

**”It’s like f\*cking hobbit-land down there”**  
***Acquitted* and sublimity light in Nordic Noir**

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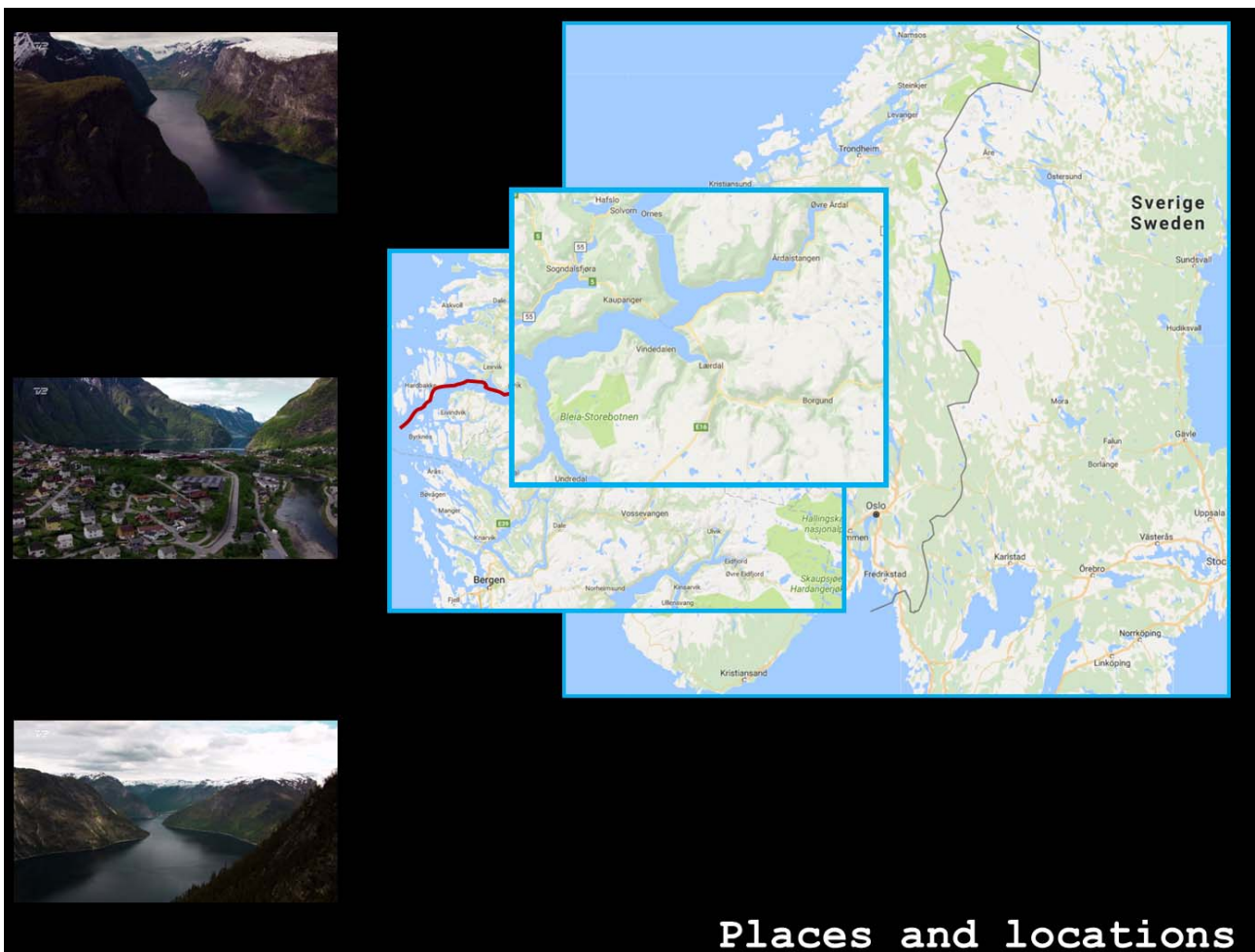
**Landscape iconography and locative title sequences**

As may be evident from the official trailer, *Acquitted* is part of an increased attention towards rural and provincial areas in Nordic television drama in general and in Nordic television crime dramas particularly. In Sweden, Norway and Denmark drama production in the capitals has been supplemented by a new rural visuality indebted to a long history of landscape imagery in various art forms. Such a landscape iconography is not only heavily used in the trailer for the drama, but it is directly stressed in the title sequence of the drama. The sequence is an obvious example of what Anne Marit Waade and I have called *the locative title sequence*, a title sequence that directly, visually and spatially depicts the place of the drama, whether fictional or real places.

