



Gunhild Agger Approaches to Scandinavian Crime Fiction

Abstract: The working paper discusses some of the major approaches to Scandinavian crime fiction in the light of the dominant features of crime culture, e.g. the broad exposure of crime fiction via different platforms and media. In this connection, the concept of mediatization is considered as well as the approach of genre typology and the concept of evil – seemingly disparate concepts and approaches, but all related to the complex processes in the borderlands between crime fiction and society. Using examples from Scandinavian crime fiction, I discuss whether the growing proximity to international genres, ways of production and standards increasingly removes Scandinavian crime fiction from its original attractions or not.

Key words: Scandinavian crime fiction, mediatization, genre typology, the concept of evil.

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Periphery and production centre

In a Scandinavian context, the traditional relationship between periphery and production centre has changed. The import from particularly the UK and the USA still prevails, but today Scandinavian books as well as films and TV series (both originals and format adaptations) are produced and screened domestically as well as exported to other countries. 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); Matti Rönkä, a Finn, is nr. 8. The English and American speaking audiences are rather self-contained; nevertheless several Scandinavian authors have been translated to English or American (Henning Mankell, Liza Marklund, Jo Nesbø). This development has accelerated after 2000 and even taken some domestic publishers by surprise. In Denmark e.g., the publishing company Klim did not realize the Scandinavian trend as fast as the competing publishing company Modtryk. As a result of the development, it has been easier for Scandinavian film- and TV drama production companies to find partners for co-productions abroad and thus to get access to international distribution. Stieg Larsson's best-selling novels and their film adaptations provide another recent testimony of the mechanisms described above.

This means that mediated Scandinavian crime culture is no longer self contained, only oriented towards a domestic audience, but that it has grown into a contributor to global crime culture. Its special trade mark has become a certain kind of realism, a concern for the development of society combined with conscience-stricken middle-aged male police investigators and by and by strongly positioned police women and private detectives insisting on the right to combine private and public affairs.

In short, the Scandinavian touch can be labelled contemporary crime fiction with a social conscience and a Nordic setting. It was first developed by the couple Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö in their 'Story of a Crime' in ten volumes (1965-75). The importance of the image coined by this couple can hardly be overestimated, as their novels and the films based on them were the first to be widely translated and remade. The urge to explore the relationship between crime and society in a modern welfare state is often claimed to be the vehicle for Scandinavian crime fiction (last by Meyhoff 2009: 296). This means that a major approach to Scandinavian crime culture in its essence is social. Typically it asks the following question: In which ways does crime fiction present, describe, mirror, distort and discuss prevalent tendencies in the modern welfare society?

The presupposition of this approach is that there exists a connection, that crime fiction in one way or another reflects prevalent problems of society. The concepts of genre and culture are generally seen as vehicles for this interconnectedness – a point I wish to highlight later in this paper.

The new position of Scandinavian crime culture does not mean that it has become less orientated towards international developments – on the contrary. The international development is a precondition. Basically, all the tendencies mentioned above are inspired by especially British and American traditions and innovations – rearranged in a Nordic setting and provided with a special Nordic trade mark. Obviously, this has been one of the preconditions for the possibility of re-exportation to other countries: the genre basically is marked by its well known characteristics, but with a certain innovating twist. On the other hand, this process may have had its costs. The process may have caused that some of the traits that originally prevailed and caused international response have been subdued in order to accommodate an international mainstream audience.

The reversal of the traditional relationship between periphery and production centre makes it worth while to take a closer look at the prevalent features of mediated crime culture.

Description of the present mediated crime culture in Scandinavia

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 domestic audiences. This is documented by the number of copies produced by publishing companies, the bestseller lists, the libraries' loan lists, the audience attending events and lectures on the topic at book fairs (e.g. Bogmessen in Copenhagen) and special crime fairs (such as the annual Horsens Krimmesse) and the viewers listed in television ratings on both crime series and police reality shows, documentaries etc

Predominant features of the present mediated Scandinavian crime culture are

- 1 *Easy access*: Crime fiction is accessible in the native Scandinavian languages and in translations to other Scandinavian languages via its broad exposure in several,

