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Location placement in Nordic Noir

Nordic crime narratives as banal Nordism

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This chapter draws attention to location placement in Nordics through crime narratives. It highlights that in the region there is a direct line from actual/practical location placement in especially television production, to location branding for local areas, to general national and transnational spatial branding, and to the creation of a location-based ideology around transnational collaboration and cultural relationships. In conclusion, it is clear that *patience and public expenditure* are important ingredients if such ‘likemindedness’ through media production and distribution is sought on a larger geopolitical level. Methodically, the chapter draws on production studies of Nordic screen production, i.e. insight into contemporary television production through interviews and material from producing and branding the series.²

The birth of Nordic Noir

As a concept, Nordic Noir was born in 2009 as an alliteration in the bookclub of University College London (UCL). Quickly after this, the concept travelled to marketing material, e.g. from the British wholesale distributor Arrow Films. Soon after this, we began to see the first academic titles scrutinizing the notion of ‘Nordic Noir’. Embedded in this spread of a concept, journalists and the press in general started using the concept as a description of crime narratives coming out of the Nordic region (Hansen and Waade 2017).

Especially titles by authors like Henning Mankell, Stieg Larsson and Jo Nesbø as well as TV series like *Wallander*, *The Killing* and *The Bridge* now became re-branded by this new and powerful concept. Distributors and academics started to ponder on this concept, stressing that the roots in the Nordic region goes back much further – and include a very conspicuous starting point: Mai Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö’s ten police procedurals about the police officer Martin Beck (1965-75).

Today, the notion of Nordic Noir may be used interchangeably with Nordic crime fiction (sometimes Scandi-crime), but some argue that Nordic Noir has its own stylistic TV-features, such as dark monochrome colours, slow-paced narrative rhythm, desolate locations and a narratively contained social critique (Creeber 2015).

Banal Nordism

Though he speaks only about the TV series *Trapped* (2015-), location observations from the Icelandic screenwriter and producer Sigurjon Kjartansson is very representative of how especially Nordic TV crime narratives have played a decisive role in establishing a local and global approach to places at once:

“Going out of the city gives us the specialty of Iceland. How Iceland is unique, how the landscape is unique. We set the first series in a small town in Iceland, but small towns tend to be like each other, it’s an international thing. The thing of the small town. But

¹ Research presented in this chapter has been financed by the research project *DETECT – Detecting Transcultural Identity in European Popular Crime Narratives* (Horizon 2020, 2018-21).

² Interviews quoted in this section have all been approved by the respondents. References to the interviews can be found in the bibliography.

still we are in Iceland, we have the crazy sea, we have the crazy mountains and we have the crazy snow and everything. So what we brought to the world was something visually unique.” (Kjartansson 2016)

Location placement in Nordic Noir signals the uniqueness of the settings and landscapes in the Nordic region, but at the same time the appeal has been intentionally international.

For decades, the Nordic region has been exemplary in its regional collaboration between its countries, between public service institutions and commercial players on the market (Hansen and Waade 2017). Such a collaboration has produced what Stuart Burch (2013) calls ‘banal Nordism’, a reference to a collaborative and joint idea of the Nordic region as a communal region with a shared mind-frame. Kim Toft Hansen has recently related this notion of ‘banal Nordism’ to how different institutions on the Nordic market tap into this ideology of Nordism (Hansen 2020).

As a result, location placement in the Nordic region not only concerns the actual, active construction of a setting for a scene in a film or TV drama production. Through years of development, Nordic screened location placement has increasingly become embedded in political interests, economic interests and representative interests in the actual locations. For Kjartansson, it is clear that he wishes to represent something that brands or represents Iceland as a geographical place, but at the same time he realizes the international appeal of such screened places.

Location placement in the Nordic region has become marked by several interests from local, national and regional policymakers, from tourism agencies, from an increasing number of producers in creative industries and, as a result, from the viewers and perhaps media tourists too.

Location strategies: creative focus

The Denmark-based pan-Nordic production company Miso Film is representative for recent tendencies on the television market in the Nordic region: increased interest in co-producing content, establishing local offices in Denmark, Norway and Sweden, close collaboration with broadcasters (often, commercial public service) and an ingrained market interest in localizing the content for both an economically strategic and a narrative reason. Miso Film has strategically used crime narratives as a popular genre to claim a central position on the Nordic screen market. Producing local content with a Nordic interest, they have been able to secure local, national and international funding for their productions. From a productional point of view, the crime series *Modus* (2017-) is a case in point: it is written by the Danish writers Mai Broström and Peter Thorsboe, based on a Norwegian novel by Anne Holt and screened in Sweden in Swedish. Altogether, this indicates that local presence with an international outlook also means something for the producer. Such a production also produces ‘banal Nordism’ through its integration of Scandinavian perspectives directly in the production model.

