The direct and most distressing consequence of timeigration is unquestionably the culture shock, and a part of that stems from the impossibility of sharing collective or cultural memory. As the series demonstrates, this lack of present-day group memory has both advantages and disadvantages for everyday police work. When Alfildr first learns about the possibility of a connection between the 1888 murders and the present case, she reacts in her trademark brusque way: “Who the fuck is Check Dropper?” (Lien, Bjørnstad and Skodvin 2021: S.2 Ep.1, 39:05-39:07). While almost everyone around her knows something about the Whitechapel case, she does not even recognise the name of the most mysterious of serial killers. What she lacks in knowledge, she makes up for with research, which, as already mentioned, is based to a large extent on widely available (stereo)typical hypotheses and conjectures about the killer and the victims. Alfildr’s temporally diverse background equips her with a certain cultural distance and enables her to challenge commonly held assumptions. It would be tempting to argue that the viewers of the TV show are equally temporally and culturally distanced from the Whitechapel killer. The double performance of Roberts-the-contemporary-killer and Roberts-the-accidental-myth-maker perceived through the neo-Victorian lens poses the question of the audience’s own assumptions and knowledge. The viewers’ temporal or cultural distance from the historic crimes does not outweigh the impact of their various vicarious immersions into numerous neo-Victorian rewritings of the case, making the *Beforeigners* timeigrant a more astute observer and interpreter.

One more factor that informs the series’ investigation is an unexplained neurological effect timeigrating both ways has had on Alfildr’s brain. Her language skills, both active and passive, rapidly improve, her senses are significantly more acute, and all her skills seem to be honed to perfection. An example is the shooting practice/blowing off steam session in Episode 4, which ends with her hitting the bull’s eye six times in a row,

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leaving only a single hole in the paper target. This seemingly impossible feat is misinterpreted by her opponent as missing the target altogether five times. All these changes matter as, at this point in the series, John Roberts has already entered the narrative. He also time-travels both ways, is equally capable and extremely efficient, as he is more experienced in using his 'powers'. Although it may seem trivial at first, Alfhildr's and the antagonist's similarity is, in fact, crucial in terms of the detective-criminal pairing and dynamic. During the final confrontation, when Roberts discovers that the policewoman who has followed him shares his ability to avoid a bullet by tracing its trajectory in slow motion, he is thoroughly impressed and intrigued. "You're like me. A fellow two-way traveller", he says, to which Enginnsdottir replies, "I'm nothing like you" (Lien, Bjørnstad and Skodvin 2021: S.2 Ep.5, 44:35-44:45), before shooting a bullet in his direction.

The confrontation of two-way time-travellers disturbs the space-time continuum. Despite Alfhildr's definite disconnection from everything Roberts stands for, he keeps trying to attract her attention in the alternate reality created by a rift in time. Far from wanting to be caught, he needs her to accomplish his mission – the aforementioned eradication of mankind. The would-be mass killer invites the detective to "think bigger" but, as she herself admits, she is "a fighter, not a thinker" (Lien, Bjørnstad and Skodvin 2021: S.2 Ep.6, 35:05; 35:42-35:45), and their confrontation is continued. Though Roberts inflicts a seemingly mortal blow, it is Alfhildr's that is really fatal – his body is extradited to England, while hers surprises doctors with a rapid and remarkable recovery.

Traditionally, crime fiction concludes with reassuring closure. As summarised by Thomas Heise, "[i]f the work of the detective is to sew the strands of time together again and unveil the intricacy of its knots in the 'big reveal' we so often find in the genre's deathbed scenes, gun-point confessions or post-investigation summaries", then "the purpose is to try to restore wholeness and order before time and space were thrown out of whack" (Heise 2020: 220). *Beforeigners* almost literally depicts as much. Though it is the transtemporal detective's attack on the killer that disturbs the time-space continuum, she manages to re-establish order. Alfhildr not only defeats the Ripper character, but also serves as a foil to demythologise Jack, the most mysterious serial killer. As a border-crosser, she "must come to terms with the novel intersections of the temporal and the spatial [she] encounter[s]" (Hurd, Donnan and Leutloff-Grandits 2017: 1). The reality superimposed on

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her not only challenges, but also reinforces Enginnsdottir's Viking spirit. Unlike Roberts, whose sobriquet is an amalgam of facts and fiction, Alfildr is only known under her past name, from the period and culture that shaped her. The cultural distance she maintains – or bridges, depending on the circumstances – is used throughout the series for comic relief as well as investigative purposes, and in the second season it helps to keep her off the beaten tracks of Ripperology and Ripperature. Though traditional Ripper trappings form part of her research background, they do not cloud her judgement.