Often locative title sequences involve deep relationships with characters as well, but they may be more abstractly or metaphorically engaged in situating a drama or developing a specific sense of place in the drama. Internationally, rural or specifically urban television dramas such as *Justified* (Kentucky), *Friday Night Lights* (Texas), *True Blood* (Louisiana), *True Detective* (Louisiana) and *Marcella* (London) use the title sequence to place the dramas. In a Nordic context, dramas such as the Swedish *The Fjällbacka Murders* (Bohuslän), the Icelandic *Trapped* (Icelandic nature), the Danish *Norskov* (Frederikshavn) and the Finish *Bordertown* (Lapeenranta) all use the title sequence in a locative manner. This goes for *Acquitted* as well.



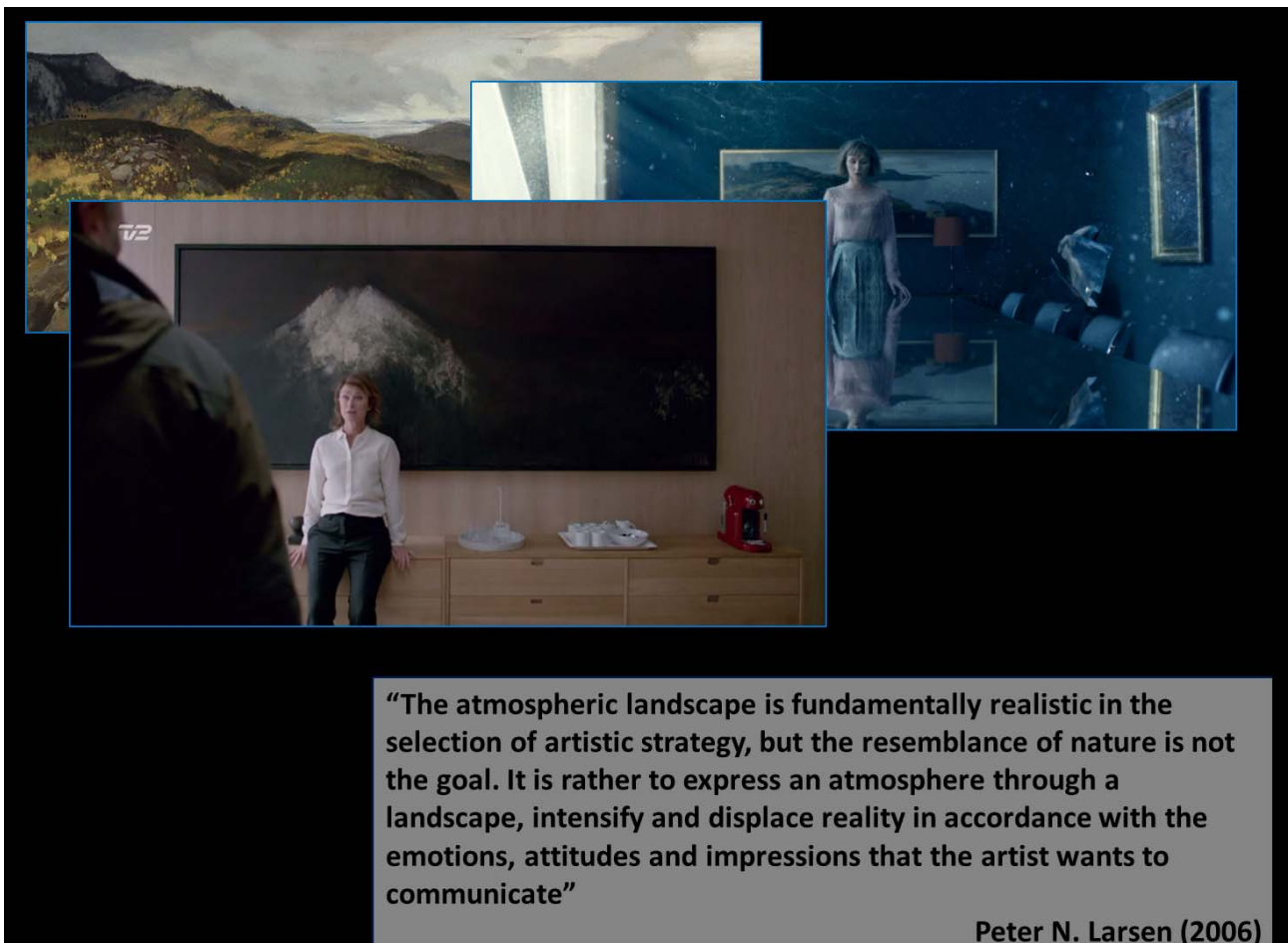
Where dramas such as *Trapped* and *True Blood* either metaphorically or abstractly comments on the sense of place in the drama, this title sequence from *Acquitted* is a blend of the more traditional introduction of characters, narrative suggestions and a locative sensibility. The drama takes place in the fictive rural town Lifjord, inspired by the name Lifjorden, a small part of the stunning 120-mile long Sognefjord two hours drive north of Bergen. The more precise locations of the drama are supposedly the municipalities of Lærdal and Årdal, standing at the far end of Sognefjord from Lifjorden.



