

TV CRIME DRAMA AS TRANSCULTURAL COMMUNICATION: CREATIVE EUROPE'S PREDILECTION FOR NORTH-EUROPEAN CRIME DRAMAS

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Abstract

Half of all television dramas co-funded by Creative Europe's TV Programming scheme in the period 2014-20 have been related to crime narratives. The scheme has contributed to the financing of many popular crime series, such as *The Bridge* (DK/SE 2011-2018), *Babylon Berlin* (DE 2017-) or *Trapped* (IS 2015-) and fostered new stories of European transnational identity such as *The Team* (DE/BE/DK 2015-) or *Midnight Sun* (F/SE 2016). *The Team* has been compared with the Eurovision Song Contest (no pun intended!), which indicates the overall communication strategy behind promoting a series like *The Team* and co-funding television crime dramas to this extent: Crime narratives work well not only as entertainment, but also as a means of transcultural communication.

From a geographical point of view, this paper examines the television crime productions that received funding from the CE's TV Programming scheme, highlighting that the imbalance already found in the overall TV scheme must be seen in the light of close collaboration between North-European proximate territories. Surely, different genres are historically represented in the association between Germany and primarily the Scandinavian countries, but here the profiled position of Scandinavian crime fiction appears to be the engine that drives forward international collaboration.

This is not as such a result of the policy behind CE's TV Programming scheme, since collaboration among partners in Scandinavia and Germany is rooted in working relationships predating Creative Europe by decades, such as the development of German co-production in Scandinavia in the early 90's and the Nordic funding scheme Nordvision and others. In other words, four North-European countries appear to have been well-equipped in advance to meet the criteria of CE through already established collaboration around crime drama. The European funding scheme may, in this way, have strengthened already strong relationships rather than creating new ones.

Here, I will departure directly from our overall assessment of the TV programming scheme and look more closely at the genres that appear in our dataset. As the title suggest, there is a clear predilection for crime narratives in the funding system, which is, by itself, an interesting feature for a research project on crime like DETECT. However, as we conclude, it may be hard to give the Creative Europe programme as such credit for the transnational circulation implied in the funding scheme's evaluation criteria. When the scheme was published, a Scandinavian-German production cluster stood ready with an overall production ecology that fitted the scheme very well.

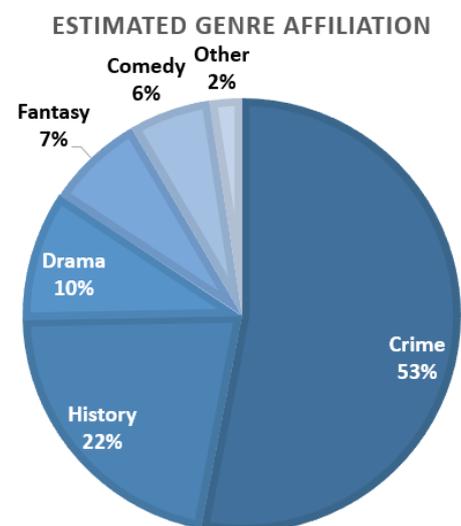
I will return to this argument in a bit. Firstly, I wish to briefly dwell with the idea of TV crime series as transcultural communication, as this is the main objective or ideal ambition of the EU's cultural funding system. In the Creative Europe programme – in general, and not just the TV scheme – this is rooted in what is often referred to as “the European added-value” in evaluation criteria. Most importantly, a European dimension in Creative Europe's funding for creative and cultural industries is manifest in how well projects co-funded by the programme travel across and beyond the continent. The motivation driving such circulation is cultural awareness across nations and cultures, hence ideally becoming acts of communication that – with the words from Andreas Hepp (2015) – “promote differences that *transcend* various traditional cultures”. This paper is not the place to critically scrutinize what transnational communication is by definition. Instead, our point is that ‘transcending individual cultures’ is an ideal strove towards by policymakers of the EU. Before dealing

with the genres represented in the TV programming scheme, I wish to give you one concrete example, one that was also co-funded by the TV scheme: *The Team*.

