

**Title: ‘Northern, not Nordic noir’. A Norwegian case study on crime series and strategies for transnational television**

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### **Authors**

Stine Agnete [Sand](#), [UiT The Arctic University of Norway](#)

Thomas Vordal, [UiT The Arctic University of Norway](#)

### **Contact information**

E-mail: [stine.sand@uit.no](mailto:stine.sand@uit.no)

ORCID number: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8842-3272>

E-mail: [thomas.vordal@uit.no](mailto:thomas.vordal@uit.no)

ORCID number:

### **Abstract:**

This article discusses transnational television and what strategies public service broadcaster NRK Drama has pursued to make the Norwegian crime series *Monster – Brutally Far North* travel. *Monster* was the first Norwegian-language television series bought by a major American cable network, Starz. Using the concept of production values, we argue that NRK has made a series that is able to ride the Nordic noir wave of success while also offering a new northern Norwegian version of the Western. These two factors made *Monster* a good fit for the American market. The series is a result of strategic changes within NRK Drama and a commitment to the private and regional film business. Furthermore, NRK views drama productions as key for reaching audiences and has increased their budgets significantly. The analysis encompasses the industry context, media articles, the ‘North’ as location, the series itself and interviews with important stakeholders.

### **Contributor details**

Stine Agnete Sand is an associate professor in the Department of Tourism and Northern Studies at the University of Tromsø, the Arctic University of Norway, researching regional film and television, journalism and indigenous media. She also works as an associate professor in the MA programme in Indigenous Journalism, Sámi University of Applied Sciences in Kautokeino.

Thomas Vordal is an assistant professor in the Department of Tourism and Northern Studies at the University of Tromsø, the Arctic University of Norway. He teaches film and media production and holds an MA in film and media studies from NTNU in Trondheim.

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public service broadcasting

Several studies have addressed the international success of Nordic noir television dramas and especially Swedish and Danish series (Creeber 2015; Eichner and Mikos 2016). Norway, however, has been a little brother compared to its neighbours. Previously, the public service broadcaster NRK, which produced most Norwegian serial television drama until the late 2000s, was criticized for delivering lower quality than its Scandinavian neighbour broadcasters, Danmarks Radio (DR) and Sveriges Television (SVT) (Lavik 2015: 44). However, we argue that NRK Drama has had remarkable success within a short period. Examples of their international television achievements include *Skam* (2015-17), *Mammon* (2014-16), and *Lilyhammer* (2012-14). The series *Monster – brutalt langt nord* (*Monster -- Brutally Far North*) (2017) is a result of changes within NRK Drama. We discuss what measures have been taken to make *Monster*, co-produced by NRK and the private company Rein Film, travel internationally.

Nationally, 440,000 spectators watched the first episode on linear TV, but viewership subsequently dropped dramatically and only 328,000 saw the second (Pedersen 2017). Even so, *Monster* is one of NRK's biggest international sales successes. The British TV and distribution company DRG,<sup>1</sup> which handles international sales of many of NRK's drama series, sold *Monster* to 40 countries worldwide. We chose *Monster* as an example because of the series' transnational features, but also because of its international achievements. The premium American cable network Starz bought the series in 2017, before *Monster* was even broadcast in Norway. It was the first time ever that a Norwegian-language television series was sold to a major American cable network and consequently introduced to the biggest television market in the world. That same year, the seven-part Norwegian crime thriller won the European Script Award for Most Innovative Script of the Year by a newcomer and was nominated for Best European TV Fiction Series at the Prix Europa, the largest radio, television and online festival and competition in Europe.

As the title of the television series *Monster -- Brutally Far North* implies, Scandinavian television drama has become more and more local, showing an increased interest in peripheral places (Hansen and Christensen 2017). As we will show, *Monster* is an interesting example of how small areas and remote villages can be used as locations for a

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<sup>1</sup> DRG rebranded as NENT Studios UK under NENT Group (Nordic Entertainment Group) in 2020.

transnational crime series. The term transnational is ambiguous, especially because the relationships and interactions between local, national, transnational and global television and cinema production are often floating and without definite borders. A transnational production often implies that the story is thematically engaged in transnational issues (culture, language, history, travel, and so on), has transnational funding, sales and transfer of television formats and programmes and/or that the production itself carries clear traces of transnationality (e.g. an artistic crew with multiple nationalities, locations in several countries, etc.) (Elkington and Nestingen 2005: 1-30; Fickers and Johnson 2010: 1-11). Not all of these characteristics apply to *Monster*. After all, the series' target group was the *national* audience. We will elaborate upon why *Monster* came to be sold internationally.