### 5. Dead Girl Riddles

The victims are one of the earliest signifiers of the Ripper themes in the series. In order to avoid the fate of Mary Kelly and other women who were murdered and mutilated, three anonymous girls are planning an escape from London: going to the home country of one of them via the sea route, possibly paying their way with sex work, thus sustaining the common assumption that the East End victims were prostitutes. The plan is derailed by timeigration – they all arrive in modern-day Oslo instead, followed closely by the Whitechapel killer. One of them, initially dismissed as a victim of a drug overdose, is found horribly mutilated in a tunnel; another is found with her throat cut, and the last one is kidnapped and killed despite the arranged exchange of her for a Scotland Yard officer. All the girls remain irrelevant as characters but gain in importance as plot devices that drive the investigation and the narrative forward. Hence unlike other neo-Victorian iterations drawing on the Ripper myth, such as Richard Warlow's TV series *Ripper Street* (2012-2016), *Beforeigners* fails to rehumanise the Ripper victims as one might expect it to do in line with neo-Victorian narrative ethics of recovering historically silenced perspectives. Helena Esser, for instance, contends that Warlow's series deliberately "eschews the Gothic gaze on the Victorian city and seeks to find an alternative mode" in an attempt to "accommodate formerly marginalised, hidden, or tabooed identities without framing them as other" once more (Esser 2018: 145). Indeed, *Ripper Street*'s use of "myriad female perspectives" enables viewers "to sympathise from a position of empathy rather than pity" (Esser 2018: 159). The same, however, cannot be said of *Beforeigners*' depiction of Roberts's female victims.

The first victim is the most thoroughly investigated and exposed. Her naked body placed on the slab serves as a prop, which turns into a narrative

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about her killer. The autopsy report confirms that she is from the nineteenth century but does not specify her geographical affiliation. Her mutilation, on the other hand, propels a series of clues and associations leading to Jack the Ripper: her killer is skilled with a knife and knowledgeable about anatomy. The mutilation itself – removal of the clitoris – accentuates the vulnerability and complete exposure of the victim.<sup>2</sup> Anonymous as she is, it “remains for her to tell” the detectives whether Jack the Ripper has timeigrated (Lien, Bjørnstad and Skodvin 2021: S.2 Ep.1, 38:27-38:22). However, the more the viewer learns about the possible connections to the 1888 killer, the less relevant his victims become. The second of the timeigrant girls matters when she is being tracked by both the killer and the police, but she disappears from the screen as soon as she is murdered. The third, interestingly, is the only one given a name – Nessie Olssen – though it remains unclear whether this is genuine or not, but her attempts at dealing with the killer are dismissed as naïve and futile from the onset. Her kidnapping serves to propel the plot, and her murder is mentioned only in passing as if it was something both inevitable and irrelevant. Another victim is even initially ignored by Lars and Alfildr, who at the time are too preoccupied with the killer to pay attention to someone whose death does not match his *modus operandi*.

The canonical victims do not receive much attention either, though the initial stage of the investigation is punctuated with their post-mortem photographs and crime-scene drawings. Some viewers might even perceive them as a sequence of black and white faces, especially since their names are never mentioned; still, those familiar with the historic case easily identify Elizabeth Stride, Annie Chapman, and Mary Jane Kelly. They are treated as past traces leading to the solution of the contemporary case. The major difference in the treatment of the victims seems to be the discourse applied to justify their irrelevance as human beings. While the historic victims were disregarded by the Victorian press as ‘unfortunates’, to use the period euphemism, and mostly treated as deserving of their fate, the series victims belong to the “ungrievable”, “marginalised in life, such as irregular migrants, and those unmourned in death: only by giving such people a value in life can they have a value in death” (Kovras and Robins 2017: 165). They enter the narrative in the 1888 flashback, only to be timeigrated and become the bodies telling the story of the killer.

Arguably, the series’ depiction of timeigrant victims is anchored in the contemporary migration context. The girls arrive not far from Oslo and

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are rescued by people from a local transit centre, where they stay as timeigrants with unconfirmed national origin, subject to an ongoing extradition case, as dictated by the (series) Schengen Agreement about arrivals in foreign waters. They wanted to cross the national border to avoid being killed, but even an involuntary crossing of temporal and cultural borders does not allow them to achieve this goal. Their situation resembles that of the real “undocumented, irregular migrant who is compelled to live a life of bureaucratic and social invisibility [...] trapped in space but also stuck in time”, experiencing chronic liminality (Hurd, Donnan and Leutloff-Grandits 2017: 12). Although *Beforeigners* depicts timeigration as an involuntary and unexplained phenomenon, the Oslofjord arrivals evoke recent European immigration crises, especially in the Mediterranean – similarly monitored by patrol boats and posing a challenge to the state and society alike.

