

## Nordic Noir Production Values

*The Killing and The Bridge*

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### Abstract

In this article, the authors argue that Nordic noir constitutes a set of production values utilised and conceptualised to make Danish television series attractive in the international market. The idea of production values is embedded in a media industrial context where market principles of target groups, sales, funding and marketing/branding are as important as aesthetic principles. *The Killing* and *The Bridge* are used to illustrate how features such as setting,

climate, light and language serve strategic as well as aesthetic purposes in the production process. The authors conclude by relating the specific Nordic noir production values present in the two series to changing conditions in Danish television drama production, in particular the internationalisation of DR Drama Division.

**Keywords** Nordic noir, television drama, production value, *The Killing*, *The Bridge*.

### Introduction

Following the rise of Scandinavian crime stories as an international bestseller and blockbuster industry with Stieg Larsson's *Millennium Trilogy* as a prominent example, and the subsequent popularity of what some have termed the *Nordic noir* genre, Danish television crime series have also risen to a relative fame internationally. In this article, we argue that Nordic noir, as a concept, constitutes a set of *production values* utilised and conceptualised to make Danish television series attractive in the international market. We use *The Killing I* (*Forbrydelsen I*, DR1, 2007) and *The Bridge I* (*Bron/Broen I*, SVT1/DR1, 2011) to illustrate how features such as setting, climate, light and language serve strategic as well as aesthetic purposes in the production process. The term 'production value' is a practical concept without an exact theoretical definition. However, the term most commonly refers to the *balancing act* of economic, practical and market interests, on the one hand, and aesthetic and quality interests, on the other. Although Andrew Nestingen's (2008) notion of 'medium concept' is originally related to Scandinavian film-making, we also believe it can be used to describe what is going on in Danish television production. In this regard, 'medium concept' production values integrate aspects of the region's predominant auteur cinema, while merging it with the conceptualisation of film, stylisation, and marketing that draws on genre cinema (Nestingen, 2008, p. 53). Consequently, the idea of production values is embedded in a media industrial context where market principles of target groups, sales, funding and marketing/branding are as important as aesthetic principles – and maybe at times even more important (Waade, 2013). In this respect, we conclude by relating the specific Nordic noir production values present in *The Killing* and *The Bridge* to changing conditions in Danish television drama production, in

particular the internationalisation of public broadcaster DR's Drama Division from within.

### **'Nordic noir' and Nordic melancholy**

*Nordic Noir* (2013) and *Death in a Cold Climate* (2012) are titles of recent books written by the British critic Andrew Forshaw describing the current popularity of Scandinavian crime fiction. The titles illustrate how locations, nature and the environment are essential in its popularity. 'Nordic noir' also refers to the historic film noir, a French concept typically used to describe American crime dramas and psychological thrillers in the 1940s and the 1950s that were characterised by certain narrative and visual features, including melancholic and desperate antiheroes, low-key lighting, striking use of light and shadow, unusual camera placement and often tragic endings (Fay and Nieland, 2010; Luly, 2012). In the 1970s, a new wave of noir-films emerged, the 'neo noir', in which modern themes reflecting the surrounding society were at play – for example, technological problems and their social ramifications, identity crisis, memory issues and subjectivity (Abrams, 2007; Haastrup, 1999). Nordic noir follows the same narrative, stylistic and thematic concepts, for example, crime and thriller, tragic plots, melancholic and desperate antiheroes as well as unusual camera placement, heavily subdued lighting and a pronounced use of shadows. The difference is that Nordic noir uses recognisably *Nordic* phenomena, settings, light, climate and seasonal conditions as well as language(s), characters and themes such as gender equality, provincial culture and the social democratic welfare state (Waade, 2011).

Nordic noir is inevitably linked to the international popularity of Scandinavian crime fiction as well as Danish television drama series as an international trademark. The narrative, genre-specific and melancholic features are already playing an important role in these contexts. The concept of Nordic noir adds and foregrounds some *stylistic* characteristics, including setting, climate, light and language. Kerstin Bergman (2011) claims that Swedish crime fiction includes a neo-romantic tendency that follows in the footsteps of the British crime tradition of Agatha Christie's authorship and television series such as *Midsomer Murders* (ITV, 1997-) when using rural areas as setting. This neo-romantic tendency fits the melancholic antihero we know from Nordic melancholic art and Scandi-

navian crime fiction, as well as the use of the characteristic Nordic rural settings, climate and light as visual style. As Bergman points out, this new tendency of emphasising rural landscapes and settings, the typical seasonal, climate and light conditions as visual and picturesque stylistic elements in the series is related to the growing media tourism industry in the region (Bergman, 2011, p. 42). Not only are the Nordic settings, climate, light and language used as practical and dramaturgically logical elements in the series; these same elements also seem to entail a significant exoticism – when looked at from outside the Nordic region – insofar as they offer a rather remarkable style and distinct features emphasising something typically Nordic.