*Monster* is set in a remote, rural area in northern Norway. A young girl disappears and her boyfriend is found murdered. A local policewoman, Hedda Hersoug, who has just moved back to her small hometown, is put on the case with a special investigator, Joel Dreyer, from the big city – Oslo. The search for the killer is supervised by local police chief and Hersoug family friend, Ed Arvola. The trail quickly points to the nearby religious enclave Kataluma, and also to the van Gebert family, the leading local criminal element. In short order, the investigation gets out of control, and both detectives resort to questionable methods in order to solve the case and their own personal problems.

This article examines changes within NRK Drama and why the Norwegian television crime series *Monster* has travelled beyond its national borders. The analysis takes into consideration the political and institutional framework, media articles, the industrial context and the 'North' as an imagined and actual location, as well as interviews with important stakeholders. We first outline our theoretical approach and introduce the concept of production values before presenting our methodology and this particular case. In the second part of the article, we examine changes within NRK Drama and how they affected the production of *Monster*. The third part is an analysis of the series, including its transnational features. Finally, the conclusion sums up the overall findings.

### **Production values and location**

According to Anne Marit Waade and Pia Majbritt Jensen (2013: 190), the concept of 'production value' refers to the balancing act between economic, practical and market interests on the one hand and aesthetic and quality factors such as setting, climate, light and language on the other. This definition is broad yet provides two main branches of inquiry that are fruitful when examining the many complexities of television production. Waade and

Jensen argue that these production values are used to make Danish Nordic noir television series, such as *Broen (The Bridge)* (2011-2017) and *Forbrydelsen (The Killing)* (2007-2012), attractive on an international market. In this media industry context, market principles, including sales, funding, marketing and branding, become equally, or even more important than aesthetic principles. However, it is important to note that the industrial context of film and television production in Europe can be different from the commercial realities of the American industry, since cultural policy and public funding play an important role in European film industries. Policy has an impact on the production of television series at NRK. Production values therefore also include political values, for instance how policy determines and affects the goals and strategies of NRK and NRK Drama.

According to Kim Toft Hansen and Waade, locations and production values are tied together because

[l]ocations represent production values, aesthetic values, economic values and political values, not only for the producers and broadcasters, but also for the external partners involved in and related to the production, for example the municipality, the city and the sponsors. (2017: 27)

Discussion of geographical location has gained significance in film studies, a result of globalization and a global flow of people, ideas and capital (Appadurai 1996). Several researchers have shown that television content that is overtly place specific and strongly embedded in local and national cultures is difficult to sell to buyers and audience abroad (Tinic 2005; Waisbord 2004). A deterministic view on globalization sees place and cultural proximity as less important, because Western and especially American culture leads to cultural uniformity. A different perspective views the local and global as mutually influential, and the term 'glocalization' involves a process of cultural translation (Robertson 1995). What can be argued is that television production today often involves production strategies that promote universal themes but with a place or culturally specific touch (Sand 2017a; Rao 2010).

Discussions of location and the place-specific often address concepts such as identity, authenticity and placelessness, for instance how visual representations of landscapes shape identities and form collective images of a country (Sörlin 1999) and the location as place or space (Lukinbeal 2004). This article addresses the importance of location and the imagined and mythical North in the series *Monster*. The North has historically often been represented as

the uncivilized, exotic Other, the Ultima Thule, the imagined horizon of the unknown or the land Beyond (Hastrup 2007; Høydalsnes 2003; Drivenes, Hauan, and Wold 1994; Baglo 2011). These representations also involve the North as something different than the rest of Norway, often defined and represented by people from the southern part of the country, the hegemonic majority culture (Myklebost 2010). Location is also an important genre element. In the second part of the article we will show how the remote locations in *Monster* fit with the Nordic noir and the Western genres.