The first two images of the drama also situates the drama within this picturesque scenery, and uses this as a cut-in to the local solar energy firm from which much of the drama will develop. After the title sequence in the first episode the first image is once again an opening view across mountains and water. In other words, the fictional setting of *Acquitted* is not only a highly recognizable places; the drama clearly insists that these images mean more than just the setting of the drama. In the title sequence the main character blends in with mountains and plunges into the fjord water, which of

course partly indicates what we should expect from the drama. But in part these images also attract attention as something in themselves, a sense of landscape that comes very close to Martin Lefebvre's idea of the autonomous landscape. Nevertheless, the landscapes of *Acquitted* never becomes meaningless or insignificant for the characters, since the title sequence clearly stresses that the main character is and will decidedly be affected by the surroundings, the place, the landscapes.

Being affected by landscape, for the character or for the viewer, has deep roots in art history, and relationship between the overwhelming autonomy of landscape and the affect on viewers and persons coincides in what a Danish art historian has called *the evocative landscape*. Peter Nørgaard Larsen refers to realistic characteristics in romantic paintings alongside evocative or subjectively suggestive sensations:



Larsen's example of evocative landscape painting is the Finnish Eero Järnefelt's painting of Lake Pielisjärvi (1899). This particular painting has no direct relation to *Acquitted*, but it is deeply asso-

ciated with Nordic crime dramas: it is used in the title sequence to the Danish crime drama *Follow the Money*, which uses water in a very similar manner as the title sequence of *Acquitted*. Here, the main characters are also seen under water in a metaphorical indication of being 'in too deep'. However, in *Acquitted* landscape painting is also used as a creation of a sense of evocation in one of the characters.

Already in the first episodes, shortly after some of the stressful news about the solar energy company has been delivered to the owner, she is portrayed standing with her back to a dark landscape painting, which was made specifically to the production design of the drama. Accordingly, the drama series continuously comments on landscapes and, in this way, also comments on its own use of landscapes. Besides the landscape painting in the office here, later in the first episode one of the main character's colleagues from Kuala Lumpur comments on the scenic attractions of the place: "it's like fucking hobbit-land down there", he says. I would then claim that such imagery is part of a landscape iconography of *Acquitted* to such an extent that it, at first, appears very conscious and structurally intended as a salient part of the visual concept of the drama.

### **Visual etymology of landscape imagery**

However, I would also claim that such imagery in television drama has a range of different historical roots: there goes a direct lineage from Nordic romantic paintings in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, across the commercial use of landscapes in a 20<sup>th</sup> Century age of advertising, into appropriation of such imagery in film and television drama in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century until today. In this way, *Acquitted* is one of many dramas that clearly use landscapes as a visual concept with a historical baggage, an inter-textual vocabulary or visual etymology running from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century until today.

