



## Scandinavian crime fiction, mediatization and cultural citizenship

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**Gunhild Agger:**

**Scandinavian crime fiction, mediatization and cultural citizenship**

**Keynote speech to SMID's conference, Haraldskær, 4-5.12.2008**

## **1. Introduction**

In this lecture, my endeavour will be to connect three areas: 1) Scandinavian crime fiction, 2) the concept of mediatization and 3) the concept of cultural citizenship. My approach assumes that mediation and mediatization are keywords in understanding the present development of crime fiction, and that cultural citizenship could be another keyword. I shall refer to historical crime fiction as this subgenre has delivered several interesting examples of functions related to the concepts of mediation, mediatization and cultural citizenship.

## **2. Scandinavian crime fiction – a brief survey**

In the Nordic welfare states, the real rate of crime is relatively low, and the detection rate is high - at least for serious crimes such as homicide. E.g. in Denmark, there are 50-80 homicides a year, and the detection rate is more than 90 % (Isager-Nielsen 2008: 121). According to Balvig and Kyvsgaard (2006), the number of reported offences against the penal code in 2005 was the lowest since 1985. Of course, many crimes are never reported and in this way the reported numbers cover an unknown number of hidden offences. On the basis of interviews, it is possible to estimate the real development, and it shows that the risk of being exposed to crime (theft, malicious damage or violence) in Denmark has fallen about 20 % during the period from 1987 to 2005. Nevertheless, the public is strongly preoccupied with crime, both as it is conveyed via fiction and via journalism.

Not so long ago, Scandinavia was a periphery seen from the angle of crime fiction. During the last forty years, however, the internationally known types of crime fiction became widespread via translations, transformations and, gradually, original contributions. Also, the interest in crime journalism took an upheaval, and the periphery turned into a production centre - as it is today.

Fiction in particular has played an important part in this conversion. Numerous authors of crime fiction, female as well as male, have expanded the concept of the typology and function of crime fiction. Sweden was the forerunner. The Scandinavian touch - contemporary crime fiction with a social conscience - was first developed by the couple Maj Sjöwahl and Per Wahlöö (1965-75) in their 'story of a crime' in ten volumes. In an international context, Henning Mankell and Liza Marklund are the most well-known authors who took over during the 1990s, but others aspire to

international recognition. In Sweden, Arne Dahl, Håkan Nesser, Jan Guillou, Inger Frimansson, Karin Alvtegen, and Åsa Nilsson represent various orientations and genres of modern crime fiction. In Norway the phenomenon of genre renewal is continued, the most distinguished contributors being Gunnar Staalesen, Jo Nesbø, Anne Holt and Karin Fossum. Besides the traditional detective novel, the socially engaged form and the crime thriller, other species have been developed during the last decade: the historical crime novel, the mythical variant, the very popular mixture between contemporary and historical forms, the existential and psychological types, feminist types, and various kinds of metafiction.

Film and TV drama based on books by the above mentioned authors (or on their characters, as in the case of Swedish *Beck*: based on Sjöwahl and Wahlöö's books or *Wallander*: based on Henning Mankell's books) have assumed crucial importance for the production industry. In this respect Denmark represents an exception. Here, the TV series were developed without a literary basis, primarily by DR. *Unit One* and *The Eagle*, both TV crime series, distinguished themselves winning Emmy awards in 2002 and 2005 as best foreign productions. Recently TV 2 has started developing a new crime series on the basis of novels by Elsebeth Egholm, confirming the combination trend elsewhere.

Attempts of developing a computer play industry on the same basis have proved to be harder. One example is Lisa Marklund's *Dollar – the Game* (PAN Vision Studio 2006). The internet, however, exhibits an abundance of sites connected to crime fiction and to all the other mediated versions – on film and television.

The spirit of enterprise and development on the side of writers and production teams has been met with an outspoken interest, bordering to enthusiasm, on the side of the audience. This is documented by e.g. the number of copies produced by publishing companies, the loans by libraries, the audience attending lectures on the topic, e.g. at book fairs, the viewers listed in ratings etc.

The prevailing features of the present public interest of crime fiction are

1. Crime fiction is accessible via its broad exposure in several, often interconnected, media: books, TV series, films, computer plays, internet (quantitative documentation).
2. Crime fiction has a broad appeal and is widely consumed and debated (documented by fan sites, reader response studies, public debate). This means that:
3. Several generations are interested in reading, watching and debating crime fiction.
4. Both sexes are interested in reading, watching and debating crime fiction.