The simultaneity of local and global processes and interests stressed by Kjartansson in *Trapped* is also clearly represented ‘behind the camera’ in the production process. Through collaborative co-funding practices – local screen agencies, national funding bodies, and international production support – content travels relatively easily internally in the Nordic region – and has received a remarkable international attention, creating something uniquely local and international in content and process in the Nordic region. The Norwegian Miso Film TV-series *Frikjent (Acquitted)* (2015-16) exemplifies this very well. Produced for the Norwegian commercial public service channel TV2, the series is a collaboration between Norwegian, Swedish, Danish and Icelandic players, underlining the local and Nordic mind-frame behind the series.

This is also featured in the location placement of the series. Here, a quote from the company’s sales brochure (Miso Film 2015) illustrates how locations have become a salient part of pitching

and selling productions outside the domestic market. Unhindered, the director Geir Henning Hopland navigates between local representations in a global world as well as the local colour of the areas around the picturesque Sognefjorden in Norway and the notion of national representation of Norway:

“Nature is a recurring motif in the series, creating a poignant backdrop for the series and heightening its power. Neon lights and skyscrapers in Kuala Lumpur meet a traditional Western Norway village surrounded by beautiful, dramatic landscape. We use the colours of nature, and earth tones provide extra warmth to the story. Many of these colours can be seen in the buildings and environs of Norway. Houses are often painted in earth tones, and materials such as untreated wood and natural stone are put to good use.” (Miso Film 2015)

The title sequence in *Acquitted* is at once a narrative and locative introduction to the series. It is narrative in the way we see a symbolic representation of the storyline, but it is also highly locative in its conspicuous location placement. Clearly, story and place blend together. Likewise, the creators of *Acquitted* have clearly expressed how the central character should be perceived as indicatively represented through the use of the spectacular Norwegian landscapes. They have stressed how the water and the mountains can be both attractively beautiful at the same time as being tragically dangerous – perhaps, just like the mysterious central character that returns to a small Norwegian town where he was accused of murder 20 years before (Eliassen and Bache-Wiig 2017).

Trapped and *Acquitted* are highly representative examples of how locations in Nordic television crime dramas have become a marketable asset alongside the suspense-filled narrative. The result is an interest in the places of crime fiction specifically, but it is also reflected in the overall attention towards crime narratives in and from the Nordic region.

Producing regional proximities

Still, locative branding models do not indicate that locations are chosen as merely a local representation for a global audience. There are other more important influential factors that have an impact on location placement – locally, nationally, regionally and internationally. Even though globalization has had an incredible effect on how content is produced and distributed, there are still tendencies towards collaboration within regional proximities. The recent Danish-Swedish-German-British-Norwegian co-production *Greyzone* (2018-) illustrates this very well: Though it is a transnational story with a transnational funding model, the funding for the series comes from neighboring countries around the North Sea area. However, creator Rasmus Thorsen stresses that the transnational funding model for TV drama today is an unavoidable fact:

“The positive angle to this is that if you have an international story, then you don’t have to force the narrative and the creative process in order to make it work. You could say that it has Denmark at the centre, then you have Norway to the north, Sweden is east, England is west, and Germany is south. Basically, the series is financed only by neighbouring countries – and I guess that it would have been very different if we had had French money too” (Thorsen 2018)

The attention towards locations and regionality in producing television drama is, for the Miso Film producer Peter Bose (2018), also a basic financial matter. According to him the Nordic region

still possess opportunities due to the fact that there is a history of co-production that goes decades back. As head of fiction at the Scandinavian SVoD Viaplay, Nanna Mailand (2018), indicates that in the Nordic region, there may be a shared culture that creates regional opportunities to tap into ‘banal Nordism’ as an socio-cultural and financial rationale. For Mailand, especially crime narratives motivate such special collaborative opportunities.

Researcher Ib Bondebjerg stresses that crime narratives may be “‘natural’ European stories” (2016: 5), while Elke Weissmann refers to such narratives as “‘explicitly transnational’ productions” (2012: 12). The subject matter (crime) is a border crossing activity, which means that the content (crime narratives) is potentially more prone to travel outside their domestic markets and to find co-producing partners in an international production environment. As executive producer at TV 2 Denmark, the commercial public service broadcaster, says: “Crime is clearly still the genre that works best. It is the easiest one to co-produce.” (Christensen 2018).