The second season of *The Team* appears in our dataset, and in many ways, this serves as the perfect example of the idealism implied in the scheme. In production, it involved five different European producers and seven European broadcasters, these from seven different European countries. The series tells the story in six different languages about three local detective teams investigating international border crossing crime through close transnational collaboration. Upon release of the first season, the former EBU Media Director Annika Nyberg Frankenhaeuser (2012-15) said: “This exciting new crime series shows that television, like the Eurovision Song Contest, can help bring Europeans together. Series like *Borgen* brought global acclaim and showed that language is no barrier to the international success of 'Made in Europe' fiction and *The Team* adds something new to the mix. It is the first genuine 'European' series of its kind” (Banks 2015). On the one hand, Frankenhaeuser is not right in her historical assessment of the originality of the show, but that is not the point that I wish to make. Rather, what strikes me in this quote is the way that she equates series like *Borgen* and *The Team* with the Eurovision Song Contest – a show that, at its highest, have had over 200m viewers in and beyond Europe. In other words, Eurovision serves as an example of transcultural communication (for better or for worse), and the policy agenda implied in Frankenhaeuser’s evaluation of *The Team*’s potential speaks directly into the same interest in creating transculturality across European borders. In the same interview, Frankenhaeuser highlights that there is “a solid history of co-production in the genre”, which for us builds a bridge into Creative Europe’s predilection for crime series *and* into the Scandinavian-German cluster that I return to later.

Crime series in the TV scheme

In the period 2014-20, the TV scheme co-funded 83 fictional TV series in total. We evaluated each programme qualitatively according to available information regarding genre. Such information was derived from the *Internet Movie Database* (IMDb) and production companies’ own genre qualifications. In addition, samples of the data were amended by additional research for specific programmes, including watching, annotating and genre qualifying the shows. The data quality was boosted further by information from original broadcasters. In the end, the fiction programmes co-funded by the TV scheme were broken down into six large estimated genre categories: crime, history, drama, fantasy, comedy and other (including unavailable genre affiliations). Naturally, a number of the series – such as *Babylon Berlin* – implies genre hybridity, and in such cases the most dominant genre was preferred. As the central plot devices and storyline in for instance *Babylon Berlin* is a crime story, and as the IMDB uses ‘crime’ as the most important genre, the series was registered as a crime narrative.



The result of this genre estimation is an overwhelming dominance of crime narratives in the TV scheme. No less than 44 series out of the 83 co-funded European series are, by a majority of IMDB-users and through our own genre qualification, deemed to be TV crime series. Firstly, this shows a comparatively strong difference from the genres represented in the European film funding opportunities, where crime plays a diminutive role (as pointed out by Stefano Baschiera and Markus

Schleich in our forthcoming DETECT report on European cultural mobility). Secondly, the crime genre has been highlighted as the genre that is easiest to co-produce, e.g. by a number of scholars and producers, among others Ib Bondebjerg and Eva Novrup Redvall, and also in my own collaboration with the Danish broadcaster TV 2. On the one hand, this points back to the point raised by Frankenhaeuser about the history of co-production within the genre. On the other, however, it also maintains a range of specific genre traits that may work well in stories transcending internally European geographical boundaries, including crimes and detectives trespassing borders both within and beyond the European continent. The result is, then, that when the calls in the TV scheme ask specifically for “the European added-value”, implying potential to co-produce and travel internationally, the crime genre seems to have an advantage from the get-go.

The Nordic-German production cluster in the TV scheme

However, as we see a general dominance of the crime genre across the European continent, essentially a *raison d’être* for the whole DETECT project, one final question needs to be answered: why do we see such a dominance from only five countries in the TV funding scheme, if the crime genre is an all-pervading international genre? In order to reply to this, we need to return to Frankenhaeuser’s reference to the long prehistory of co-production within the genre.