### **Method: the case study *Monster***

This article highlights a case study, which includes interviews with the head of drama at NRK, Ivar Kjøhn, the producer at NRK at the time, Lasse Greve Alsos and the co-producer at Rein Film, Mathis Ståle Mathisen. All three interviewees can be described as above the line in the production of the series, which means they hold prestigious positions and have the power to make important decisions (Caldwell 2008). We were primarily interested in using the interviews to gain insight into why *Monster* was singled out, why northern Norway was chosen as the location, what financial considerations entered in and how a balance between economic and creative goals and ambitions was established. Conducting interviews with people in such positions, described by Hanne Bruun (2016) as exclusive interviewees in the media industries, naturally presents some challenges. They are gatekeepers to important knowledge and information, and we as researchers will never know what they choose not to tell us. In a competitive business where reputation is crucial, shared information is carefully selected to benefit the interviewee. Interviews with exclusive interviewees will therefore never tell the ‘whole truth’; there will be blind spots.

However, interviews are not the only source of information. The analysis also draws on findings in documents, including policy documents, the NRK placard (a document which articulates the state’s demands and expectations in regard to NRK’s activity), annual reports and strategy documents as well as articles in the media. Since NRK is owned by the state, policy documents and the NRK placard reveal NRK’s role and obligation as a public service broadcaster. Policy obviously sets some conditions for NRK Drama and their work, not to mention the choices they make when selecting and producing series. Strategy documents and annual reports are therefore relevant in comparison to policy and the NRK placard, to see how NRK has fulfilled these obligations and what they choose to focus on. Media articles have provided additional information, especially opinion pieces that discuss and criticize NRK.

Analysis of the series, including narrative, style and genre, is also based on the

empirical data. Focus is especially on the rural setting, including the relationship between internal considerations of genre and target group, branding and selling and the presentation of rural northern Norway as both a fictional non-place and a 'real' location.

Since we examine changes within NRK Drama and *Monster* as a transnational series, the concept of production values provides a valuable frame for the analysis. The creation of *Monster* is a result of many considerations, both economic and creative, and production values serves as a tool for considering the background of how the series came into being, the production, the content and the distribution.

### **NRK Drama: from criticism to critical acclaim**

As television researcher Erlend Lavik (2015: 44) notes, there have been many discussions regarding the quality of NRK's television series, both the in-house productions and the external productions. The critical acclaim that NRK Drama has received has happened more recently. NRK is financed by a license fee, which means that NRK Drama's strategies always are a response to cultural policy. It is expected that a state-owned public service broadcaster shall offer television drama that represents an alternative to commercial, profit-driven productions (Syvertsen 2008). In the following we address the political context and the development that has taken place within NRK Drama.

A decade ago, NRK Drama was a topic of debate and criticized for being too broad: 'While Danish and Swedish television drama include both the broad and the narrow, from the great national historical dramas to narrow dramas about marginalized groups, NRK Drama tries to reach everyone with each project' (Lismoen 2010 n.pag.). In 2012, fifteen people from the Norwegian film and television business, including the young and talented future director of *Monster*, Anne Sewitsky, signed an opinion piece in one of Norway's largest newspapers, *Aftenposten*, with the title: 'Legg ned NRK Drama!' (Shut down NRK Drama!). They pointed at 'decades of bad/average quality', the inability to 'secure/make use of artistic capital' and failure to 'utilize economic resources' (Skjoldbjærg et al. 2012 n.pag.). They also criticized NRK for imitating and copying the Danes rather than creating something new and fresh. The criticism was directed towards the creative and quality aspects of what NRK Drama was doing, but also addressed economic and structural issues. According to Lavik (2015: 44), it was not unreasonable to expect NRK to achieve the same success as DR since the television industry operates under similar conditions in Norway and Denmark.

Head of NRK Drama at the time, Hans Rossiné, responded to the criticism and said that NRK Drama would commit to originally written series and focus on the writer, a strategy

that would be implemented between 2013 and 2018 (Steen 2012 n.pag.). At the turn of the millennium NRK's television series had highlighted the director, but it was difficult to spot any continuity or carefully considered philosophy from one production to another (Lavik 2015: 46). This new strategy was a response to the historical lack of standardized routines and guidelines for drama production in Norway (Lavik 2015: 46).

Ivar Kjøhn became the new head of Drama in 2013, at a time of reorganization. According to Kjøhn, this meant a focus on the writer, who was expected to follow the project to completion in cooperation with the producer (Kjøhn 2018). Rossiné had decided on this strategy, but Kjøhn implemented it. In 2014, Kjøhn expressed a commitment to both broadness and high quality:

Since we produce so few titles each year, we need to create TV dramas that engage a wide audience. But in order to be broad you need to be brilliant. We have to find the highest common level which I guess is identification with characters and one way to do this is to let writers/creators steer the show from beginning to end. There is a real need from Norwegian and foreign audiences for high end character-driven dramas .(quoted in Pham 2014)

His statement shows that although NRK was in a process of change, they were still very much in line with cultural policy: to offer public service broadcasting to the *whole* population and to be 'Something for everyone. Always' (Norwegian Ministry of Culture 2007). Although they were criticized for being broad, NRK Drama has held to this ambition.

