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# The Export of Nordic Stories

## *The International Success of Scandinavian TV Drama Series*

Scandinavian television drama series have achieved international success during the past decade. Since the success of *Forbrydelsen* (The Killing) the American and European television market is monitoring drama series from the Nordic countries. The original shows have been aired in many national television markets around the world. The international success of Scandinavian quality storytelling also resulted in several adaptations: *Äkta människor* (Real Humans) saw an American-British adaptation. *Forbrydelsen* was adapted in Turkey and in the USA. *Bron/Broen* saw an American and a British-French adaptation. There is no monocausal explanation for the international success of Scandinavian TV Drama series. But the combination of several key factors, such as patterns of storytelling or a specific Nordic aesthetic against the background of the specific development of the global television market, can be considered as driving forces behind the international success of Nordic stories.

While the international competition for TV Drama gets tougher despite the on-going appetite for Drama, Scandinavian products seem to have a one-horse race in the international strive for attention. “Scandi Drama” can build upon a line up of former successes that have been sold to and watched all over the world and its influence is evident in the British crime drama *Broadchurch*, New Zealand’s *Top of the Lake*, and even US-productions such as *True Detective*.

There are several possible explanations for the international recognition of Scandinavian TV drama series. Most notably the international appreciation of Scandinavian crime novels, termed Nordic Noir, has given way for the drama series in establishing a benevolent attention to the genre.<sup>1</sup> In addition, national and international television landscapes faced significant transformations during the past two decades. Deregulation of the public service broadcasting

system and digitalization resulted in a multiplication of television channels around the world that are in need of content.

With these bigger and more general currents that drive the global and local media markets also a number of other developments hold responsibility for the phenomena in question. These developments can be located at the level of the media product itself, with narration, aesthetics and characters, at the level of production, with its specific way of structuring creative output, and at the level of audiences that show affection for Nordic Stories across the globe.

### **Nordic Noir – a cross-media brand**

Kerstin Bergmann locates the beginning of Nordic Noir around the Millennium (2000). According to her, Nordic Noir entails the representation of cold, dark and desolated winter

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landscapes, the reputation of explicit violence and the tristesse of the crime genre in general. Bergmann identifies five characteristics of the Nordic Noir, namely the “Stieg Larsson Effect”, the Welfare State criticism, gender equality and strong women characters, the exotic landscapes and settings, and a strong bond to the Anglo-American crime fiction tradition.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, the worldwide success of the Stieg Larsson novels and the subsequent movies paved the path for other Scandinavian Crime authors. However, the successful marriage between crime novel and (TV) movies that produced international successful television series such as *Beck*, *Wallander*, *Arne Dahl* or *Wern* are but one aspect of the Nordic success story. One must also consider the impact of Scandinavian films that contributed to the reputation of Nordic production as portraying social realism and human abysses, some ingredients for the Nordic success. Ingmar Bergman, Aki Kaurismäki, Lars von Trier, Thomas Vinterberg or Susanne Bier all have contributed to a reputation of Scandinavian cinema (and television) as critical, radical and authentic.

Moreover, Ingmar Bergman’s TV series *Scenes of a Marriage* (1973) as well as Lars von Trier’s *The Kingdom* (1994–1997) can be considered pioneering for the most fruitful *mélange* and crossover between the creative personnel and production culture of TV and cinema. Nordic Noir thus is based on a creative tradition located in Scandinavian divers media production and it has its media specific implementation in novels, movies, series and film.

### Female lead characters

Three main elements assure the quality of Scandinavian drama series: the female lead characters, the way of storytelling, and new strategies to channel and manage creative output. What Bergmann identifies as the Welfare State criticism is transformed within Denmark’s TV series production into the strategy of “double storytelling” that has been one of the promotional headlines of DR’s leading figures.<sup>3</sup>

Nadia Kløvedal Reich, head of fiction DR, explains this as a kind of hidden agenda within the actual narration, an agenda that transports DR policy and Public Broadcast obligations: When Birgitte Nyborg in *Borgen* suggests a “marriage agreement” to her husband Phillip, the whole idea of Denmark as a Welfare State that has achieved gender equality is written into that scene.<sup>4</sup>

It is worthwhile noting that the idea of the double story can by no means be ascribed to DR solely – in fact, other Public Broadcasters in Europe have implemented this idea since long. As for instance Germany’s Public Broadcaster ARD and its long running crime series *Tatort* that laid the claim to integrate social criticism and realism into the show since the 1970s.