‘Nordic melancholy’ is another trademark linked to internationally well-known and acknowledged Nordic art, literature, film and music in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, including the works of Sibelius, Munch, Strindberg and Bergman, from which the Nordic noir also benefits. In that sense, both Scandinavian crime series and Nordic noir draw upon a rich Nordic tradition of aesthetic references, as well as the French, British and American crime / thriller tradition in both film, television and literature (Agger, 2010). This melancholy is expressed in the main characters’ inner psychological and personal conditions and conflicts, but also in terms of external conditions such as landscape, nature, climate and general atmosphere. The protagonist most often has a hard time dealing with his or her own life, experiences emotional conflicts with others, and is often lonely and pensive. There are many examples of melancholy in both Danish television drama series specifically and Scandinavian crime series more generally, where most main characters seem to be struggling with close relationships and personal life, experiencing failed marriages, alcoholism, and often disappoint family and friends while they are busy saving the lives of others. Sarah Lund in *The Killing* is a good example of this miserable antihero and of Nordic melancholy. At the beginning of the first season of *The Killing*, Sara has a Swedish partner and – together with her son from a previous relationship – is on track to move to Sweden to be with him. But 20 episodes later, Sarah is still in Copenhagen, and her relationship is disintegrating because she has been too busy solving the crime, neglecting her private life and family in the process.

### ***The Killing I: November, November, November....***

*The Killing I* is undoubtedly the most successful Danish television export so far. Besides being sold for broadcast in all other Nordic countries, the series has, according to lists made available by its distributor ZDF Enterprises, been exported to 97 countries and territories in all continents but Africa, including Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Great Britain, France, Turkey, Japan, Australia and New Zealand. In Great Britain, for example, *The Killing I* was called 'the best series currently on TV' (Jarossi, 2011) and became a relative hit with viewers and especially critics (Jensen and Waade 2013), paving 'the way for a wave of subtitled European crime drama' proving it was possible to successfully broadcast foreign-language drama on British television (Frost, 2011a). Additionally, the series has also been re-made into an American version (*The Killing I, II and III*, AMC, 2011-2013) and Indian, Russian and Turkish remakes may be underway (Dohrmann, 2013).

Ingolf Gabold, former Head of DR's Drama Division and producer of *The Killing I*, explains that the overall vision of the series was inspired by Danish writer Henrik Nordbrandt's poem saying that the Danish year has 15 months: 'January, February, March, April, May, June, July, August, September, October, November, November, November, December' (Gabold, 2013). This is to say that the country's climate conditions and its seasons played a significant and outspoken role in the series' production value.

The plot of the first of a total of three seasons, *The Killing I*, is about a young high school girl, Nanna Birk Larsen, who has disappeared. Already in the name of the missing girl, the Nordic noir production value is marked. 'Birk' is the Danish name for the typical Nordic wood species birch, and 'Larsen' is a common Danish family name. Police detective Sarah Lund is asked to solve the case. It turns out that Nanna has been murdered, and we follow the reactions of her family, teachers and friends as they try to come to terms with what has happened; and we follow Sarah Lund's and her fellow police detectives' tenacious work to find out who killed Nanna. During the series the viewer gets to know a lot of friends and family members related to the victim, and it turns out that everyone may have a motive to kill Nanna. This ambiguity in relation to the characters in which we do not know whether they are good or bad

is a thriller genre element, also used in film noir, and it helps to create the suspense and excitement of the series (Agger, 2011).