NRK has gradually increased the share of external productions and now buy 40 per cent of their productions from external producers and production companies (Norwegian Ministry of Culture 2015a: 120). This is in response to a request from the Ministry of Culture in 2006 and part of an effort to increase the quality of television drama and contribute to continuity, secure competence development and cooperation between television and the film business (Norwegian Ministry of Culture and Church 2006: 124). NRK Drama reorganized in 2016 and they now have a producer department, focusing on the best idea and to serve the private film and television business and collaborations on external productions (NRK 2018). According to Kjøhn, cooperation between the television and film sectors has increased the quality of Norwegian television drama:



More people from the film business started working in the television business. This was positive, since they represented new ways of thinking. Cinematographers with a background in film improved the visual expression. Film workers' entry into the world of television has resulted in higher costs, but it has increased the quality. (Køhn 2018)<sup>2</sup>

NRK has definitely increased their commitment to drama, and in 2017 won their first Emmy in the category Best Drama for the series *Mammon 2* (2016). According to NRK's annual report for 2017, NRK Drama has three goals: 1) to increase the number of productions available for the audience; 2) to contribute to strengthening Norwegian drama milieu in cooperation with private business; 3) to select all drama productions based on a best idea principle (NRK 2018). What distinguishes NRK Drama's strategy today, as reflected in the goals, is an increase in external productions, fewer internal productions, high ambitions and an international focus. Køhn also emphasizes that drama is a cornerstone of NRK's strategy, as drama drives audiences: 'More and more people use streaming. Television drama is important because people who use streaming services want drama. Thirty per cent of all streaming at NRK is drama' (Køhn 2018). Although NRK produced most of Norwegian serial drama until around 2010, Norwegian commercial channels such as TV2, TV Norge and TV3 and international streaming providers such as Netflix and HBO Nordic have taken a serious interest in Norwegian drama series production.

To meet this competition, NRK Drama increased their budget by 100 million NOK in 2018 and now have 280 million NOK at their disposal annually. According to Køhn, NRK Drama aims to produce two or three long-running series yearly with a budget between 60 and 100 million NOK each year (Køhn 2018). They aim to reach a broad audience and will therefore produce crime series, family and historical shows as well as shows with a focus on contemporary issues. Although NRK primarily caters to the Norwegian audience, Køhn recognizes that the national market remains limited. For NRK, co-production and co-financing mean more money to raise the quality level and number of productions. Today, NRK Drama has far greater credibility than in 2012 when people in the film business wanted NRK Drama to shut down. An example of this changed attitude is an article published in the online film and television magazine *Rushprint*. The former leader of the Norwegian film producer association, Leif Holst Jensen, wrote that NRK's success is important for the

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<sup>2</sup> All translations are by the authors.

national film and television business because NRK Drama contributes to increased quality and innovation (Jensen 2018).

### **Why NRK chose *Monster***

NRK has clearly increased their interest in and ambitions for drama production. How does *Monster* fit into these strategic goals? Although NRK is obligated to produce content in different parts of the country, this is not a primary goal of NRK Drama. They were not searching for a series set in northern Norway, but rather had hoped to find a ‘safe’, cosy, family entertainment series when screenwriter Hans Christian Storrøsten introduced the manuscript for the first episode of *Monster* to producer Alsos. According to him, *Monster* was the opposite of what they were looking for: a crime series written by a newcomer and set in northern Norway (Alsos 2018). Time pressure was also an issue:

We were in a hurry, we needed a project, but didn’t find one that fit. *Monster* was the right project and the best idea. However, we were cautious because the writer was a newcomer and so we needed some experienced people to be part of it. (Køhn 2018).

At the time, NRK Drama needed to produce one or two series per year. Alsos, one of three executive producers, took the manuscript to Køhn, who gave it the green light. Alsos thinks this was a brave and perhaps risky decision, since it involved commitment to a newcomer and to a production in the northernmost region of the country. According to Køhn, selecting *Monster* was not a regional-political choice. ‘*Monster* was the best project. It was something we had not seen before – new places. It was original’ (Køhn 2018). He also describes what he sees as a trend, an interest in the remote, the peripheral. The reason for this, he thinks, is that the periphery represents something different than what we have seen in all the series that take place in the city, something visually distinctive. The drawback is that it is more expensive to do a project in remote areas (Køhn 2018).