When ‘illegally’ (alive) within the EU, migrants forgo many of the rights that citizens take for granted; being subject to surveillance, controlled and limited, they are the subjects of perhaps more of the state’s attention than any other class of person. When dead within the EU, they are denied even the limited attention that law obliges for a European body. A live migrant is thus a threat to be managed, while a dead one appears as an irrelevance to be ignored. (Kovras and Robins 2017: 161)

If migrants become victims, they are marginalised: a “migrant corpse is an absent-presence that occupies an indeterminate space ignored by the legal and political order and the border regimes responsible” (Hurd, Donnan and Leutloff-Grandits 2017: 20). By extension, it may be argued that the series’ unregistered timeigrant bodies become absent-presences that occupy a liminal transtemporal period. Having lived on the margins of society, the women are hardly prioritised in death.

Migration assumes various roles in the context of crime. Contemporary crime narratives use migration “to interrogate identity and its definition for detectives, criminals and victims through [crime fiction’s] generic conventions” and “combat the xenophobia and racism engendered in anti-migration discourse” (Beyer 2020: 381). *Beforeigners’* timeigration



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operates analogously, especially for the identity of the transtemporal detective and killer. It seems, however, that eliminating prejudice and objectification from the discourse on the victims proves more difficult. They are remembered as little more than mutilated corpses, and “the corpse signifies for the detective a past that has to be recovered and reconstructed and a spatial disruption that has to be contextualised and explained” (Heise 2020: 219) rather than a lost life to be mourned or commemorated. The victims keep providing answers as to the killer’s identity and continue functioning merely as elements of the Ripper riddle.

Arguably, such depiction of victims is conspicuous not only in ‘Jack the Ripper’ but in other serial killer narratives as well (see Warwick 2006: 563-564). Neo-Victorian scholars argue that the very deployment of the trope of the serial killer “deprive[s] not just one, but multiple, often female victims of their lives and agency” (Romero Ruiz 2012: 47). Moreover, televisual detective shows tend to overexploit women as embodied victim figures and underuse female investigators (Meldrum 2015: 202). While the Norwegian series is not free from objectification and instrumentalisation of the (female) victims, it juxtaposes this with Alfhildr’s agency. Unlike the victims, she is not a Victorian timeigrant but a two-way time traveller with a Viking shield-maiden past, and hence remains free from neo-Victorian trappings. She is one of several female detective characters – along with a colleague at the station and the Chief of Police – in a Nordic noir detective procedural.

## 6. The Viewers’ Transmemory

Time and memory are malleable and adaptable. *Beforeigners* comments on contemporary societal problems through the lens of transtemporality, but also defamiliarises the Whitechapel killer by adapting a (neo-)Victorian theme in a postmodern Nordic noir context. Challenging the assertion that everyone knows something about the 1888 case, the series subverts viewers’ expectations stemming from Jack the Ripper’s afterlife in cultural memory. Following the transtemporal detective, audience members suspend their collective memory to reload it with what Alfhildr discovers. Such transposition of cultural memory with new data or remembrance creates what I have labelled ‘transmemory’, which is further negotiated with the closure of the series’ case. While it is true that the juxtaposition of decades-worth of numerous theories and adaptations and a three-hour TV show<sup>3</sup> cannot be expected to result in a complete reversal of prevalent perceptions of the

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mysterious murderer, I still maintain that the series manages to demythologise the Ripper figure and its intriguing combination of the factual and the fictive.