- often interconnected, media - books, TV series, films, DVD-editions, computer plays, internet support (quantitative documentation).
- 2 *Broad appeal*: Crime fiction is widely consumed in Scandinavia (documented by quantitative research and fan sites). More generations and both sexes are interested in reading and watching crime fiction and journalism.
 - 3 The public interest is enhanced and qualified by a new *professional attention*, concerning crime fiction as well as police reality shows and journalism. Crime fiction is professionally reviewed and debated in the media (opposed to the situation 20 years ago).
 - 4 The fact that Scandinavian crime fiction is being translated and exported abroad has created a *new self-esteem* among writers, production teams and audiences (documented by interviews with producers, literary agents and authors).
 - 5 It has also been the cause of a new *professional and commercial* way of production, explicitly targeting to adapt bestselling novels to popular films and TV series.
 - 6 *Scholarly attention* to Scandinavian crime fiction in Scandinavia and abroad has increased since 2000, offering new mappings of the cultural criminal landscape and explanations of causes and connections (among them Agger 2005 and 2008, Brodén 2008, Nestingen 2008, Agger & Waade 2010, Toftegaard & Lausten 2010, Christensen & Hansen 2010).

The upsurge of Scandinavian crime culture is strongly supported by a massive attention in the media. Where formerly crime fiction was the matter of addicts, today it is the business of the whole of society and all of the media constellations developed by this society. The process that goes on between crime culture and society can perhaps best be understood in terms of the concept mediatization.

Mediatization

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 are visible in the area of mediated crime culture outlined above, and on their side they can be used to further highlight the process of mediatization. A few examples will illustrate how this process works.

1. There is a constant *chain of communication and exchange between different media*, enhancing the permanent public interest of crime fiction. A solid part of this chain is based on *adaptations*. In crime culture on the whole, the process of adaptation from book to film and /or TV drama series is traditionally well established. The lists of primarily European and American titles in Meyhoff 2009 (p. 402-447) document the absolute domination of English and American adaptations. However, it also documents the acceleration of the adaptation process in Scandinavia.

Especially Swedish adaptations prevail, among them the film and TV adaptations of Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö’ novels during the period 1967 (*Roseanna*) – 1994

(*Stockholm Marathon = Terroristerna*). Other prominent examples of recent Swedish adaptation authors, displaying the acceleration of this trend are Henning Mankell (10 titles 1994-2005), Liza Marklund (2 titles 2001-2003), Åke Edwardson (6 titles, 2001-2004), Camilla Läckberg (7 titles, 2002-2008).

A significant development in the adaptation process is the *relative independence* from the books, launched by the series of *Beck* (1993-94, 1997-98, 2001-2002, 2006-2007). It is based on two of Sjöwall and Wahlöö's characters, Beck and Gunvald Larsson, but in a new, modernized setting. Besides, a touch of humour and consequently comic relief is added by Beck's funny neighbour, and the radical criticism in some of the novels is moderated or even absent. According to Brodén, the original focus was depoliticized as it shifted to "djävulsk ondska, extrema brott och samhälleligt förfall med uppskruvad melodramatik" ("devilish evil, extreme crimes and social decay with a distinct melodramatic turn", m. t., Brodén 2008: 212).

Similarly, the TV series *Wallander* started adapting the novels, making use of the well known book titles, and ended basing the plots on ideas developed by Henning Mankell, on his main character Kurt Wallander and not least on the location of Ystad. The TV series starring Rolf Lassgård as Wallander assumed great popularity during the 1990s, and it was developed further with Krister Henriksson in the main role 2005-2007 (1-13) and 2009-2010 (1-9).

Another significant feature in this process is *cross-cultural adaptations*.

Already some of the Sjöwall and Wahlöö novels were adapted in different countries, e.g. *The Laughing Policeman* in 1973 (USA, Walther Matthau as Beck), *Der Mann der sich in Luft auflöste* in 1980 (Germany/Hungaria, Derek Jacobi as Beck), *Beck – De gesloten kamer* in 1993 (The Netherlands, Jan Decleir as Beck).

In 2008, *Wallander* was adapted by BBC Scotland and produced in Ystad with Kenneth Branagh as Wallander. It was screened November-December. This production was much debated by reviewers in terms of adaptation and Swedishness, but it was dominantly well received by critics and audiences (cf. a collection of quotations at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/wallander_TV_series). It received relatively high ratings (*Sidetracked*: 6.5 million, 23 % share; *Firewall*: 5.9 million; 23 % share, *One Step Behind*: 5.6 million; 22.4 % share). Kenneth Branagh won the award for the best actor at the 35th Broadcasting Press Guild Television and Radio Awards, and Anthony Dod Mantle, the photographer, won an award for Photography and Lightning at the BAFTA Television Craft Awards, among others. The series was pre-sold to Germany and the USA; ARD and WGBH Boston figure as co-producers. Besides, the series has been sold to Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland. In this way, a cross-cultural adaptation in a sense will be a part of the collective Wallander-complex.