### **Co-production and funding from the region**

*Monster* is an in-house production, but NRK also collaborated with a local film company as facilitator and co-producer. Since the location of the show was in northern Norway, NRK needed someone who knew the area to do location scouting and arrange practicalities. Networking and reputation are crucial in the film and television business. Alsos knew producer Mathis Mathisen at Rein Film from previous work, which is how the company got

involved as co-producers. Mattisen is from the northernmost county in Norway, Finnmark and Troms, and Rein Film has offices both in Oslo and in Kirkenes, Finnmark and Troms county. The company has produced many of their films in northern Norway. NRK also wanted to involve a local company for film-political reasons: ‘It is important to contribute to building film environments in different parts of the country. For NRK, media diversity is important, to build both the regional and private film business as a whole’ (Køhn 2018). According to Køhn, Rein Film contributed through their local knowledge, including finding locations and using local actors and film workers. According to producer Mathisen at Rein Film, they actively searched for film workers in northern Norway when producing *Monster*, and several members of the film crew were locals (Mathisen 2018). For Rein Film, it was important to use local competence:

When possible, I always argued in favour of the film workers from northern Norway. I wanted to involve them in the production. NRK is obliged to have a local presence. It was also important to have local screenings, to give something back to the communities. (Mathisen 2018)

The producer, director, co-producer and some of the actors were present at screenings in Vardø, Tromsø and Bodø, three cities in northern Norway, before *Monster* aired at NRK. Rein Film contributed 2 million NOK through funding from the regional film fund, Filmfund North, which changed their role to co-producer rather than just a local facilitator. The regional funding therefore contributed to Rein Film acquiring greater ownership, influence and experience by working on the project. Because financing from Filmfund North also presupposes that a production takes place in northern Norway, it helped secure the location and the use of local film workers, as the company highlights on their website (Filmfond Nord 2017).

The NRK placard specifies that NRK Drama needs to consider geographical diversity, both in content and in location, and conveys their obligations towards the private film and television business. Of special interest when discussing *Monster* are the goals outlined in paragraph 16, 17, and 20, which underline that NRK shall reflect the geographical diversity in Norway, display cultural diversity and support Norwegian film and independent production milieu (NRK 2019).

The production of *Monster* fulfils these obligations. First, the location is in Finnmark and Troms, northern Norway. Second, by co-producing with the private film company Rein

Film, NRK contributes to the development of the private film and television sector in general, but also to the regional film and television business, and hence to diversity, since Rein Film has a strong presence in northern Norway. Big television series productions do not happen on a regular basis outside of Oslo, and film workers in outlying regions often lack work opportunities due to low production volume (see Sand 2017b).

### **The Northern: Between Nordic noir and Western**

To make content for the Norwegian audience was the ambition for *Monster*, but as producer Alsos puts it, ‘the international success was a nice side-effect’ (Alsos 2018). As a public service broadcaster, NRK does not have a commercial focus and thus can afford to take creative risks. Early in the production of *Monster* the creators decided that although they were making a series that might be seen as a Nordic noir, they wanted to move beyond this category:

We thought about it as a ‘Northern’. We felt that it had more resemblance to the Western genre. Internationally, it got labelled as a Nordic noir because that sells. To us, it was not a point to pursue it as a Nordic noir. We wanted to make something different. (Alsos 2018)

Everybody was doing Nordic noir, it was a brand. We wanted to break loose from that. (Køhn 2018).

The genre descriptor Northern has no clear definition, although it had previously been applied to the Norwegian feature film *Veiviseren (Pathfinder)* (Gaup 1987). This story, based on a Sami legend, also takes place in northern Norway and has been described as a Western set in Sápmi (Iversen 2010: 85).

