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Remote but Connected

Lapland as a Scene of Transnational Crime in *Ivalo*

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Abstract

Set in a small town in the north of Finland, the crime TV series *Ivalo* (*Arctic Circle*, Finland, 2018) exemplifies the fascination of Nordic Noir with 'remote' locations as scenes of transnational crime. The plot seems to forebode the corona pandemic, portraying the spread of a life-threatening 'Yemenite virus' developed as a biological weapon from the Balkans to Lapland. In this article, I analyze how the virus narrative allows the series to bring new perspectives on Nordic Noir. The narrative emphasizes international connections while creating representations of places that can be characterized as both *translocal* (Greiner and Sakdapolrak 2013) and *glocal* (Robertson 2012). Because of its far northern location, the series can be described as an example of Arctic Noir. However, *Ivalo* breaks with traditional representations of both Lapland and the Russian border in Finnish audiovisual culture, striving towards a new cosmopolitan imagination.

Keywords: Arctic noir, border, cosmopolitanism, glocality, Nordic Noir, translocality

A co-production venture between the Finnish Yellow Film & TV and the German Bavaria Film, the crime TV drama *Ivalo* (*Arctic Circle*, 2018) takes its name from a small Lappish town, the administrative center of the second northernmost municipality in Finland, Inari. Ivalo is located close to an international airport, at about 50 kilometers from the border with Russia. The area has become a popular travel destination for tourists with its skiing centers, national parks and wilderness areas. This arctic location is the series' prime production value (Waade 2017, 6) and reflects the current fascination of Nordic Noir with "remote" locations and the interest to turn them into scenes of transnational crime.

Ivalo was filmed by Finnish director Hannu Salonen, co-written by the Finnish Joona Tena and the Icelandic Jón Atli Jónasson. It stars actors from Finland, Germany and Iceland. The main languages spoken in the series are Finnish and English. It has been sold to more than 20 countries, including Germany, Spain and China (Koskela 2019). It exemplifies Ib Bondebjerg's (2016, 5) observation that "the crime genre on television is one of the genres where European co-production has resulted in quite advanced forms of transnational stories and creative collaboration." In Finland, *Arctic Circle* was premiered on the Elisa Viihde video-on-demand service from December 2018 to April 2019.

The plot starts when the local police find an abused Russian prostitute barely alive in an old cabin. Taken to the hospital she is found carrying a life-threatening, sexually transmitted 'Yemenite virus'. When two more prostitutes are found murdered, the National Bureau of Investigation takes over the case and sends for German virus specialist Thomas Lorenz (Maximilian Brückner). Local police officer Nina Kautsalo (Iina Kuustonen) is ordered to assist Lorenz; together they will come to realize that not only is the virus in direct connection with the murders, but that the infection, which was started in a distant place, might now have serious consequences for Lapland and even for the whole world.

Ivalo seems to convey forebodings of the corona pandemic, whose first suspicions in Finland were reported in Ivalo in January 2020. Although in the plot the 'Yemenite virus' is developed and spread deliberately, the scenario feels particularly pertinent in the light of the current pandemic crisis, now that we have become aware that globalization also has its dark side and it is not only people, goods

and ideas that travel around the world. As a matter of fact, through its virus-related plot, the series connects a sparsely populated place in the subarctic region with several other, often quite distant, locations.

In the following, I analyze *Ivalo* as an example of Arctic noir and discuss the way in which it creates, through its topical virus narrative, an unconventional representation of Lapland that can be characterized as both *translocal* (Greiner and Sakdapolrak 2013) and *glocal* (Robertson 2012). There has been a tendency to represent Lapland as Finland's 'internal other' in Finnish audiovisual culture (Hiltunen 2019). However, the fight against the virus portrayed in the series calls for both inter-regional and international co-operation as well as the crossing of borders, especially the Russian border. I argue that the virus plot brings changes to both the nature of crime investigation in Arctic noir and the representation of Lapland and the Russian border in Finnish audiovisual culture.