Generally speaking, these traits are common in Western societies on the whole.

In a Scandinavian context, national interest in crime fiction may have augmented due to the changing relationship between periphery and production centre. The import from UK and the USA still prevails, but today books as well as films and TV series (both originals and formats) are produced and screened domestically as well as exported to other countries. In 2008, *Wallander* has even been adapted by BBC and is produced in Ysted with Kenneth Branagh as Wallander. The *Krimi Spezial* edition of *Buchkultur*, summer 2008, lists the following Swedish writers on their top10 list: Stieg Larsson (2), Johan Theorin (5), Åke Edwardson (7), and Matti Rönkä, a Finn, is nr. 8. The English and American speaking audience is rather self-contained; nevertheless several Scandinavian authors have been translated to English/American (Henning Mankell, Liza Marklund, Jo Nesbø).

How can we explain this raising interest in Scandinavian crime? For this purpose the concepts of mediation, mediatization, and cultural citizenship will be considered.

### **3. Mediation and mediatization**

Since the modern, urban breakthrough, crime has been a popular ingredient in the media. Exposure in the media has been a crucial factor in determining how crime has been perceived within the public sphere. According to Taylor (1998) some homicides are more apt for the press than others. In 1994, 727 homicides took place in UK; many of them only receiving little or no attention in the media. In 'the perfect murder', the victim is a woman or a child, preferably innocent, attractive, upper-middleclass, and with a hint of sexuality. The case of Madeleine McCann (who disappeared May 4, 2007 and has never been found) illustrates the point: the media coverage has been overwhelming and often nauseating. This is just one example of what mediation means in this context – that the message is affected by the media.

Mediated, fictional representations contribute to our reservoir of images, connected with crime, to our conceptions of its dominant forms and to our understanding and way of discussing it. This does not mean that we cannot distinguish between facts and fiction or that violence on the screen necessarily encourages real violence. It just means that mediated, fictional representations matter, just as "Style Matters" to quote a title from Jeff Ferrell (1995). The real is nearly always mediated. Few people have witnessed a murder taking place in reality. More people have witnessed the stealing of a book or a bike or they have met violence in the streets. As pointed out by Michelle Brown, basically, we draw on mediated representations imagining serious crime: "in order to

theorize how those representations are fundamentally bound up with social practice, one must interrogate how images are recursively caught in the reproduction and reinvention of social knowledge and ideology, sites of permanent struggle” (Brown 2007: 16).

In his book *En verden af medier* Stig Hjarvard uses the concept of mediatization to define a new era in which media are no longer separable from society. Mediatization means “the process where society increasingly becomes subordinate to or dependant on the media and their logic” (Hjarvard 2008: 28, my translation). Hjarvard analyzes the mediatization process as a doubleness of integration and autonomy. During the integration process, the media are embedded in the functioning of other social institutions. Simultaneously, the media more and more tend to form an autonomous institution in society. According to Hjarvard, another consequence of the mediatization process is the blurred, more complex relationship between facts and fiction, not in the sense that the real disappears, but in the sense of an augmented consciousness of e.g. the real being narrated and the fictitious having roots in some kind of reality.

These features of are visible in the area of crime representation, and on their side they can be used to further highlight the process of mediatization:

1. There is a constant *chain of communication and exchange between different media*, enhancing the permanent interest of crime in the media. This means that often mediation will contribute to the process of mediatization, as the example of the disappeared Madeleine exhibits. In this case, the logic of the media, following every possible and impossible development of the investigation, took over the original purpose of urging the public to help finding the little girl.
2. *The doubleness of integration and autonomy* is clearly demonstrated in the area of crime. Integration is a part of the policy where the police get access to the media to convey their messages to the public. The exposure via the various media, bringing new versions every hour, and not least the linking of versions contribute to the integration process. But autonomy is the other side of the coin: In police magazines, the whole crime is reconstructed; here the producer possesses the director’s cut. And later on the crimes may be retold in memoirs of policemen (Isager-Nielsen 2008). Or they are re-enacted in crime fiction as drama documentaries - or fiction based on a true story.
3. This in its turn may result in a *blurred, more complex relationship between fact and fiction* where we do not question fictional stylistic devices conveying facts or devices signalling facts in fiction.