The series takes place in Copenhagen. The City Hall, Nanna's home and the police station are the main locations of *The Killing I*. Sarah's own home is disintegrating, and her son has to live with his grandmother, Sarah's mother. As a viewer you follow Sarah on her way through Copenhagen and its surroundings and inside the City Hall. In the first episode the police search for Nanna in a meadow. It is late autumn, and the grass is yellow and withered. The viewer does not know whether it is a crime scene or just an innocent meadow. The place is significant in the opening scene and represents a cinematic landscape in which the landscape imagery in itself indicates a narrative and visual style (Lefebvre, 2006). The setting is marked as a bleached Nordic autumn landscape in a frosty, cold climate. The story's dramaturgy follows the overall vision: It starts in early November and ends three weeks later. Nanna's killer is finally revealed in the story's climax, in which the action takes place a dark autumn evening in a birch forest, again within a typical Nordic natural setting. With torches as the only source of light, the viewer follows the hunt in the woods, where crosscuts between the police, Nanna's mother and the murderer, who has taken Nanna's father as a hostage, threatening him with a gun. The crime scene is a genre-specific place, and in this case it is also part of the climax scene, marked by Nordic nature and rainy weather conditions and low-key lighting as the general visual style.

The series' radical televisual style with consistent dark colours and dim lighting, the significant lurking camera placements and the many rainy autumn scenes emphasise the series' significant cinematic noir style. Iconic places such as the Danish parliament, the city of Copenhagen and its significant neo-classical police headquarters, as well as the names of the characters, the regions' typical climate conditions and landscapes, make up the 'Nordic' in the Nordic noir production values of the series. Sarah Lund's Faeroese jumper furthermore indicates something essentially Nordic. This *Nordic-ness* is even manifest in the US remake of the series, which stylistically is fairly close to the original both when it comes to location (Seattle) and characters. Sara Lund's American equivalent, Sara Linden (the surname referring to linden trees), even wears a jumper similar to Sara Lund's jumper, which has also be-

come an important part of the series' trademark in Britain (Kingsley, 2012).

The Danish language is not really a part of the series' Nordic noir style and concept from the onset rather the Danish language is a natural and conventional part of a Danish television drama production. But when we look at the reception of the series in for example Great Britain, the Danish language has become a significant part of the series, insofar as the need for subtitles has become a quality indicator in itself (Frost, 2011a; Jensen and Waade, 2013).

### ***The Bridge I: explicit meta-style and concept***

*The Bridge I (Bron / Broen I, SVT1 / DR1, 2011)* is a co-production between DR and Swedish public broadcaster SVT, produced by independent production companies Filmlance International (Sweden) and Nimbus Film (Denmark) but co-funded by other (public) broadcasters such as Norwegian NRK and German ZDF. As was the case with *The Killing*, *The Bridge I* has proved quite a successful export, being sold to markets as different as Australia, Brazil and Poland. Two remakes of the series have also been produced. One is a French-British co-production (*The Tunnel, Sky Atlantic / Canal+, 2013*), which uses the Channel Tunnel between the two countries as its pivotal point. The other remake is American (*The Bridge, FX / MundoFox, 2013*), produced for the American cable channel FX and its Spanish-language channel MundoFox, in which police detectives from the US and Mexico are teaming up to find the killer and the bridge in question is the *Bridge of the Americas* crossing the iconic Río Grande and connecting Mexican Ciudad Juarez with US El Paso (Jones 2012; Jensen 2013).

Since the series is a co-production with Swedish public broadcaster SVT, and undertaken by independent production companies, as opposed to DR's usual *in-house modus operandi* of series such as *The Killing I-III* and *Borgen I-III*, DR's production philosophy only indirectly influences the production. Filmlance has previously produced the *Beck*-series, based on and inspired by Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö's bestseller crime novels about the Swedish detective Martin Beck, and as such the company knows the tradition of Scandinavian crime fiction very well. This is also a manifest part of *The Bridge's* concept, plot and aesthetics, in which all elements from the region's popular crime series are reflected. In other words, the

series is a meta-series demonstrating popular elements of Nordic crime series' significant style and societal critique. One example is the first body found on the bridge between Sweden and Denmark in the first episode, which alludes to both the transnational co-production and the construction of the new bi-national region of Oresund, but at the same time reflects the cultural and national differences between the countries.