Now, before exemplifying my ideas related to *Acquitted*, I would like to take you through a very quick tour of the historical development of the mediation of landscapes, a route that will take us through steps of Norwegian visual landscape history and directly back to *Acquitted* and many other Nordic dramas that use landscape imagery in a similar manner. This will cover media historical development since early 19<sup>th</sup> Century romantic landscape painting until recent place branding in film and television production. You have to excuse me for the brevity of the historical overview; much more can be said about these matters, and many scholarly references could be made. Though, here I don't have space for these.



As already said, the generic conventions in televised landscape iconography are deeply imbedded to landscape paintings throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. It is, for instance, said that Caspar David Friedrich imagined his 'Munk by the Sea' (1809) to be looking towards Iceland. He might as well have been looking towards Ystad in Southern Sweden, here with an image from the final episode from the Swedish *Wallander* series. Here, we clearly see the landscape imagery miming the romantic evocative landscape iconography of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

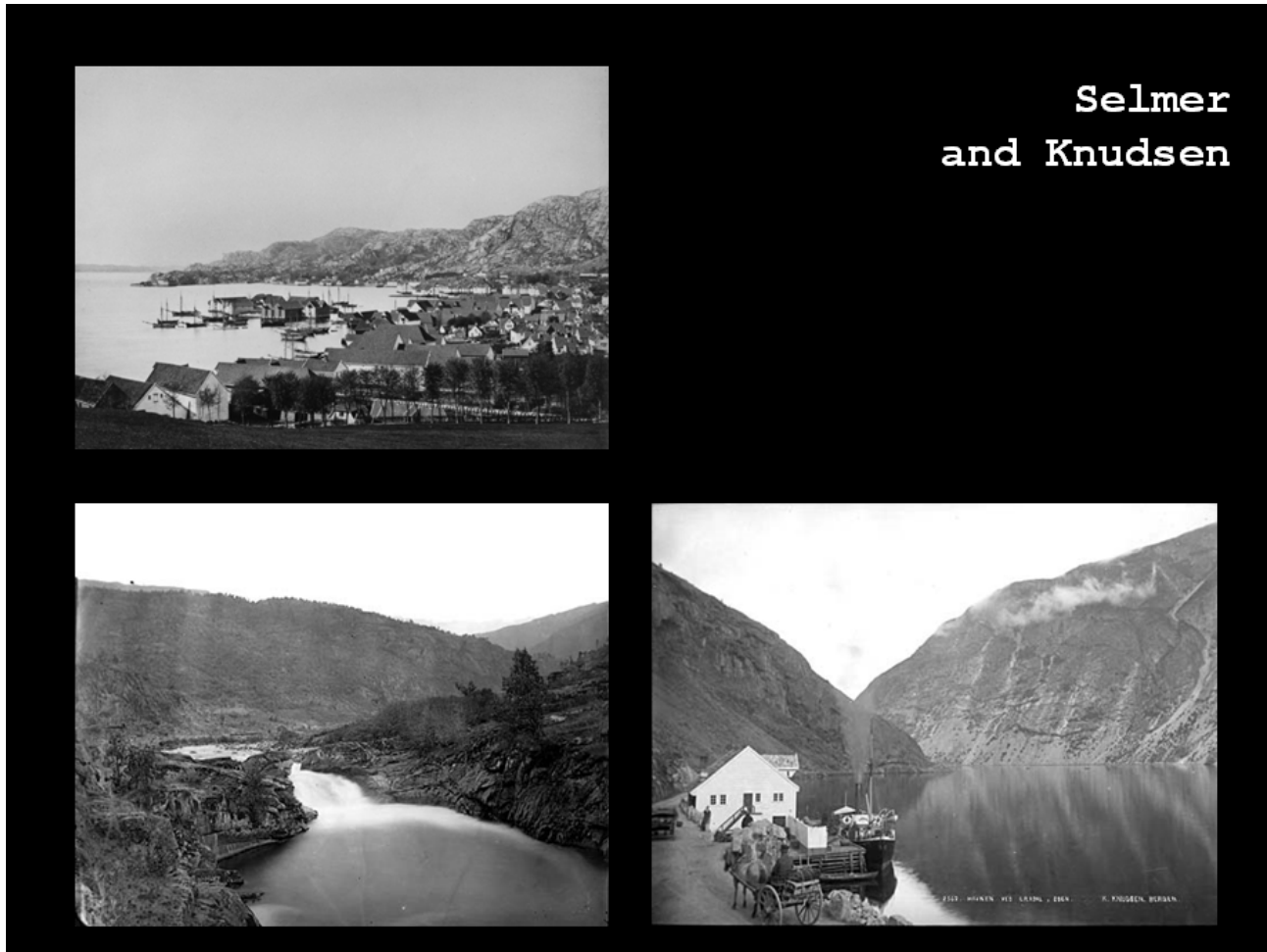


Friedrich and Wallander



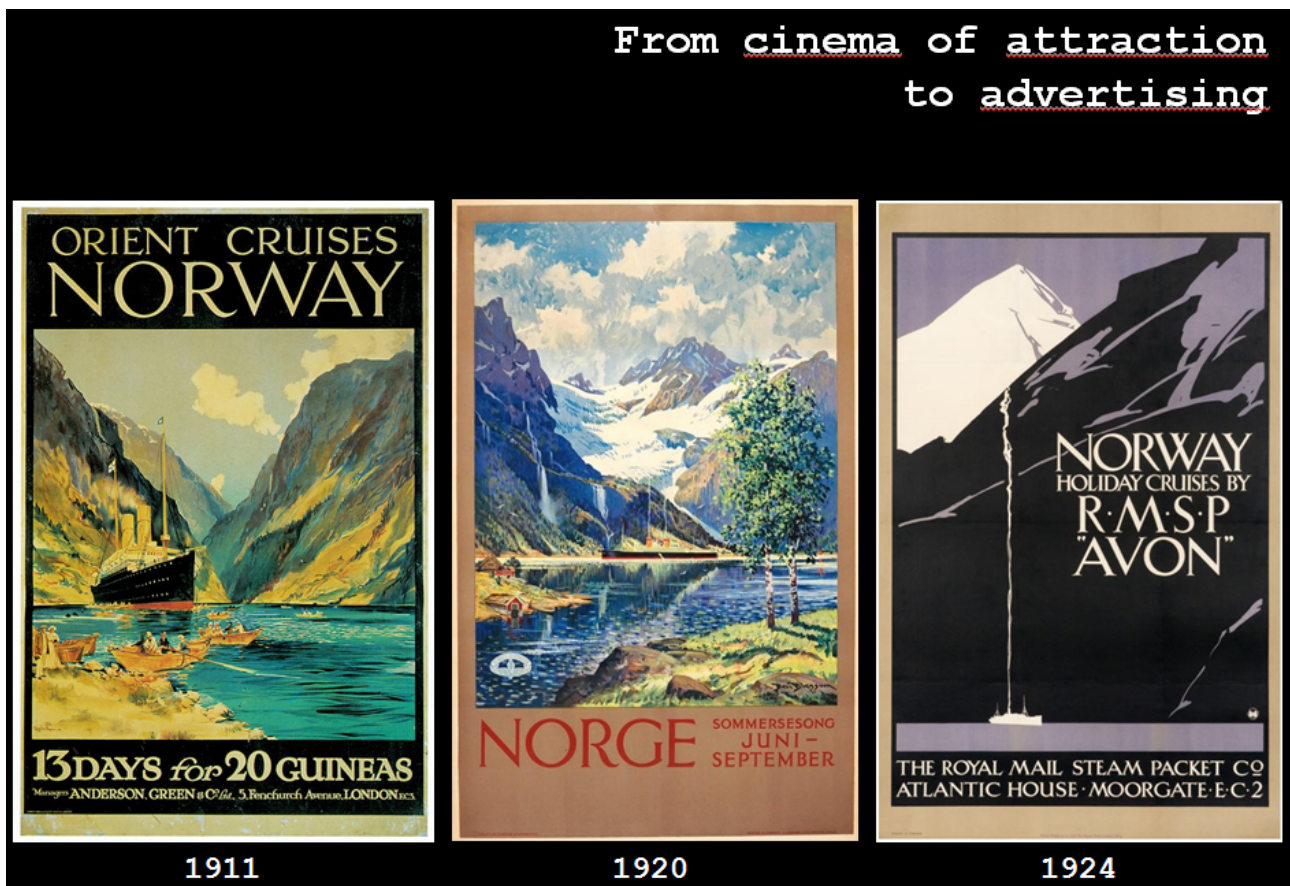
However, in going from landscape paintings in this period to commercial appropriation of such imagery in 20<sup>th</sup> Century, I would suggest that there are some missing links. In a Norwegian context, this would be landscape photography that developed mostly in the 1860s around Marcus Selmer who is considered the first landscape photographer in Norway. Most of his photography is lost today, though this image of Sandvika in Norway has obvious similarities with landscape imagery in *Acquitted*. Shortly after, the photographer Knud Knudsen took over, and had a significant interest in

national symbols and local colour, besides his interest in the Scandinavian landscape and topography.