#### 4. Cultural citizenship

In his introduction to *Crime and Fantasy in Scandinavia* Andrew Nestingen proposes an understanding of popular culture in Scandinavia as "a site in which civil society is beginning to emerge" (Nestingen 2008: 7). His analysis is that due to the imperatives of neoliberalism, the old, Scandinavian, Social Democratic identification between nation and state, has gradually fallen apart. His claim is that the Nordic countries are undergoing a "transformative struggle over moral order" (Nestingen 2008: 38). One of the consequences is that many discussions that formerly took place in a political context now have switched to the domain of popular culture: "Popular literature and cinema, then, have become what Taylor calls "spaces of display" (2004, 167-171). That is, they are a forum in the continuum of private and public in which subjects can self-reflexively use language and image, while also displaying to others the way they are doing so, thereby bidding for the attention and backing of spectators" (ibid.). Nestingen concludes: "If we want to understand contemporary Scandinavia and its struggles over transformation, we need to study and discuss popular culture" (Nestingen 2008: 9).

Nestingen is very direct in establishing the relationship between civic society and popular culture. Although he does not consider the concept of cultural citizenship, he makes use of it for his basic purpose – to establish popular culture as a space of display "for the formations of demands that mobilizes publics" (Nestingen 2008: 38).

This understanding and practical use corresponds to Joke Hermes' as put forward in *Re-reading popular culture* (2005). Popular culture is here defined as "the domain in which allegiances are built and through which we feel connected" (Hermes 2005: 15).

Cultural citizenship is the explicit term used in this book to analyze the democratic potential of popular culture. Hermes' interest is to highlight how cultural citizenship can be used "in relation to less formal everyday practices of identity construction, representation, and ideology, and implicit moral obligations and rights" (Hermes 2005: 4). Consequently, her definition is expressed in the following way: "*Cultural citizenship can be defined as the process of bonding and community building, and reflection on that bonding, that is implied in partaking of the text-related practices of reading, consuming, celebrating, and criticizing offered in the realm of (popular) culture* (Hermes 2005: 7).

On the basis of these approaches, Hermes asks: "can reading a mass-marketed genre such as crime fiction be construed as a form of cultural citizenship?" (Hermes 2000: 219). On the basis of

empirical research (interviews), she distinguishes three constructions of crime reading as a form of citizenship:

1. an agenda of social issues that need to be worked through
2. the construction of the reader: as what kind of person are we constructed in our capacity of crime readers?
3. the discussion of various questions concerning the domestication of feminism

*Doubleness and ambiguity* are key terms in the interviews both concerning the quality and status of crime fiction, gender and the possibility of changing gender roles. In spite of that Hermes' conclusion is that crime fiction has the function of being "a domain in which we may question how we belong to society" (Hermes 2000: 230).

In his article "Culture and citizenship – The missing link?" (2006) Nick Couldry criticizes among others Hermes' use of the term cultural citizenship basically on the grounds that it is unclear what it means: Is it a new kind of citizenship – on line with e.g. political, economic, social citizenship, or is it old wine on new bottles? He proposes a sharp distinction between 'cultural citizenship' (caution!) and 'culture of citizenship', which he finds more productive. Finally, he proposes the concept of 'public connection' as a more precise term for mediated versions of the public world. His conclusion is that "Media are important, but not always in a way that sustains public connection" (Couldry 2006: 215).

This conclusion seems to be challenged by some examples from the history of Danish TV drama. *Sommer* was DR's TV serial flagship of 2008. Aesthetically and thematically it was rather old fashioned, depicting conflicts in a family dynasty of doctors. Despite these shortcomings, it succeeded drawing public attention to two issues: the work carried out by a NGO such as *Médécins sans Frontières* and the effects of Alzheimer's Disease. The organizations *Médécins sans Frontières* and The Alzheimer Society (*Alzheimerforeningen*) benefited. In this case we saw a direct connection between the exposure of everyday problems via TV fiction and the level of interest in and memberships of organizations involved, facilitated by internet references (links from DR to *Médécins sans Frontières* and articles written by The National Knowledge Centre for Dementia). This is the most recent example that can interpreted in terms of both mediatization and cultural citizenship in progress – an example that sustains public connection. Other examples can be found in the area of historical crime fiction, both in the form of TV drama and books.