Yet, what distinguishes many Scandinavian series and Danish series in more particular is that this claim is combined with a far higher degree of creative freedom and new strategies to structure creative output. The Danish model, that inspired PSB as well as commercial channels across Europe<sup>5</sup>, entails the idea of crossover and producer’s choice (a smooth transition between TV and film industry personnel), as well as the idea of “One Vision” and a strengthened role of the writers.<sup>6</sup> These strategies have arguably led to a creative output that is considered to be of high quality.

In short, the result is “good storytelling”. In this context, double storytelling as a concept “refers to always telling stories that are not only entertaining but which also contain larger ethical and social connotations”.<sup>7</sup> It resulted in stories that not only contained larger social topics but were more often than not centred around a female lead character. As pointed out by Bergmann in relation to the Nordic Noir novel, also TV drama series are characterized by strong but nevertheless ambivalent woman protagonists. With Sarah Lund (*Forbrydelsen*), Saga Norén (*Bron/Broen*), and Birgitte Nyborg (*Borgen*) women characters are central to the three internationally most successful series.

Yet these protagonists are no glamorous heroines, they all struggle with their circumstances and their gender roles. The characters are thus a blueprint for women in their 40s

who have advanced in their jobs and who live in complicated relationships with their partners, their parents, their children and their colleagues. Saga Norén even rejects socially desirable concepts of partnership altogether, a detail that was read as socially dysfunctional and as the Asperger syndrome by many viewers.<sup>8</sup> The focus on strong, ambivalent woman as lead characters offer new ways of dealing with problems and establish new forms of conflicts that would not arise if the character would be male.

By incorporating the female perspective into the story – instead of simply replacing a male by a female character – Scandinavian drama series offer a new perspective on social and psychological problems that drive the stories. At the same time they offer foreign audiences a stereotypical view on Scandinavian societies that are supposedly the most advanced societies in terms of gender equality – nonetheless still struggling. Multiple perspectives storytelling that is typical for these drama series adjust the challenges of the lead characters to actual and universal challenges of women across the globe. At the same time it offers a realistic and authentic view of social relations, as well as of crime and violence.<sup>9</sup>

In the Scandinavian TV drama series characters are confronted with ethical issues during their crime investigations or during their political actions as in *Borgen*. Birgitte Nyborg acts as prime minister and she has to deal with all the political network of intrigues and with all the challenges of the media-politics-relation. Inspector Sarah Lund and inspector Saga Norén have to handle the full range of societal problems connected to crime: drugs, paedophilia, environmental crime, vengeance or violence.

In *Äkta människor* not only the challenges of a life with robots are negotiated but the setting serves as a springboard for principal philosophical and ethical questions of human life. When is life human? What is humanity? What is the basis of human rights? What is the value of a human life?

Multiple storytelling offers different views on the topics and it combines the perspective

of perpetrators and victims with the view of institutions or companies and private persons with their individual destinies that are related to social conditions. Therefore each individual action is interlinked to other actions of the acting person as well as to other people's actions and to political and institutional decisions. Scandinavian drama series thus weave complex narrations with complex characters that clearly contrast the tendentially less ambivalent drama series of US Quality TV.