In a Danish context, Lars von Trier's *Riget*, a serial in the borderlands between crime fiction, hospital melodrama and satire (1994 & 1997) was adapted in the USA. With the title *Kingdom Hospital* (2004, 1-14), Stephen King executive-produced the serial, and it was screened by the ABC. Stephen King's adaptation is a free fantasy mixing elements from the original with elements from American popular culture, often his own works, in twisted, unexpected ways.

Thus, adaptations have assumed crucial importance for the production industry, causing changes in the original concepts due to both professionalization and commercialization.

On this background, the predominant Danish model is strikingly different. Here, the crime TV series are usually developed independent of a literary basis, primarily by DR. However, what is interesting is that this apparently does not prevent international attention and export. The police series *Unit One* and *The Eagle* received Emmy

awards in 2002 and 2005 and were also distributed to the Nordic countries and Germany among others. *The Protectors*, an action drama about the Danish bodyguards and their tasks, is the most recent example of an original Danish Emmy-receiving TV series. However, recently TV 2 has started developing a new crime series on the basis of novels by Elsebeth Egholm, in this way confirming the combination trend elsewhere.

Both the adaptation model and the self-dependent model are supported by home pages at the internet that play an important part promoting the films and TV series, keeping up interest and giving background information on actors, choice of setting, producers etc. The same is true for newspapers that regularly focus on recent events in the crime culture and offer special editions dedicated to crime culture.

To sum up, the mediatization process not only enhances but also deeply affects the chain of communication and exchange between different media that contribute to the present crime culture.

2. *The doubleness of integration and autonomy* is clearly demonstrated in the wide area of crime journalism. 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. Or they are re-enacted in crime fiction as drama documentaries - or fiction based on a true story. Two recent memoirs can exhibit some of the mechanisms of this process.

In 2006, Hans Jørgen Bonnichsen, former superintendent in the CID, connected to the National Department for Homicide and later chief of The Police Intelligent Service, published a book called *Hånden – en PET og politikronike (The Hand – a Police Intelligent Service and a Police Chronicle)*.¹ Similarly, in 2008, Bent Isager-Nielsen, a former chief of the National Department for Homicide published *Man jager et bæst og fanger et menneske (You chase a beast and catch a human being)*.

Part of a tradition of police memoirs that has increased since 2000, these books are written from approximately the same position – the position of retirement where it is possible to reflect on the directions of the late development and formulate a personal pattern of seeing the past and a 'will' for the next generation. Both writers are excellent educators, able to formulate principles on the basis of concrete examples. The interesting issue in this connection is that both refer to cases from their experience in National Department for Homicide ("Rejseholdet" or "Unit One") – and these cases are best known to the public from the police series *Unit One*. In both cases, the philosophy developed from the active years as investigators is the same. It is coined in the title of Isager-Nielsen's book - *You chase a beast and catch a human being*. This sentence apparently has been a sort of motto for the real Unit One and is ascribed to several of its members (e.g. Per Kanding).

This exhibits how a *blurred, more complex relationship between fact and fiction* gradually has developed, where professional authors like Isager-Nielsen or Bonnichsen make use of facts that originate in committed crimes known to the public through a crime fiction series. Similarly, the attitude to the media as conveyed in e.g. *Unit One* and by Bonnichsen display strong similarities. In *Unit One*, the relationship of IP, one of the investigators on the team, to a journalist from a daily newspaper often is the cause of intense irony - and a lot of trouble. Bonnichsen makes use of the metaphor

1 A hand with an eye inside has since 1701 been a symbol of the Danish police.

“soap opera” in order to characterize the media’s attitude to information: “Gang på gang oplevede jeg, hvordan de store sager endte som sæbeoperaer, når de først kom ud i medierne. Så blev der fokuseret på personerne, på deres indbyrdes relationer, ja nogle gange på deres sexliv. Intet om substansen” (“Once and again I experienced how great cases ended as soap operas exposed in the media. The persons, their mutual relations, even sometimes their sex lives were in focus. Nothing about the substance.” m.t., Bonnichsen 2006:115).