## **5. Historical Crime Fiction**

According to publishers, librarians and booksellers, historical novels are one of the most popular genres. Since Sir Walter Scott launched the genre with *Waverley* in 1814, it has been one of the heartlands of popular culture. The historical novel has proven its vitality, being able to expand into other media (e.g. feature films, television series, docudramas) in a continuing process of renewal. The incentive of this process is the ability of making alliances with other genres. As time goes by, the historical novel has had many partners – melodrama, feminism, biography, politics, myth, religion and metafiction - just to name a few. Crime is one of the latest associates, but not the least interesting.

What is true for the historical novel – its ability to enter new partnerships – is also characteristic of the alliance between the historical novel and crime fiction. Since *The Name of the Rose* (1980), Umberto Eco's international bestseller, the subgenre of historical crime fiction has developed a variety of new types. In classical historical crime fiction, an accurate description of the setting and the predominant ways of thinking in the chosen period is crucial, and the plot is developed according to the time depicted. Historical crime fiction in this sense has also hit television, *Foyle's War* (ITV, 2001-2008) being one of the most prominent examples. But there are other ways. What I would call the historical-contemporary combination model has gained increasing impact. In this model, historical elements merge into the plot providing a wider range of complication and a deeper kind of interpretation of the crimes in question.

How do we explain this fascination with the past also in various types of crime fiction? My assumption is that the past when represented in contemporary crime fiction has three decisive functions. It serves as 1) a mirror and a moral yardstick for the present time and its notion of transgression; 2) a forum for how present national self-knowledge finds a popular form of expression that may contribute to cultural citizenship; 3) a catalyst for the awareness of time, which is essential to genres of suspense.

## **6. Mirror, Forum and Catalyst**

A popular historical element in contemporary Scandinavian crime fiction is World War II - the time of the German Occupation in Norway and Denmark. Many authors have delivered examples of that. As my main examples in this context I have chosen two novels, one by Henning Mankell: *The Return of the Dancing Master* (Swedish ed. 2000, American ed. 2004) and the other by Jo Nesbø: *The Redbreast* (Norwegian ed. 2000, recent English ed.). In both cases the plot revolves around the heritage of Nazism and the roots of neo-Nazism. In *The Return of the Dancing Master*, Stefan Lindman, a younger policeman, fleeing from himself and his cancer, seeks to find some answers to

some fundamental question: How is it possible that a neo-Nazi movement can develop in a Welfare State like Sweden? Is the official understanding of history correct, or is it oblivious to certain unpleasant facts such as a wide-spread pro-German attitude in neutral Sweden during World War II? In certain ways the past continues its existence into the present: the neo-Nazi values and organization functions as a distorted mirror for that. And it demonstrates that the germ of Nazism could exist anywhere. Lindman gets a turn to find out that his own father had pro-German sympathies during the war. As the novel ends, Lindman has not only detected the murderers, but also the complicated connexions between past and present.

In the case of *The Redbreast*, the very interpretation of history is the core of the crime. Gudmund Johansen represents the point of view of the not so few soldiers fighting on the German side at the Eastern front in the conviction that they did it to keep Norway free of Communism. That he later should be treated as a traitor to his country was incomprehensible and consequently unacceptable for him. The unwillingness to accept the version of the victorious side becomes fatal as Johansen, formerly nicknamed The Redbreast, decides to confront what from his viewpoint are the liars of history.

In both cases, elements from the past are distortedly mirrored in the present: the ideology of extreme nationalism from the past is seen as a grim heritage in the present. And vice versa: If people in free societies nowadays can be tempted to adopt neo-Nazi values, it is easier to understand how it could happen in authoritarian societies. In this way, a debate is raised concerning present national self-knowledge: which values do we accept (e.g. concern for the land we live in) and which values do we reject (e.g. aggressive forms of nationalism, excluding certain members of the society from participating in it). In both cases, the simultaneous presence of historical and modern time contributes to an acute awareness of time: the moment, the fleeting time, the sense of all that formerly was. And let us not forget that time is one of the keys of crime fiction: this stressing of various aspects of time perfectly matches the acute sense of time, so functionally and aesthetically essential to crime fiction. To illustrate this final point, *The Redbreast* is illuminating. Another synonym of *The Redbreast* is Uriah, the well known figure from The Old Testament, who was sent to a post in the war, which got him killed. This story is repeated by history, both during World War II, in the case of Johansen – and in the case of Harry Hole, Nesbø's favourite investigator.

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