The Danish detective Martin Rohde refers to all the miserable, emotionalised, male antiheroes in the Scandinavian crime tradition, such as Henning Mankell's Kurt Wallander and Sjöwall and Wahlöö's Martin Beck. As the kin of Wallander and Beck, Rohde is struggling with both private and professional relations. The pronunciation of his name Rohde in Danish is similar to another word 'rode', which means 'make a mess'. Rohde's Swedish counterpart, the female detective Saga Norén, has a name with references to both the old Nordic saga tradition and to Lars Norén, a significant Swedish melancholic poet and playwright. Her 'autistic' behaviour is both a humoristic element in the series and refers to other famous insensitive female characters within the tradition, including *The Killing's* Sarah Lund and Stieg Larsson's Lisbet Salander. The plot is the general serial killer plot of many crime series, following the serial structure of the genre. Martin Rohde's son, who plays a significant role in the story, is killed in the last episode of the first season. This ending is unusual in action-driven crime stories, but demonstrates another noir element, namely the tragic ending. The use of glass and mirror, for example, letting the camera follow an action through a window, is also a characteristic noir element (Haastrup, 1999). In addition, the story includes critical approaches to the Scandinavian welfare society, another well-known trademark of Scandinavian crime series, in which police, press corruption and shortcomings of the social, health and political systems are revealed. What is interesting is that viewers not only get to know 'whodunnit', they also get to know the revenge motifs and sad circumstances behind *why* the serial killer has become a criminal.

Nordic settings and the region's climate, light and language conditions are also emphasised as stylistic and conceptual elements of this series. For instance, iconic places in Copenhagen and Malmö are used in the opening sequence (for example, 'Turning Torso' in Malmö, and the Police Headquarters, the City Hall and the State



Hospital in Copenhagen), as well as the highway and the bridge between the two countries and cities. The Nordic neo-classical police headquarters in Copenhagen is used as setting, which is also the case for a lot of other Danish crime series, making it an iconic setting of Scandinavian crime series itself. The lighting emphasizes the bleached, grey, pastel nuances of the series, reflecting the winter landscapes outside (for example, the repeated image of the bridge in lilac sunset) as well as the Nordic architecture and design tradition present in for example Martin Rohde's home and the Swedish news room, with glass facades, wooden interiors and furniture made of natural materials by well-known Danish architects such as Wegner and Jacobsen. The language also plays a prominent part. The series mixes Swedish and Danish, and the characters have difficulty understanding each other, an example of which is Saga's difficulty in pronouncing Rohde's name, which makes it sound more like 'rød' (red) or 'rod' (mess). These linguistic nuances are particularly funny for Nordic audiences, who will recognise language as an established mode of humour and jokes within the region, as well as the acknowledged difficulties every non-Dane has experienced when attempting to pronounce the uvular 'r', the soft 'd' and the large variation of distinct vowel sounds of Danish. In *The Bridge I*, the Nordic languages are not only a natural part of the series' *mise-en-scene* but they are emphasised and transformed into a reflected and significant part of the series style and production value.

### **Concluding perspective: DR Drama's subtle internationalisation**

Concluding, we argue that the Nordic noir production values presented above – and arguably perceived as essentially Nordic and even at times essentially *Danish* – are actually a consequence of the increasingly international orientation and ambition of Denmark's public broadcaster DR to win international prizes in order to attract international funding. The success of DR Drama, domestically *and* internationally, has been attributed to the so-called 'dogmas', applied from the mid-1990s onwards. The dogmas originally consisted of 15. However, today most industry people and academics agree that four dogmas summarise the peculiarities of DR's approach to television drama production: one vision, double story, crossover and producer's choice, respectively (Nielsen 2012a, 2012b; Agger 2012;

Redvall 2010, 2011). These dogmas have allowed DR to create a new conception and interpretation of Danish television drama, in combination with a change in the production culture of DR Drama itself (Redvall, 2011).

What is interesting about the dogmas in our argument, however, is that they are partly inspired by international production practices. Thus, 'one vision' was inspired by the so-called 'show-runners' of especially American television series, and 'producer's choice' found inspiration in American – and British – production practices that allowed for a more flexible organisation. In the same vein, the cross-over dogma – stating that there must be a crossover between the DR in-house production team and the independent television/film production industry in order to achieve aesthetic and artistic innovation – has arguably led to a more international and movie-like visual style (Bondebjerg and Redvall, 2011; Nielsen, 2012b). This style has garnered much international acclaim and been a contributing factor in DR winning five Emmy Awards since 2002 (Redvall, 2011), together with other international prizes such as Prix Italia (Nielsen, 2012b), and as such, part of a conscious – and, as we now know – successful strategy to attract funding from abroad by winning international prizes (Redvall, 2011).

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