The geography of production

Two banal factors heavily influence locations in Nordic Noir. The first one is the placement of the production company; the second one is the actual placement of the production. The city of Copenhagen is heavily represented in Danish crime film and crime series, and Stockholm shares this level of representation in Swedish crime narratives. With broadcasters, film education and film institutes located in the capitals, it comes as no surprise that such media clusters result in a heavy representation of these cities in general and in crime narratives too.

As a reaction to this centralization through media clusters, we have seen a tendency towards producing at so-called ‘distant location’, i.e. locations further away from production hubs. The series *Acquitted* is a good Norwegian example, while the Swedish Fjällbacka productions (2013) based on Camilla Läckbergs characters and setting and the supernatural noir *Jordskott* (2015-) show that the tendency also resonates in Sweden. Denmark is a geographically smaller country than the two other Scandinavian countries, but nevertheless the series *Dicte* (2013-16), *Norskov* (2015-17) and *DNA* (2019-) all represent distant Danish locations. All series are produced for TV 2 Denmark, a broadcaster with policy obligations and a historic interest in reaching all of Denmark, also through the locations of their dramas and the sites of production for regional TV.

The phrase “the local is more global” has, for that reason, become a cliché in media production. As producer Tomas Radoor from Nordisk Film indicates, authenticity and a sense of the real lies in the local even if a story is markedly transnational:

“This ‘the local is global’ has been widely used, but I still think that there is more to it. I think that we are suckers for authenticity and that we have become more conscious about ‘bullshit’. I think that we have become better at recognizing a story that feels real.” (Radoor and Thomsen 2018)

For TV 2, the series *DNA* (produced by Nordisk Film) furthered the transnational co-production model in *Greyzone*, but still it broke new ground for the broadcaster in the way that it used several European locations as part of a very internationalized setting, including French, Czech and distant Danish locations.

While different series produced for TV 2 Denmark point towards an intensified use of distant *local* locations as well as towards telling stories that cross *international* borders, the context around such productions still stress the need for local authenticity and something unique in the way that settings are established around real locations. The series *Norskov* – the first Danish TV series to be shot 100% on location in a small Danish town Frederikshavn – illustrates the interest very well. There are many

interests at play, as highlighted by Christian Rank, TV 2's executive producer on *Norskov*, today head of drama at DR Fiction:

“Frederikshavn saw the value of a large serial production that would attract local attention. They were able to engage in the production because the port was facing some challenges. They wanted to generate an increase in population, attract young people, generate jobs and training places. In this context, they saw *Norskov* as a good platform, and we found a common interest. In light of the international attention towards our series, we are very aware that we may create added value for some of the local areas where our series take place. Perhaps pay special attention to regions, which may resonate with institutional strategies of being a regional broadcaster. In that respect, you might say that we really want to produce drama outside of Copenhagen, and when we do so, we have an interest in discovering whether or not local stakeholders may benefit. We have a whole department which focuses on commercial partnerships, so-called advertiser funded programming. However, they cannot interfere with what we do, you may say that no one in Frederikshavn wanted to control the narrative, but they only wanted an association between *Norskov* and Frederikshavn. We are increasingly aware that some series evoke a sensation of something very local: *Dicte* feels like it takes place in Aarhus, and you can feel that *Norskov* takes place in Frederikshavn.” (Rank 2016)

Tourism-induced production

Gazing across the Nordic region, it becomes obvious that location placement is affected by a wide range of different factors. One of the most attractive ones appears to be media-based tourism activities. The most successful case of place branding through TV crime narratives in the Nordic region may be the utilization of Henning Mankell's Wallander stories in Southern Sweden (Waade 2013). This series was produced by the production company Yellow Bird, a company that has produced a range of cornerstone productions within the Nordic Noir brand based on the slogan “We turn bestsellers into blockbusters.” Today, this is still the case – at the moment they are producing a new Netflix drama *Young Wallander*, while SAM Productions is producing bestselling novel *The Chestnut Man* (2018) for Netflix, which has been written by Søren Svestrup, author of the famous Nordic Noir series *The Killing* (2007-2012). These new projects shows a) that written crime fiction still plays a huge role in the attention towards Nordic crime narratives, b) that the mentality around these stories are interestingly Nordic and not only national, and c) that there is still a remarkable international interest in Nordic crime stories.

The Wallander case illustrates strategic interests in using crime narratives as an attention seeker for tourists. As such, Mankell's stories – including the locally produced BBC-versions of the stories – have helped brand the small town Ystad. However, this is just one out of two general ways to brand places. In the Wallander stories, Ystad plays a part as a fictionalized Ystad, but still the town remains almost the same. The above-mentioned Icelandic *Trapped* also brands Iceland as a place to visit and is, for instance, utilized by the polar travel agency Discover the World.