### Branding location and aesthetics

Scandinavian drama series are well acknowledged for their use of locations and aesthetic style. The urban topography of Copenhagen and Malmö or the rough Scandinavian landscapes are important for the staging of the stories. In combination with low lighting they create a dark atmosphere that is well known from the genre of film noir.<sup>10</sup> "In all series, the signature sequences are dark, tone-setting, and in line with the style and effects of the international noir tradition familiar from particularly American and French thrillers from the 1940s and 1950s".<sup>11</sup>

The dark lighting results in a range of colours from dark brown and blue to grey. These light and colours characterise the city- and the landscapes as bleak and miserable. It creates a special atmosphere that is labelled as Nordic and gives the name for Nordic Noir.<sup>12</sup> By analysing the Welsh series *Hinterland* Elke Weissmann argues that the landscapes in Nordic Stories transgress their atmospheric function by turning into a protagonist itself.<sup>13</sup>

In this sense, location is more than a setting in which action is taking place. It is injected or loaded with narrative meaning. "Locations in media texts thus become a "brand value" for cities, countries and regions"<sup>14</sup> that is connected to a whole set of ideas not only about the Nordic Noir as a (cross-)media genre, but also with the idea of the Scandinavian Welfare State, of gender equality, of strong women, cool design and a specific way of life. A brand that proved to be highly successful during the last decade.

## Successful production economy

As suggested initially, the Nordic success has to be contextualized against the background of global developments in the media branch as well as with regards to the specific production culture.

The recent decades have been tagged by digitization, diversification and by globally operating media conglomerates. This development has conditioned a situation where numerous broadcasting channels and VoD provider are in need of content for their numerous channels and niche channels. The increasing demand for programmes again has pushed an international trade of television shows.

Besides the big television shows and formats for the big audiences broadcasters, channels and streaming platforms are searching more and more for content in small nation's media industries. Scandinavian crime drama series such as *Beck* and *Wallander* – the original Swedish version as well as the UK-adaptation with Kenneth Branagh – were already screening in Germany and the UK. But when distributor ZDF Enterprises placed a deal and sold *Forbrydelsen* as *The Killing* to BBC 4 it opened the door for other Scandinavian and non-American drama series and also paved the way for the US-adaptation of *The Killing*.<sup>15</sup> BBC 4 established itself “as a curator of ‘high quality’ European drama” and incorporated foreign language drama into its public pur-

pose.<sup>16</sup> The Nordic success is thus based on the one hand on innovative output, but on the other hand its success was due to the specific market situation with a increasingly globalized structure in need of non-American, European content.

Lastly, when re-considering the success, we have to be aware of the different definitions of success: while many Nordic Stories have been highly appraised by critics and have created a turmoil in the branch, its audience success in terms of numbers are less significant. The final episode *The Killing*, the show that is now considered as door-opener for other Scandinavian as well as European Drama series, could draw more than 800.000 viewers in the UK and it had – due to its prominent program slot – an average of 3,44 Million viewers in Germany. Beyond the UK and Germany Scandinavian Drama remains a niche product for the cosmopolitan elite audiences.

Regardless of audience figures, Scandinavian Drama had an enormous effect on the media landscape. It triggered discussions and public debates about the quality in European television and it established a “non commercial creative counter-flow” towards the Anglo-American dominance of the European television market.<sup>17</sup> The result is a new European drama production culture that competes with the Nordic stories for attention and recognition.

## Notes

1. Forshaw (2013); Gamula & Mikos (2014).
2. Bergmann (2014, p. 82–83).
3. Redvall (2013a, pp. 171–7); Redvall (2013b, p. 230).
4. Nielsen (2016).
5. For example RTL and its production of *Deutschland* 83.
6. Redvall (2013b, p. 229).
7. Redvall (2013b, p. 230).
8. Results from focus groups in Germany, UK, and Denmark, carried out within the project “What makes Danish TV series travel?”
9. Gamula & Mikos (2014, pp. 115–7).
10. Jensen & Waade (2013, p. 262).
11. Agger (2013, p. 238).
12. Forshaw (2013).
13. Weissmann (2016).

14. Eichner & Waade (2015).

15. Interview with Volker Lehmann, Vice President Acquisitions and Coproductions ZDF and Susanne Müller, head of ZDF fiction by Susanne Eichner and Pia Majbritt Jensen, 22 June 2016.

16. Ward (2013, p. 255).

17. Jensen (2016).

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