Genres as links

In my introduction, I mentioned the assumption for one dominant approach to Scandinavian crime fiction, namely that this crime fiction in one way or another is based on a realistic way of seeing, which reflects the problems of society. As mentioned before, the relationship between crime and society in a modern welfare state has been seen as a vehicle for Scandinavian crime fiction. The concept of a realistic genre orientation offers an approach that generally is seen as a vehicle for the interconnectedness between crime fiction and society, turning the investigation towards society itself, echoing the open subtitle from Sjöwall and Wahlöö, “novel about a crime” which obviously may be the criminal’s crime affecting society or society’s crime against itself and its members. If you assume realism to be one of the main components of Scandinavian crime fiction, it is not too difficult to establish such a connection, and indeed, the quotations from Bonnichsen and Isager-Nielsen seem to support the general assumption. But is this the whole truth?

During the last 30 years, Scandinavian crime fiction has seen an internationally inspired expansion of genres. There is no commonly accepted code of genres, but almost everyone agrees that there is a commonly acknowledged genre tradition. It was founded by Edgar Allan Poe, developed by the great British crime writers and the American hard boiled writers. Often it is discussed whether thrillers belong to the genre. The solution to that seems to be the combination “the crime thriller” (Scaggs 2005: 105). There is also a common agreement in genre theory that new forms since the ones coined in “the golden age” and “the hardboiled period” are the police procedural and historical crime fiction (Scaggs 2005). Different criteria call attention to other subgenres such as the serial killer detective fiction or the spy novel that have been awarded their own chapters in Meyhoff 2009. And as always in genre theory, criteria are objects of debate.

In my working paper *Krimitypologi* I have discussed a possible genre typology based on the following criteria 1) Genre tradition, 2) Time, 3) Relation to reality, 4) Values and Attitudes, 5) Intertextuality and reflexivity (Agger 2008:1).

In short, my argument here is that all crime fiction relate to *former models and traditions* either openly (as Gunnar Staalesen overtly relating his detective Varg Veum to the Marlowe tradition) or more discretely as in most novels intertextually referring to selected predecessors. *Time* is especially stressed by the genre partly because of its inherent importance in the reconstruction process (as pointed out by Todorov 1971), partly because it is a means of distinguishing between contemporary and historical crime fiction.

Relation to reality is as complicated as *values and attitudes*. By calling attention to these criteria I primarily wish to stress the importance of realism as time and place are concerned and to discuss the use of concepts such as values and attitudes. I consider *critical crime fiction* as one large subgenre (with the novels by Sjöwall and Wahlöö as Urtext and Henning Mankell and Stieg Larsson as inheritors), the “*femikrimi*” as another, understanding hereby crime fiction with a gender orientation, mostly

written by women, describing a female investigator, representing a female point of view (Kim Småge, Anna Holt, Liza Marklund, Camilla Läckberg, Elsebeth Egholm, Gretelise Holm), and the *existential, psychological* novel as another important subgenre (e.g. Harriet Fossum).

Lastly, I have drawn attention to the growing level of reflection, already expressed by Umberto Eco in *The Name of the Rose* in 1980, that to an increasing degree coins itself in '*literary, metareflexive* crime novels (Kjerstin Ekman, Svend Åge Madsen, Henning Mortensen).

In Scandinavian crime literature all the mentioned genres exist, even the serial killer subgenre that is always promising for a well turned plot and consequently pursued by so prominent representatives of Scandinavian crime fiction as Jo Nesbø (e.g. in *Snømannen* 2007) and Håkan Nesser (e.g. in *En helt annan historia* 2007).

The question is: granted that all these subgenres exist in a Scandinavian context, do they all have the Scandinavian trade mark? One could argue that the serial killer subgenre according to its dominant plot seems to be far away from the Scandinavian trade mark of realism and social responsibility. But apparently, this subgenre has become a prevalent part of recent Scandinavian crime fiction. So let us test what happens, picking two representative examples of this subgenre to spot the trend.

The Concept of Evil

The serial killer subgenre offers all the ingredients of an exciting plot because it is developed on a basis of competition: the murderer challenges the investigator in twisted ways, time is an enemy, and the whole set up heightens the tension: when is the evil circle broken? It is obvious to connect the subgenre to the concept of evil. Traditionally, according to the Norwegian philosopher Svendsen 2002, this concept has been linked to religion in a dichotomy opposing good and evil. In common speech, it is often used trying to understand the meaningless. On this background, in a perspective of enlightenment, the concept has been considered with a certain degree of scepticism.