Arctic noir and translocality

Nordic Noir has recently traveled further north and further away from urban centers, revealing the underbelly of small arctic communities in series such as the Icelandic Ófærð (*Trapped*, 2015), Swedish-French *Midnattsol* (*Midnight Sun*, 2016) and the Norwegian *Monster* (*Id.* 2017) (Hiltunen 2019; Waade 2020). Researchers have adopted the term Arctic Noir to describe crime series that use the harsh far northern climate as a marketing device and a central aspect of their aesthetics (Waade 2020, 38–39; Iversen 2020).

Most of the Finnish Nordic Noir TV series, such as *Sorjonen* (*Bordertown*, 2016–20), *Karppi* (*Deadwind*, 2018–20), *Ratamo* (*Id.*, 2018) and *Bullets* (*Id.*, 2018) have been located in cities. The noir-western *Armoton maa* (*Law of the Land*, 2017), a film set in western Lapland, and *Kaikki synnit* (*All the Sins*, 2019), a crime series set in Ostrobothnia, are the only notable exceptions. Therefore, Arctic Noir as a 'sub-genre' of Nordic Noir is a novel context for the analysis of audiovisual productions located in the north of Finland, Lapland. Waade points out that the Arctic has been represented, mostly by outsiders, as an elsewhere (2020, 42). Therefore, it can be argued that *Ivalo* marks a significant turn in the history of Arctic noir and its role in shaping our conceptions of this increasingly contested and vulnerable region.

Greiner and Sakdapolrak note that a translocal perspective on places focuses on both what is in them and what flows through them. They write that "Translocality (…) implies a transgressing of locally bounded, fixed understandings of place and at the same time emphasizes the importance of places as nodes where flows that transcend *spatial* scales converge" (Greiner and Sakdapolrak 2013, 377). Therefore, they suggest, translocality can be used as a "starting point from which to challenge dichotomous geographical conceptions (Agnew 2005), such as space and place, rural and urban, core and periphery" (Greiner and Sakdapolrak 2013, 380). Although Ivalo is no doubt peripherical when looked at from Helsinki, in *Ivalo* it becomes the center of the action.

The virus, or the invisible connector

Greiner and Sakdapolrak (2013, 380) point out that discussions about translocality "direct attention to various modes of mobility beyond the movement of people". In virus epidemics, the infectious agents move with people, but usually unbeknownst to their own human carriers. In the series, the virus is a powerful but at the same time largely invisible driving force of the plot, which adds a medical context to the narrative. Its image is visualized in the first episode when Lorenz lectures about his work at his daughter's school, and when he tries to convince the chief inspector of the dangerousness of the Yemenite virus. In a later episode, an image of the mutated virus is shown. Otherwise, the virus is visualized only in the title sequence as images of enlarged cells and as a black rhizome-like structure that turns dark red while expanding in the snowy landscape, spreading around from buildings, cars, trees and other elements of the scenery, giving the impression that an all-encompassing enemy is taking over everything. The title sequence plays a special role in that it makes the virus visible and illustrates in an exaggerated manner the way it works – something that the actual narrative cannot do.

The Yemenite virus is told to always travel together with the herpes virus. It is activated when a woman gets pregnant and can cause both severe deformity in fetuses and, frequently, the death of expectant mothers. This grim prediction comes true when a local Laestadian woman and her baby die during childbirth. Laestadianism is a pietistic Lutheran revival movement, the members of

which hold conservative values and avoid all forms of 'worldliness'. Ironically, the dead woman's husband has to confess that he enjoyed the services of certain party girls. The only other known carrier of the virus beyond the Russian prostitutes is Nina Kautsalo's promiscuous sister, who is put to quarantine. Yet, when Kautsalo's small daughter is also found infected with the disease, it soon turns out that the Yemenite virus is able to mutate and spread in different ways beyond sexual transmission.