From there, such imagery enters silent cinema in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Both Mimi White and Helen Wheatley refer to Tom Gunnings classic notion of ‘cinema of attraction’ as a basis underneath ‘television attractions’ and ‘spectacular television’, but in his essay Gunning himself refers to the American silent film “Personal” (1904) and the conspicuous way that the film makes use of landscape as attractive material in itself. For Gunning, early cinema attracted attention simply because it had an ability to show a mere *something*, and this something includes nature and landscape for Gunning too. In the same period, from the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, modern tourism developed, and as a result landscapes become marketable, and shortly after the birth of cinema we see the first advertisements using landscapes as a marketing tool, below with three examples from Norwegian travelling commercials. Scandinavian travel ad from travel agencies later used similar

images with a noteworthy resemblance with romantic imagery from landscape paintings. The 1960's emotional turn in advertising, interestingly portrayed in the first episodes of *Mad Men*, resulted in a direct use of landscapes, seascapes and cityscapes as commercial material, here from Danish cinema advertisements. The evocative sensibilities of 19<sup>th</sup> Century landscape paintings now turned in to a much more literal sense of visual attraction, that of commercial utilisation.



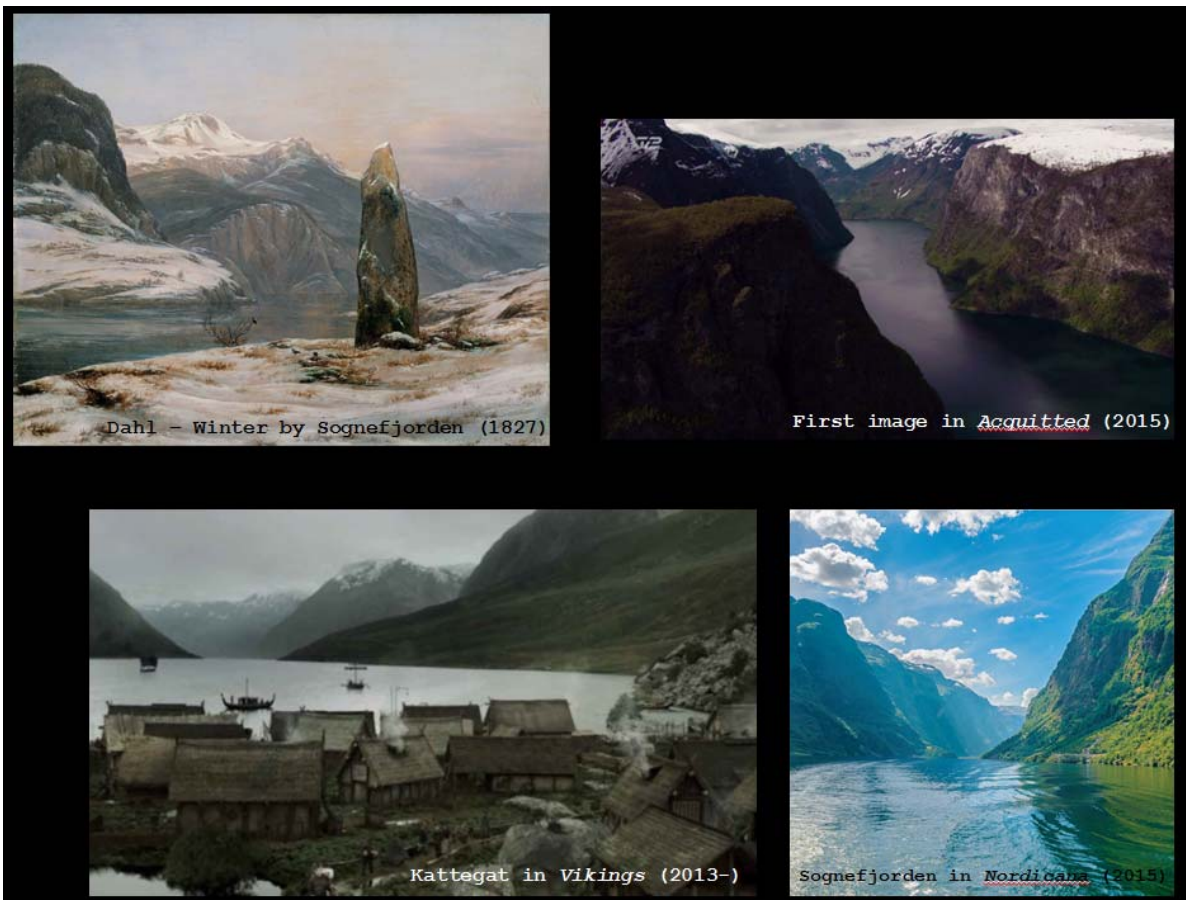
### *Acquitted* and/as sublimity light

The break with public service monopoly in Scandinavia in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century created new grounds for commercial development of the television production market. In Norway, TV 2 – the broadcaster and commissioning co-producer of *Acquitted* – was launched in the early 90's. In Scandinavia in general new commercial public service broadcasters established new possibilities for a private, independent production sector with opportunities to locate funding outside the usual broadcaster's budgets and national funding models, and this included city branding and regional branding models all over Scandinavia. This includes new models for private investment and an ever-changing financial landscape of television drama production.



When *Acquitted* was funded, Miso Film – the main independent producer of the drama – received local funding from the Bergen fund Fuzz. I do not know how large a part of the overall budget Fuzz was, but I would guess that they were *not* the main player. Today the Fuzz fund has been dissolved in order to establish the local media fund Zephyr. Even though such players probably do not play a huge part financially, they play an important role in shifting attention from the capitals to regional places in Scandinavian television production, including the Bergen area in Norway. And here, *Acquitted* is part of a more general both global and local tendency in which the very local can become a very global form of expression. And a very important reason for the global reach of such local imagery in *Acquitted* is the visual indebtedness to the visual historical baggage included in the etymology of the landscape images.