Still, ‘Discover the World’ also illustrates another branding model for the nexus between tourism agencies and film/TV production: Iceland has become the home of numerous productions using the topography of Iceland as *place substitution* for films such as *Batman Begins* (2005) or *Prometheus* (2012). According to Einar Hansen Tómasson (2016), project manager at the private-public promotion partnership Promote Iceland, they are approached by an increasing number of international film and TV producers with an interest in producing fiction in Iceland – and the reason is (besides obvious tax incentives) a very varied topography and a spectacular nature experience.

For Tómasson, the aesthetics of local topography means a lot besides the surrounding practicalities of production:

“Of course, the location must fit to the story line. We cannot be an old forest, we know that. It has to fit to the script, and luckily for us we have very diversified locations. So for example, *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* (2013). As part of the script Iceland substitutes Greenland, Afghanistan and the Himalayas. All these locations in that film were shot in Iceland. One of our strengths is that if you, say, locate your base campus in the mid-south and draw two circles from there, you’re able to access both the highlands, the big mountains. You can go from there to icebergs, big waterfalls, green alleys, the black desert beach by the coast. You’re able to access these locations within a very short timeframe. You’re probably able to get similar locations in the US, but you will have to go Hawaii for the black sand beaches and you will have to go to Alaska for the iceberg and so on. That’s our core strength; you save a lot on the logistic set-up, which is very expensive.” (Tómasson 2016)

In other places in the Nordic region, especially in Norway, there are similar strategic services addressing the locations of the film and television productions. On the one hand, the attraction of a large international production results in local production expenditure, while at the same time film and television becomes a heavy incentive behind promoting a place through the actual locations behind the stories.

The result is that film and TV may not only influence tourist activities after production; tourism today also has an impact on the aesthetics of television and film narratives. Needless to say, not only crime narratives rely on representative location placement, but the international success of a brand like Nordic Noir of course creates added attention towards the places represented in the stories.

Local topography and spatial branding

Spectacular nature is a great asset just like a romantic or thematically representative city area. Media production clustering may, on the one hand, produce a logistic set-up that incentivizes production in certain places, but distant locations may, on the other hand, also solve logistic issues for productions and represent unique topographic areas. The latter may even produce the former, and with Iceland located fairly central in the Atlantic Ocean, the topography and the geographical location has altogether been a successful cocktail, attracting film and TV productions to the Nordic area.

The British production *Fortitude* (2015-18) is a special case regarding both its generic qualities and its location placement. The TV series, produced for Sky Atlantic, clearly represents a British commercial interest in Nordic Noir as it blends the characteristics of the genre brand with new supernatural tendencies within crime narratives. The setting of the series is the fictional settlement Fortitude, located in a Norwegian Arctic area very similar to Svalbard. Nonetheless, the actual ‘cold’ locations of the drama were found in Iceland, while the cast of the series – including notable Nordic actors and actresses – stresses the Nordic affinities of the series. However, finalizing the series the third season finally moved the production from Iceland to Svalbard, coming full circle with its own setting. As a case, *Fortitude* shows the brand value of both Nordic Noir and Nordic locations in international crime stories.

Branding *Fortitude*, Sky Atlantic used the fake-tourism website visitfortitude.com, mimicking the numerous tourist websites around the world. A fake tourist website was also used in relation to

the British launch of the Swedish supernatural crime drama *Jordskott* (2015). Interestingly enough, the *Fortitude* tourist site slowly disintegrates – as a marker of the series’ dramatic material – in order to become a promotional site for the TV series. Yet, this promotional strategy stresses the touristic context around such productions.

Screen agencies and policies of place as locative factors

Location has always been a practical matter in film and TV production – and it will always be a practical side of producing stories. However, the case of Nordic Noir clearly shows that there is a wide-ranging catalogue of opportunities in supporting spatial branding through film and TV.

The countries in the Nordic region share a number of similarities that transcend the mere topographical aesthetics of locations. As a very important cultural precondition in all Nordic countries – and one of the main reasons that the small countries may punch above their weight – is that the success story of Nordic Noir is based on public service values for television and public support for media production in general. Of course, the roots of the attention towards Nordic Noir lie with a literary genre that caught the attention of the international readership decades ago, but the media policies behind public service television – both non-commercial and commercial public service – are a conspicuous reason for the spread of Nordic crime narratives and the branding opportunities for the region. In other words, the basis for branding smaller nations through popular culture is, in the Nordic region, built around years of leg-work establishing national public service brands as well as politically incentivized transnational collaboration between the Nordic countries. The ideological branding of the Nordic region – the ‘banal Nordism’ – has been established through decades of collaboration and public funding opportunities for popular culture.