In the second season of *Bron/Broen* (*The Bridge*, Sweden/Denmark, 2011–18), environmental activists use a deadly virus to draw attention to their cause. In a key scene, a character exposed to the infection dies a painful death and a female police officer decides to commit suicide rather than wait for the disease to kill her. In *Ivalo,* the medical context is a more integral and visible part of the narrative than in *Bron/Broen*, but in the latter the consequences of the virus are shown in a more grisly manner.

The crime investigation takes a new turn when the pharmaceutical entrepreneur Marcus Eiben (Clemens Schick) from Amsterdam arrives in Ivalo and asks Thomas Lorenz for assistance. Eiben reveals that the virus was developed in 1993 in Bosnia by a Serbian scientist micic with the intention of destroying the Muslim population of the country. A small group of Serbian soldiers were injected the virus and assigned the task to rape Muslim women, with the goal to infect the whole Bosniac population. However, the operation was interrupted once the war came to an end. Only one soldier with the virus in his blood, Lazar Cevikovic (Aleksandar Jovanovic), was left alive. Called "patient zero" and believed to possess an antidote to the virus, this man has been hiding in Yemen but now lives in Murmansk, in northern Russia. Eiben has been looking for Cevikovic for 20 years, since he lost his wife and child because of this man. When finally Cevikovic is found, he claims to be a victim as well, having been unaware to be carrying the virus until the death of his own child and wife. Therefore, only Micic can disable the virus. We also discover that Cevikovic has ordered the murder of the Russian girls, whom he claims had seen too much at his parties. The first suspects, local thugs, turn out to be minor figures working for Cevikovic.

Spatial and temporal connections are created through actions that are reactions to the virus. By locating the story in the far north

and the origin of the virus in southern Europe more than 20 years earlier, the narrative calls attention to the fact that in today's mobile world everywhere is connected to everywhere else and local and global can become linked in complex ways. Although the virus causes fear and suffering, it also leads to positive forms of co-operation between experts of different fields and nationalities. Before long, the National Bureau of Investigation has to concede that expertise can be found also in Lapland. Local knowledge turns out to be crucial in different phases of the investigation. Moreover, in the present of the story-world, movement across the Russian border is the most significant form of transnational mobility.

Crossing the Russian border

Borders and cross-border operations have been from the beginning important ingredients of Nordic Noir, most importantly perhaps in *Bron/Broen* and in the Finnish *Sorjonen*. Since the Russian girls are victims of human trafficking, the Russian border guard is involved in the investigation, albeit on a rather superficial level. Although Russia is associated with threat, a certain change of attitude towards the eastern neighbor can be seen to take place in the series: the main characters venture to the other side of the border in a way that has not been seen in previous Finnish films and series.

As Juha Ridanpää (2017) has observed, audiences seem to be interested in borders today; he mentions as examples *Bron/Broen*, its several adaptations, and *Sorjonen*. As in *Ivalo*, in these series activity near and across the border is associated with criminal activity. The meaning of borders is therefore easily constructed as negative, and border stories are often used to "strengthen different forms of patriotic ideology", although the same series can have an educational and informative impact, too. (Ridanpää 2017, 100. My translation.) It should be noticed, however, that the focus of Ridanpää's study is not Nordic Noir but rather two earlier Finnish films, Renny Harlin's, *Jäätävä polte* (*Born American*, Finland and US, 1986) and Wilho Ilmari's *Yli rajan* (Finland, 1942), in which the crossing of the Russian border takes up negative meanings related to the stories' time-setting, respectively the Cold War period and WWII.

In Finnish cinema, the author writes, "the crossing of the Finnish-Russian border has been always portrayed in a negative light and as a highly criminal and dangerous activity, and the films'

heroes have always been aware of the severity of the punishments resulting from such activity" (Ridanpää 2017, 102. My translation). For historical reasons, the border has been considered to keep the two nations apart. WWII cemented this view, because Finland lost 12.5 % of its territory to Russia and during the Cold War, Finland was seen as a buffer state between Russia and Europe (Ridanpää 2017, 101–102). Still today, the eastern border is not open, which is in marked contrast to the western border.

