Scandinavian crime fiction, mediatization and cultural citizenship

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Abstract
My aim is to discuss 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, I shall consider the concept of mediatization, Using examples from Scandinavian crime fiction, I shall discuss whether the growing proximity to international genres, ways of production and standards increasingly removes Scandinavian crime fiction from its original attractions.

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. Germany is one of the most outstanding receiving 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 home page Schwedenkrimi.dk gives a detailed survey of biographies and bibliographies of Scandinavian crime authors (not limited to Swedish contributors) as well as links to reviews, interviews etc. The English and American speaking audiences are rather self-contained; nevertheless several Scandinavian authors have been translated to English or American (among them Henning Mankell, Liza Marklund,
This international turn has accelerated after 2000 and has even taken some domestic publishers by surprise. In Denmark e.g., the publishing company Klim did not realize that the Scandinavian trend had hit Denmark 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 an easier access to international distribution.

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, often 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 (1965-75) in their ‘Story of a Crime’ in ten volumes. 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 one way or another reflects the problems of society and offers a mapping and a diagnosis of them, but this indeed seems to be the case in most Scandinavian mainstream crime genres.

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 an advantage for the possibility of re-exportation to other countries: the genre bears 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 worthwhile 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 on 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 Krimimesse in the newly abandoned jail in Horsens) 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). Booksellers as well as supermarkets excel in crime literature; bestsellers are boosted in supermarkets.

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. Public interest and debate 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 some 20 years ago).

4. The fact that Scandinavian crime fiction is being translated and exported abroad has creating a new self-esteem among writers, production teams and audiences (documented by interviews with producers, literary agents and authors).

5. The same fact has directly and indirectly been the cause of a new professional and commercial way of production, explicitly targeting to adapt bestselling novels to popular films and TV series.


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. From his point of view, mediatization means “the process where society increasingly becomes subordinate to or dependant on the media and their logic” (Hjarvard 2008: 28, my translation. Cf. also Lundby 2009). 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
elements 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 melodramatikk” (“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 as the main character 2005-2007 (1-13) and 2009-2010 (1-15). That
the critical attitude is still present can be seen in Hämnden (The Revenge) from
2008, one of the latest productions in the series. Here we are confronted with a
plot that once again exhibits the shortcomings of conventional policing and
military strategies when it comes to what seems to be a cocktail of racism and
terrorism – apparently with kind regards to Sjöwall and Wahlöö’ Terroristerna.

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 during 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
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. However, recently TV 2 has started developing a new crime series on the basis of novels by Elsebeth Egholm, in this way confirming the dominant adaptation and 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, offering various kinds of information and entertainment. The same is true for newspapers that regularly focus on recent events in the crime culture and with regular intervals 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. It invites to all kinds of engagement on the part of the receivers. Satisfaction of curiosity, to be sure, is one of the forms of engagement, but there are others. The mediatization process also, it can be argued, provides the audience with the option of reflection, as it can be registered in informal debates on blogs etc.
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.


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 Rejseholdet and is ascribed to several of its members (e.g. Per Kanding)

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

Examples from fiction interestingly reflect the same picture. *Sommer*, a family melodrama, was DR’s TV serial flagship of 2008. Aesthetically and thematically it was rather old fashioned, depicting conflicts in a family dynasty of doctors. Despite these shortcomings, it succeeded drawing public attention to two issues: the work carried out by a NGO such as Médécins sans Frontières and the effects of Alzheimer’s Disease. The organizations Médécins sans Frontières and The Alzheimer Society (Alzheimerforeningen) benefited. In this case we saw a direct connection between the exposure of everyday problems via TV fiction and the level of interest in and memberships of organizations involved, facilitated by internet references (links from DR to Médécins sans Frontières and articles written by The National Knowledge Centre for Dementia). This is the most recent example that can interpreted in terms of both mediatization and cultural citizenship in progress (cf. later in this paper) – an example that sustains public connection. Other examples can be found in the area of historical crime fiction, both in the form of TV drama and books.
Cultural citizenship

In his introduction to *Crime and Fantasy in Scandinavia* Andrew Nestingen proposes an understanding of popular culture in Scandinavia as "a site in which civil society is beginning to emerge" (Nestingen 2008: 7). His analysis is that due to the imperatives of neoliberalism, the old, Scandinavian, Social Democratic identification between nation and state, has gradually fallen apart. His claim is that the Nordic countries are undergoing a “transformative struggle over moral order” (Nestingen 2008: 38). One of the consequences is that many discussions that formerly took place in a political context now have switched to the domain of popular culture: “Popular literature and cinema, then, have become what Taylor calls “spaces of display” (2004, 167-171). That is, they are a forum in the continuum of private and public in which subjects can self-reflexively use language and image, while also displaying to others the way they are doing so, thereby bidding for the attention and backing of spectators” (ibid.). Nestingen concludes: “If we want to understand contemporary Scandinavia and its struggles over transformation, we need to study and discuss popular culture” (Nestingen 2008: 9).

Nestingen is very direct in establishing the relationship between civic society and popular culture. Although he does not consider the concept of cultural citizenship, he makes use of it for his basic purpose – to establish popular culture as a space of display “for the formations of demands that mobilizes publics” (Nestingen 2008: 38).

This understanding and practical use corresponds to Joke Hermes’ as put forward in *Re-reading popular culture* (2005). Popular culture is here defined as “the domain in which allegiances are built and through which we feel connected” (Hermes 2005: 15).

Cultural citizenship is the explicit term used in this book to analyze the democratic potential of popular culture. Hermes’ interest is to highlight how cultural citizenship can be used “in relation to less formal everyday practices of identity construction, representation, and ideology, and implicit moral obligations and rights” (Hermes 2005: 4). Consequently, her definition is expressed in the following way: “Cultural citizenship can be defined as the process of bonding and
community building, and reflection on that bonding, that is implied in partaking of the text-related practices of reading, consuming, celebrating, and criticizing offered in the realm of (popular) culture (Hermes 2005: 7).

On the basis of these approaches, Hermes asks: “can reading a mass-marketed genre such as crime fiction be construed as a form of cultural citizenship?” (Hermes 2000: 219). On the basis of empirical research (interviews), she distinguishes three constructions of crime reading as a form of citizenship:

1. an agenda of social issues that need to be worked through
2. the construction of the reader: as what kind of person are we constructed in our capacity of crime readers?
3. the discussion of various questions concerning the domestication of feminism

Doubleness and ambiguity are key terms in the interviews both concerning the quality and status of crime fiction, gender and the possibility of changing gender roles. In spite of that Hermes’ conclusion is that crime fiction has the function of being “a domain in which we may question how we belong to society” (Hermes 2000: 230).

In his article “Culture and citizenship – The missing link?” (2006) Nick Couldry criticizes among others Hermes’ use of the term cultural citizenship basically on the grounds that it is unclear what it means: Is it a new kind of citizenship – on line with e.g. political, economic, social citizenship, or is it old wine on new bottles? He proposes a sharp distinction between ‘cultural citizenship’ (caution!) and ‘culture of citizenship’, which he finds more productive. Finally, he proposes the concept of ‘public connection’ as a more precise term for mediated versions of the public world. His conclusion is that “Media are important, but not always in a way that sustains public connection” (Couldry 2006: 215).

This conclusion seems to be challenged by some examples from the history of Danish TV drama.
References

Crime fiction novels