In the Nordic region, central producers of a spatial and/or Nordic mentality are generally publically funded bodies of different kinds: local film commissions (such as West Norway Film Commission or The West Danish Film Fund), national film funds (such as The Public Service Fund in Denmark or The Swedish Film Institute), transnational screen agencies (such Nordvision or The Nordic Film and TV Fund), municipalities or other political bodies, tourism agencies (most of them publically funded too) and broadcasters (such as publically owned public service broadcasters or advertiser-funded public service).

Such institutions all have different obligations and *raison d’être* and, as such, they do not single-handedly produce Nordism. Though, the co-existence of all bodies at once as well as a comparatively strong public funding model for each create a production ecology that has been able to ‘co-produce’ a banal sense of a Nordic ideology (with locations as one significant example of banal representation). With transnational institutions such as Nordvision (collaboration between non-commercial public service institutions) and The Nordic Film and TV Fund (collaboration between the Nordic Council of Ministers and several film and TV institutions) as noteworthy transnational collaboration, it becomes clear that media production in the Nordic region is built around publicly (co-)funded cultural partnerships. From an institutional point of view, this creates a transnational financial attention towards how locations are chosen, produced and represented in film and TV series.

With a generic reference to *Nordic Noir* as a revolving point, crime fiction – produced for and co-financed by the above-mentioned bodies – has been remarkably strong in co-creating a sense of transnational unity through popular culture – both internally in the region and in the mind-frame outside the region.

From banal Nordism to banal Europeaness?

The point is not that the Nordic production and funding model should be copied elsewhere in order to establish cultural collaboration and ideological intimacy. In the empirical material for this section, we also see signs of bewilderment and lack of trust in the Nordic model, which illustrates that ‘banal Nordism’ may exist as an actual collective awareness, but it is, at the same time, very much an image that has been reproduced for a very long time. In essence, transnational ‘likemindedness’ can be motivated through media collaboration, but even in a region like the Nordic one with years of ideological alliances it is still not easy.

Nevertheless, the branding model behind Nordic Noir indicates an impression of success, and that the spread of Nordic Noir may be the fruit of years of establishing collaboration and Nordic internal branding before the external branding created resonance throughout Europe. There may be two necessary ingredients in creating something similar on a larger geopolitical level, such as banal Europeaness, and that is *patience and public expenditure*. Public funding creates an opportunity for smaller nations’ creative industries to grow, while such growth takes time and patience and cannot be motivated overnight. One thing is location placements as banal promotional activities based on one or several productions, which is fairly simple to create, if the locations are there to be sold; another thing is a successful establishment of a surrounding ideology throughout a region. Places and hence locations are often, through geo-political histories, tied to ideology, which means that location placement may be a very important node in the creation of something greater than the mere representation of places on screen.

Conclusion: Uncertainties and opportunities

Nordic Noir – and Scandinavian crime narratives in general – are compelling cases with respect to how a brand may be used as a locative branding strategy. Nevertheless, international commercial players without a direct politico-historical interest in maintaining cultural collaboration (most importantly streaming services) have been able to tap into the ‘banal Nordism’ of Nordic Noir, as verified by Hansen (2020). On the one hand, such perspectives may, down the road, emphasize the strength of local or regional cohesiveness, but this may be at the expense of publicly funded initiatives, including public service television. Even though the public service institutions still retain a remarkable market position in the Nordic region, new players on the market create uncertainties regarding the position of publicly funded programming.

One obvious strategy is producing local content for a local audience, or regional content for a regional audience. However, new streaming services are now co-producing with local production companies and the result is, for the commercial players, also a significant local recognizability in the productions, such as the Danish, Swedish and Norwegian Netflix productions *The Rain* (2018-), *Quicksand* (2019-) and *Ragnarok* (2020), respectively. If the political incentives behind local production models in a transnational production environment are kept strong, e.g. through strategic public transnational collaboration, the Nordic region shows that there is an opportunity to create indications of a transnational and location-based cultural cohesion. This cultural situation is based on decades of national and transnational collaboration, but it may be supplemented – or perhaps even surpassed – by commercial activities. Whether or not such a situation is politically and structurally desired is a decision someone needs to make; commercial players are growing in power and may become an even greater threat to publically owned or supported initiatives.

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