Implicit in the term ‘Northern’, as used by the creators of *Monster*, is that it is a hybrid of the Nordic noir and Western genres and their conventions. As Rick Altman points out:

At times we invoke generic terminology because multiple texts share the same building blocks (these semantic elements might be common topics, shared plots, key scenes, character types, familiar objects or recognizable shots and sounds). At other times we recognize generic affiliation because a group of texts organizes those

building blocks in a similar manner (as seen through such shared syntactic aspects as plot structure, character relationships or image and sound montage. (Altman 1999: 89)

The genre hybridization that the Northern represents is not uncommon because, as Altman adds:

(...) genres are easily mixed because a. popular notions of genre are heavily invested in one or two characteristic and easily identifiable elements, thus permitting genre cueing with minimal material; b. a film needn't obey a genre's logic throughout in order to be identified with that genre; c. because they depend on diverse elements (plot material, themes, images, style, tone, etc.), different genres may be combined with only minimal interference; d. certain scenes or motifs (for example, the love-conquers-all final clinch), being common to multiple genres (the Western, the musical, the weepie, the romantic comedy, etc.), are capable of reinforcing audience perception of several different genres. (1999: 131)

Which familiar building blocks are the most important with regards to Nordic noir and the Western? In the following, we will show how *Monster* represents a mix of these two genres.

### ***Monster* as Nordic noir**

According to Glen Creeber, 'Nordic Noir is best understood as a broad umbrella term which describes a particular type of Scandinavian crime fiction, typified by its heady mixture of bleak naturalism, disconsolate locations and morose detectives' (Creeber 2015: 1)

[Insert Figure 1]

Caption: The morose detectives of *Monster* (2017), Norway: NRK1. Tom Balgaard/NRK, used by permission.

Setting and characters are essential genre elements that define Nordic noir, along with the obligatory crime-solving plot. Other central aesthetic characteristics are narrative complexity that allows for multiple narrative viewpoints, slow and understated pacing and a distinctive sense of place, in addition to the stylistic conventions of film noir, where the 'portrayal of location and landscape implicitly reflect[s] its characters' inner moods and feelings' (Creeber 2015: 9).

Waade and Jensen emphasize (Nordic) melancholy as one of the central feelings:

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. (2013: 192)

When we first meet the protagonist, Hedda Hersoug, in Episode 1 of *Monster*, she is reluctantly taking a call from her boyfriend. It is abundantly clear that one reason she has come back to the place she grew up is to escape him, presumably after getting a bad case of cold feet. Shortly thereafter another reason for her return is revealed: the illness of her father, requiring her to take care of him. On top of that, she struggles with the loss of her mother, who disappeared when Hersoug was six years old. This setup of the character very much fits the Nordic noir format, and as is revealed in subsequent episodes, also ties into different strands of the detective plot of the series.

According to Creeber, 'The complexity [...] is often (although not always) intensified by having two detectives forced to work together on a single case. [...] [T]hey not only represent very different sides of policing but two types of moral and ethical codes' (Creeber 2015: 5). When the murders start piling up, Hersoug is no longer left to her own devices and is forced to work with a hotshot detective flown in from Oslo. Predictably, their personalities and values clash, with Dreyer's arrogance, drug addiction and willingness to cross ethical boundaries causing him to make a series of bad decisions, dragging Hersoug down into the mud (at one point literally) in the process. Hersoug and Dreyer are the two main narrative focal points, while ageing local police chief Ed Arvola and two members of the local crime family, the matriarch Margot van Gebert and her daughter Jani, provide additional twists to the story.

As in *The Killing* and *The Bridge*, the spectator is encouraged not only to view the story-world through a number of different narrative levels, but also through different contrasting narrative perspectives. As Creeber points out, this technique 'reveals an intensely complex and divided world which can only be healed through a combination of tolerance and co-operation' (Creeber 2015: 5). In *Monster*, the outsider perspective is provided by the dubious dealings of the van Gebert matriarch as well as by members of the religious enclave of Kataluma.

Creeber goes on to enumerate other defining characteristics of the Nordic noir genre:

What all these dramas have in common is their attempt to employ the detective genre to investigate the often lonely, desolate and isolated lives of its characters. Location is often central to this project, offering a cinematic expression that allows its visual canvas to tell us much about the people, themes and sensibilities at the heart of these narratives. (Creeber 2015: 19)

Whatever the makers' intentions, *Monster* obviously fits the Nordic noir moniker. This is hardly surprising. Just as the first wave(s) of Nordic noir crime fiction had an enormous influence on TV series from other countries -- Creeber uses *Broadchurch* and *True Detective* as his main examples of this -- *Monster* is in turn heavily influenced with regard to setting, characters and plot by American successes like *True Detective* in addition to the Australian/UK/NZ series *Top of the Lake*.