As a final example here, I link four images that indicate 1) a historical background of landscape images in specifically *Acquitted* while also stressing 2) an international vocabulary in the creation of a Scandinavian landscape, and finally 3) the commercial value of such imagery.



The first image is the national romantic painter Johan Christian Dahl's *Winter by Sognefjorden* (1827), which illustrates an art historical visuality. The second image is taken from History Channels series *Vikings* (2013-), here an image of the mythic town Kattegat, in the drama situated in Norway. However, the actual shooting location was Lough Tay in Ireland, indicating an international consciousness around images of the North. The third image is taken from Arrow Film, the main distributor of Nordic Noir in the UK, and their book *Nordicana* published for the 2015 UK festival on the so-called 'Nordic cool', here with a commercial image from Sognefjorden in Norway. Finally, I include the first image of *Acquitted* that clearly shows resemblances with the three different images here, as well as other images mentioned earlier.

In my headline for this paper, I refer to such intertextual circulation of imagery as *sublimity light*. As such, this is not an attempt to describe a watered down sense of sublimity, but it is rather a way to describe the ways in which landscapes of sublimity play many roles in a series like *Acquitted* (and many other series related to the idea of Nordic Noir and beyond). In much Nordic Noir the beauty of the landscapes are at once attractive and appealing for film and television tourists and appear awe-inspiring for characters and viewers, a middle ground between light and dark, attraction and repulsion, though the attractive elements of the landscapes has the upper hand rather than the darkness and lack of light. In this sense, with sublimity in the romantic sense being equally attractive and frightening, the level of fright and repulsion is toned down for the benefit of what we have called 'the beauty of autumn decay'. Basically, landscape imagery in dramas such as *Acquitted* play an important role in pointing towards local beauty, but – as is the case with *Acquitted* – also towards debates about provinciality and peripherality.

This paper is a spin-off from chapter 12 in the book *Locating Nordic Noir – From Beck to The Bridge* (with Anne Marit Waade), published at Palgrave Macmillan (2017). Please, consult this book for references and further details. Indications of a history of Norwegian landscape imagery included in this paper is not included in this chapter. It is, rather, a work in progress.