If we look at the top four receivers of funding for TV fiction in the TV scheme, we find that the three Scandinavian countries Norway, Sweden and Denmark, and Germany take home no less than 65% of the fiscal share and 61% of the grants in total. Such a dominant bias towards only four North-European countries indicates that the crime genre alone is not the sole reason, and that it needs an explanation that has more to do with production ecologies and pre-established creative affinities among the four countries. If we include the funding that went to Iceland and Finland, the Nordic cluster by itself is strongly represented by taking home 53% of the total funding for TV fiction programming in Creative Europe 2014-20.

| Country | Award | No. of awards | Fiscal share | | FR, GE, SW, DE, NO |
|-----------------|-------------------|---------------|---------------|----------------|-----------------------|
| Austria | 750,000 | 2 | 1.5% | Top 5: | 37,695,000 |
| Belgium | 1,000,000 | 2 | 2.0% | Fiscal share: | 76% |
| Croatia | 260,000 | 1 | 0.5% | Top 5 grants: | 55 |
| Denmark | 5,850,000 | 10 | 11.9% | Grant share: | 66% |
| Finland | 255,347 | 1 | 0.5% | | |
| France | 5,730,000 | 9 | 11.6% | | GE, SW, DE, NO |
| Germany | 8,760,000 | 14 | 17.8% | Top 4: | 31,965,000 |
| Iceland | 2,471,824 | 6 | 5.0% | Fiscal share: | 65% |
| Italy | 2,500,000 | 3 | 5.1% | Top 4 grants: | 51 |
| Norway | 6,725,000 | 8 | 13.6% | Grant share: | 61% |
| Spain | 871,552 | 3 | 1.8% | | |
| Sweden | 10,630,000 | 19 | 21.6% | | Nordics |
| The Netherlands | 500,000 | 1 | 1.0% | Total finance: | 25,932,171 |
| UK | 3,000,000 | 4 | 6.1% | Fiscal share: | 53% |
| SUM | 49,303,723 | 83 | 100.0% | Grant share: | 53% |

In fact, the Nordic countries and Germany have a prehistory of strong co-production and co-funding relationships among each other. Through both Nordvision and The Nordic Film and TV Fund, the Nordic countries have an institutionalized co-production relationship, while Swedish, Norwegian and Danish languages share similar linguistic features making them mutually understandable, although co-production between the three countries is *not* considered linguistic co-production. As I've highlighted in *Locating Nordic Noir* (2017) with Anne Marit Waade, German co-funding has been instrumental in boosting the production value of especially Danish and Swedish crime dramas as well as their international distribution. This started as early as the 1990's in the Swedish-German collaboration on six adaptations of novels by the quintessential crime writers Sjöwall and Wahlöö, including collaboration between broadcasters SVT in Sweden and RTL in Germany. This continued in a range of collaborations with especially German ZDF on the *Beck* series, the *Wallander* series, the Emmy-award winning series *The Eagle*, and the very important role played by ZDF Enterprises in the world-wide distribution of the Danish series *The Killing*. In other words, internal collaboration within the Nordic region has a decadelong prehistory, while the German connection in especially Nordic crime series cannot be underestimated.

This feeds into the funding results in the Creative Europe TV scheme. Here, Nordic-German co-production was found in almost one in every four fiction titles supported by the TV programming scheme (23%). Either among the Nordic countries or by including German collaboration, the required collaboration between at least three countries in the 2014-20 scheme seems almost 'mechanical' in accessing funding from the TV programme. Therefore, the Nordic-German cluster appears as the very strongest in the network of co-productions supported by the TV Programming scheme, because the production ecology and the already established creative relationships between the countries fitted the policy of the TV programming scheme very well.

Conclusion

Altogether it, then, comes as no surprise that the crime genre takes home over half of the funding for TV fiction in the Creative Europe programme. Interestingly enough, when Germany is awarded fiction funding as a majority producer, the genre affinity is most often historical drama, often tied directly to the Second World War and the Cold War. So, when Germany appears as a producer of crime narratives, they regularly appear in the dataset as a minority co-producer on Nordic crime series. On the one hand, this is based on the long history of what eventually becomes the international attention towards Nordic Noir. On the other, it tells an interesting story about the important hidden role played by Germany in the international propagation of Nordic Noir – and, not least, how Creative Europe may have ended up strengthening already strong transnational production ecologies in the period 2014-20.

For more information, see our DETECT policy brief "Creative Europe's Support for European TV Fiction Programming" (2020) and the DETECT report *Cultural mobility through narrative media production in the European cultural space* (D4.3, forthcoming).