The series' detectives follow a path well-trodden by other fictional investigators. They need to reveal "effects without apparent causes, events in a jumbled chronological order, significant clues hidden among the insignificant", and they must "reestablish sequence and causality" (Dennis Porter qtd. in Heise 2020: 220). The progress of Lars and Alfildr's investigation, reflective of the linear progression of crime narratives in general, is enhanced by the dynamic tension between the killer's and the timeigrant detective's identity and transtemporality. To a large extent, the duality stemming from Enginnsdottir's anonymity and Jack the Ripper's notoriety is what makes them such worthy opponents. She is no-one's daughter in both temporalities and has to obtain 'new' cultural memory; he is everyone's son since his Victorian claim to (ill) fame and comes with a huge amount of cultural baggage ingrained in other characters' and viewers' collective memory. Drawing on O'Brien's comment on the *Time After Time* protagonist and antagonist (see O'Brien 2016: 93), the *Beforeigners* duo may be described as coming from the/our future and shaped by their timeigrant past – Alfildr is defined by her Viking upbringing and Roberts by his time-travelling trip to the nineteenth century. Whereas Roberts does not care for the present and is past-oriented – intending to prevent evolution from happening – Enginnsdottir cares for the future and is present-oriented. Narrative-wise, his enterprise is doomed to failure. Alfildr's border-crosser/flâneur gaze is marked by an enormous cultural distance to the memory maze created by Jack the Ripper fictions, and this is what enables the transtemporal detective to distinguish between significant clues and insignificant assumptions, capture the killer and restore a certain order.

What makes the viewers' transmemory even more interesting is that their collective memory of the Whitechapel killer is mostly fed by extratextual elements. The series deploys various stereotypical Ripper trappings, but the character of the killer comes neither in a Victorian nor a post-Victorian costume – *we*, the neo-Victorian global audience, project that role upon him. First of all, Roberts's time of origin is not the nineteenth century; secondly, he is never shown *back then*; and thirdly, there is nothing about *him* that signifies any of the theories – coherent or conflicting – formulated during or after the original investigation by the police, the press, or Ripperologists. All those associations stem from the way the Jack the

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Ripper myth functions in contemporary contexts and cultural memory, manifested in the series by Alhildr's online research. In fact, Isaac Ben Joseph may seem the more attractive timeigrating suspect: he is of Victorian origin, a Jew desiring to hinder the Oslo police, and even a semi-serious suspect in the Whitechapel scene. On the other hand, Joseph may easily be singled out as 'the most likely suspect' and, once recognised as a trope, disregarded as a viable candidate.

Although the viewers' present and palimpsestuous perspective may shift, resulting in a more critical view of the figure of the killer, the permeability of temporal borders does not encourage changes in the perception of the victims. They are not treated as individuals but as a group defined by their deaths, episodes in a serial-killer narrative. Both the historic and the series' victims occupy a liminal position – they are relevant as clues in the case and irrelevant as members of the society. The beforeigners escaping East End threats enter a new world and yet cannot cross its border, remain enclosed in their Victorian ideological domain. Problematizing migration makes the series topical and critical of our reality, but its corollary is the perpetuated marginalisation of the murdered women. Classified as Victorian unfortunates or contemporary unregistered timeigrants/illegal immigrants, they are deemed worth saving, but cease to matter once dead and devoid of further traces of their killer. Their bodies are examined, described, and photographed, only to become part of the police archive. Theoretically, this could make their memory easily accessible and sustainable; practically, entering an archive categorised and labelled as 'exhibits' means being kept out of society's living memory and re-entering it only when an index search finds a match. If the index term is not comprehensive enough, the subject may remain cocooned in stereotypes and transpositions.

*Beforeigners* reflects some of the interpretative changes ongoing in neo-Victorian and crime fiction studies, like the transnational turn and attempts at demythologising the murderer; others remain absent, with the current process of reorienting the discourse towards the victims rather than the killer being the most prominent. Despite not being a narrative that provokes a transmemory of the Whitechapel victims, I consider *Beforeigners* to be an intriguing example of and commentary on the way in which transnational audiences and creators grapple with 'Jack the Ripper'. Providing an effective example of transmemory creation, the series' would lend itself as a crucial point of reference to reconsider other neo-Victorian

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crime works and their narrative ethics, especially as regards the restoration of ‘full’ humanity to precarious victims of crime.

### Notes

1. Quotations are after the HBO translation (subtitles by Fast Titles Media), dialogues in English, and the English diegetic onscreen text.
2. It also sexualises the victim, which might be read an element of neo-Victorianism’s fascination not only with sex crimes but also sexuality more generally. See for example Clare Meldrum’s comments on scopophilic and fetishistic depictions of the female body in neo-Victorian detective shows (Meldrum 2015: 206), or Romero Ruiz’s analysis of “the ‘prostituted other’ [who] in particular inhabits the re-imagined Victorian cityscape as the paradigmatic trauma victim and a symbol of sexual exploitation” (Romero Ruiz 2017: 46).
3. Season 2 consists of six 45-minute episodes.

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