### ***Monster* as Western**

The above descriptions point towards setting as one of the most important building blocks of Nordic noir, with character and plot following close behind. This is also true of the Western, as John G. Cawelti's three-part formula for the genre -- setting, situation/plot and character -- indicates (Cawelti 1999: 11-56; 1970).

Although Westerns allow for a variety of plots, the fundamental characteristic is the clash between civilization and savagery. The action that arises from this clash reveals the antagonistic dichotomy that is at the heart of the genre. The classic Western is always set in the American West or near the frontier during a time period when social order and anarchy are in tension, and the story often involves some kind of pursuit (Cawelti 1970: 31). As Kelsey Topola has noted, the environment is as inhospitable as it is volatile, and always rife with danger for the heroes, villains and townspeople alike. The threats to characters can be divided into two main categories, dangers that are inherent in the landscape and dangers that are inherent in the social order ( ). According to Cawelti, the setting contains physical features that serve to isolate and antagonize its inhabitants. These include openness, aridity, lack of resources and extremes of light and climate ( ), which all work together to create what Topola has referred to as 'a landscape of death' (Topola 2013: 3).

In a similar manner, the first episodes of *Monster* create an awareness of the unforgiving landscape. A series of establishing shots of the main town soon give way to the

vast Arctic tundra in autumnal colours, the rugged coastline, a dark forest. An added menace is apparent when viewers learn that the territory borders on Russia. This is truly the harsh northern frontier of Norway.

[Insert Figure 2]

Caption: Detective Dreyer dwarfed by the northern frontier landscape. *Monster* (2017), Norway: NRK1. Screenshot, used by permission.

[Insert Figure 3]

Caption: A transport shot showing the rugged terrain. *Monster* (2017), Norway: NRK1. Screenshot, used by permission.

In later episodes, new layers are added to the landscape when snow and ice appear. One of the series' important showdowns places two ageing police officers fighting naked in the snow, the sun shining down on them in the vast open landscape.

Insert Figure 4

Caption: Naked men fighting in the landscape of death. *Monster* (2017), Norway: NRK1. Screenshot, used by permission.

Another important element of a Western is the characters, whom Cawelti groups in three categories, the townspeople, outlaws and heroes. In *Monster* the heroes working to protect the townspeople are not as obviously virtuous as in classic Westerns but resemble the more morally ambiguous heroes in Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969). The outlaw element is clearly represented by the van Gebert family, and in a sense by the outsiders of Kataluma, a closed religious society with its own set of rules and norms that do not always conform to the townspeople's way of living or their sense of morality and justice.

The final element of Cawelti's Western formula is the plot. Cawelti simply states that plot is what arises from the clash between the hero (or civilization) and the villain(s) (or savagery) in the Western setting ( ). Since this definition is so open, the only real requirement of a Western plot (besides including a hero and a villain) is that it is violent. Will Wright adds to Cawelti's understanding of the Western plot, connecting it to Claude Levi-Strauss' writing on myths (Wright 1977; Levi-Strauss 1963, 1976). Levi-Strauss' argument is that myths are structured in terms of binary oppositions and meaning is produced by dividing the world into



mutually exclusive categories, e.g. culture/nature, man/woman, black/white, good/bad, us/them. Wright argues that the narrative power of the Western is derived from its structure of binary oppositions: inside society/outside society, good/bad, strong/weak, civilization/wilderness (Wright 1977: 49). All of these elements are present in *Monster*, and we would argue that as a Northern it adds other binary pairs, center/periphery and north/south, that are important in a Norwegian context, given the long history of political conflicts along those dividing lines.

Wright lists different types of plots derived from two major narrative components, the solitary hero and the community in conflict or crisis. The main variant is the classical plot, which begins with the hero outside society and shows his progressive integration. At the end of *Monster*, Hersoug does not ride away into the sunset, but having found the killer and confronted her past, she decides to stay in northern Norway while Dreyer goes home to Oslo. The final shot of the series is the Northern equivalent of that familiar Western trope. Here, two outsiders, the ‘outlaw’ Jani van Gebert and the Kataluma preacher’s daughter Renate Nilsen, take their first steps away from their previous lives and set off together towards a new beginning.

[Insert Figure 5]

Caption: The Northern variant of the Western’s ride into the sunset. *Monster* (2017), Norway: NRK1. Screenshot, used by permission.