However, the constant exposure of evil via the media reverses the concept and makes it what Svendsen calls "an aesthetic object" rather than a moral one: "Denne 'fascination' er ikke mindst forbundet med, at det onde i stor udstrækning er blevet et *æstetisk objekt* snarere end et moralsk. Det onde fremstår som noget *andet* og skal på den måde fungere som modkraft til den kedelige hverdag" ("This fascination is not least the result of the following: the evil has to a large extent become an aesthetic object rather than a moral one. The evil appears to be *something else* and in this way its task is to function as an opponent to the boring everyday life", m.t. Svendsen 2002: 7). That is why still more extreme versions keep appearing in films and TV series: "Ondskaben i fiktionen lever af sin fikcionalitet" ("The evilness in fiction feeds on its fictionality" m.t., *ibid.*). The aesthetic approach means that the exhibition of evil becomes a play to be enjoyed by the audience. Consequently, Svendsen draws attention to the link between evil and serial killers: "I populære forestillinger af det onde legemliggør seriemordere billedet af den dæmoniske ondskab stærkere end nogen andre" ("In popular imaginations of the evil, serial killers incarnate the image of demonic evilness stronger than anyone else" m.t. Svendsen 2002: 66).

If we pick Jo Nesbø's *Snømannen* as an apt example of a recent Scandinavian serial killer novel, it confirms the above mentioned features. The unknown murderer starts killing as the first snow falls. Of course, the question is: Is there a pattern in these murders? And when this is confirmed, the next question is: Can such murders be prevented in the future? The race between the CID investigator Harry Hole and the ingenious murderer is close.

The novel's basic theme is evilness as it is expressed by Ståle Aune, one of Harry Hole's colleagues: "Jo eldre jeg bliver, desto mer heller jeg til den oppfatning at ondskap er ondskap, med eller uten sinnslidelse. Vi er alle mer eller mindre disponert for onde handlinger, men disposisjonen vår kan ikke frata oss skyld" ("The older I get, the more am I convinced that evilness is evilness, with or without a mental illness. We are all more or less disposed for evil acts, but our disposition cannot eliminate our guilt" m.t. Nesbø 2009: 435). The demonic evilness is incarnated in Matthias Lund-Helgesen, "the Snowman", who owns the capacity of inventing still more extravagant and spectacular methods of death for his victims. The last one is meant to crown them all in a gigantic, aesthetic and deadly work of snow art.

No doubt, the plot pays tribute to the mainstream serial killer thriller genre as used e.g. by French Fred Vargas. It does not mean that all the usual Scandinavian features are missing. But it does mean that the serial killer plot and its obvious aesthetic attractions are highlighted. However, we still do find a certain realism in the description of typical traits in society, exhibited with a certain irony: e.g. the official fathers in standard marriages are not always the real fathers of their children; the police organisation has its need of scapegoats in case of failures; and the media follow their own logics in all the talk shows instead of providing solid information in solid news.

In this novel the usual critical and realistic features are there, but they figure in a subdued fashion, and the serial killer in Svendsen's words does "incarnate the image of demonic evilness stronger than anyone else." On the whole, there is a trend in contemporary Scandinavian crime fiction to adapt the serial killer plot in an international mainstreaming way. But there are other trends as well, opposing this mainstreaming.

Hakon Nesser's *En helt annen historie* was appointed to be the "Best Swedish Crime Novel" in 2007. In this case, the title is more than commonly eloquent, literally meaning 'quite another story'. The international orientation here expresses itself in the choice of Bretagne as location for some of the events and in the very name of Nesser's protagonist, Barbarotti. For a very long time the reader suspects that Nesser has gone mainstream in other ways as well: yet another serial killer seems to be operating. Without revealing too much, I can say that this is not quite the case. Nesser performs a well-done twist in the plot and in our expectations, giving hope for more original turns of the Scandinavian crime novel, not necessarily exploring the social layers of contemporary society once again, but at least playing with the stereotypes in more advanced ways.

Conclusion

The prevalent trends are not unambiguous. There are examples that the growing proximity to international mainstreaming, ways of production and standards can be said to remove the Scandinavian crime fiction from its original attractions. The fascination with the serial killer has spread in a Scandinavian context, and this can add a certain stereotypical character to the plots. This perhaps is more articulate in TV series, appealing to an international audience. But there are also examples of the opposite tendency, namely playing with the well-known serial killer plots in imaginative ways. On the whole, until now the salient Scandinavian features prevail – the predominant Nordic location, often drawing on an international context, but flavoured by the known ingredients, exhibiting the climate and the preferred place as well as the social concern.

The answer to my initial question, then, would be that the original attraction still prevails, but that it has exhibited some traits of fatigue.

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