What Creeber calls an ‘intensely complex and divided world which can only be healed through a combination of tolerance and co-operation’ ( ) is demonstrated in *Monster* when both Hersoug and the religious outsiders of Kataluma find their way back to the social network of the townspeople, while two outsiders reject their ‘uncivilized’ pasts and forge their own path to a better future.

### **Nordic noir + Western formula = a transnational *Monster***

Concerning Nordic noir, Waade and Jensen write:

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 emphasizing something typically Nordic. (2013: 192)

This exoticism has served *Monster* well, and perhaps given the creators more creative leeway. The series is shot almost entirely on the Varanger peninsula in the northeastern part of the county Troms and Finnmark. The towns of Vardø and Vadsø, and the surrounding rural areas are used to create the *brutally far north* setting of the series, but the creators have gone to great lengths to remove specific geographical markers (road signs, signs on buildings) for any of these places. One single pivotal location is actually not far north at all. For an important scene in Episode 2, where Dreyer chases a suspect into a forest area and ends up accidentally killing a local girl, the creators had to look elsewhere because there is no forest on the Varanger peninsula, only rugged coastal terrain and Arctic tundra. Consequently the production set up in the woods just outside Oslo instead, a 3.5-hour plane ride from Vadsø. Not exactly far north, but a location that fits the general setting of the series and the demands of the genre tropes of the script (there has to be a chase scene in the woods if the setting is rural). This is another variation on the landscape of death already established.

The great paradox of the Western is that it has (almost) nothing whatsoever to do with history and everything to do with myth. This is also true of the Nordic frontier setting portrayed in *Monster*, which eschews historical or geographical accuracy in favour of creating, if not a mythical North, then at least an imagined one. This deliberate decision has given the creators a way of avoiding criticism from local audiences for perpetuating stereotypes about the North. At the same time, the non-specific setting has made the series more appealing to an American audience by serving up an imagined Nordic noir North constructed within the conventions of the Western, a genre that originates and has been popularized in the United States ever since James Fenimore Cooper ‘invented’ it with his novel *The Pioneers* in 1823. We would argue that the effort to create something new for a national audience by mixing the Nordic noir and the Western genres makes the series more appealing to an international audience.

## **Conclusion**

This article has discussed why the Norwegian television series *Monster*, originally produced for a national audience, travelled internationally. Using the concept of production values, which includes both economic and creative measures, we argue that the series is a result of strategic changes within NRK Drama and NRK’s cultural-political commitment to the private

and regional film business. Furthermore, although *Monster* was not perceived as a Nordic noir during the production process, it includes locations and visual tropes that resemble the Nordic noir 'look', and the series benefited from being branded as a Nordic noir by the distribution company DRG. The article reveals how *Monster* navigates between creative goals and economic realities, which resulted in a Northern, a mix between the Western, Nordic noir and images of the 'North'. These transnational features, including genre hybridity, notions of placelessness, the North as an imagined place and the frontier theme, have been important for the international distribution of the show.

Our analysis of the aesthetic production values shows that *Monster* is an example of how genre film and television are torn between convention and innovation. The goal is to offer audiences something familiar enough to make the show easily marketable, but also to put some sort of fresh twist on it to grab their attention. *Monster* rests on the strong and entrenched association of northern Norway with the peripheral 'end of the world', with rough and raw landscape and forces of nature, while the series also reflects on existing stereotypes about the Other in rural areas as eccentric and bigoted. By adhering to established Nordic noir conventions and adding some Western secret sauce into the mix, NRK made a television series that is able to ride the Nordic noir wave of success while also offering a distinctly new northern Norwegian version of Western myths. These two factors, we argue, made *Monster* a good fit for the American market and contributed to it becoming the first Norwegian-language series bought by an American network rather than being optioned for an American remake.

*Monster* is a result of NRK's increased commitment to quality drama and to diversity, including the development of the private and regional film and television business through co-production and buying external productions. In the last decade, the number of external productions, including co-productions, has grown by 40 per cent, giving NRK access to better financing, including regional funding, and to a wider range of stories and talents. Inspired by the one-vision strategy of Danmarks Radio, NRK has moved from the twin-vision model, with its focus on the scriptwriter in cooperation with the producer, towards a one vision model focusing on the scriptwriter. Higher ambitions with regard to quality have led to more generous financing for drama and the selection of projects according to merit, since drama is seen as hugely important in the fierce competition for viewers. *Monster* was chosen both because it was the best idea and because it fit NRK policy goals on a regional and national level. The international success of the series suggests that NRK's strategy shift also has wider positive implications.

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