In Nordic Noir's representation of transnational crime, border crossing has not always been associated with negative meanings and unlike in periods of war it does not lead to hostilities between nations." In *Bron/Broen* the co-operation across the Swedish/Danish border reveal national differences, which can be a source of humor (Åberg 2015). *Ivalo* too takes small steps towards showing a more easy-going relationship between the Finnish and the Russian authorities than what was seen in, for example, *Sorjonen* or *Jäätävä polte*, where the trip to Russia was nightmarish. In *Ivalo*, on the contrary, the representation of the Russian authorities even displays some humor as in the figure of Alexander Ragulin from the border guard.

On the other hand, the series upholds a negative image of Russia. The Finnish police do not think it is safe to return the prostitutes to Russia and the girls are horrified by the sheer possibility of being repatriated. Moreover, the most violent scenes take place during a dangerous expedition to Russia to find Cevikovic. However, the crossing of the border itself goes almost unnoticed. Although *Ivalo* creates the impression that Russia is somehow closer or can be reached more easily than in previous years (c.f. Saunders 2017, 4), some stereotypes are reminders of the conflicting historical relationship between the two countries. While Cevikovic is not Russian, his criminal activity is organized from the Russian side of the border. As an example of "banal geopolitics" (Ridanpää 2017, 106), the difference between the countries is illustrated by cars. When the search team enters Russia, they change the snowmobiles for old Ladas in order to not draw attention to themselves. Following Saunders's (2017) analysis of "geopolitical television", *Ivalo* can be read as both a geopolitical intervention and an act of "world-building". The series suggests that a change in attitude is possible, although it does not seem to be entirely sure of its own stance. On the

one hand, it sticks to old conventions, one of which is giving Russians, or Eastern Europeans more generally, the role of villains, on the other, it seeks to create, in this geopolitically loaded region, a new kind of transnational narrative.

Although the border is a significant trope in the narrative, *Ivalo* is not ultimately so much concerned with questions like national identity and self-image, which, according to Ridanpää (2017), are typical of border stories. Rather, it is more interested in exploring the nature of the individual characters and the intersections between their lives in a translocal place, which Mandaville (2002, 204) characterizes as "a space in which new forms of (post)national identity are constituted, and not simply one in which prior identities assert themselves".

Constructing a cosmopolitan Arctic

It has been argued that Nordic Noir owes its popularity to a skillful combination of local and global elements, which Stougaard-Nielsen describes with the term "accessible difference". In order to arouse interest, the story needs to be rooted in a certain locality, yet at the same time it also needs to be transnationally recognizable. (Stougaard-Nielsen 2016, 3.) This situation illustrates Roland Robertson's theory that in cultural products locality tends to be "communicated 'from above'". This kind of standardized form of locality is captured by the term glocal. (Robertson 2012, 195.) When Nordic pullovers started to appear in crime series, they became global signifiers of Nordicness. Local is thus a consequence of, or becomes recognized as local through, global processes. Moreover, 'local' elements are combined with the international conventions of the crime genre, as Seppälä (2020, 258) points out. In this respect, *Ivalo* resembles many other Nordic Noir productions. It aims for a new, cosmopolitan representation of Lapland, while at the same time adhering to certain local specificities.

Ivalo does not settle for the authentic landscape but turns it into something more exciting. In its fictional world, on top of Kaunispää Fell sits Arctic Resort, an impressive glass-fronted hotel digitally created for the series. In reality, there sits a log house. Although the hotel features a lot, no key scenes take place there. It could therefore be argued that the main function of the building is to create a cosmopolitan atmosphere on the aesthetic level (c.f.

Mulvey, Rascaroli and Saldanha 2017, 1–3). Hotels are *non-places*, that is, places that are only meant for visiting and are relatively similar everywhere (Augé 1995). The dark, minimalist lobby and the glimpses of smartly dressed people create an effective contrast with the surrounding landscape. The hotel emphasizes the new, translocal character of Ivalo.

The key sites in addition to the hotel are the police station, the hospital and Nina's home. The many aerial views of moving vehicles, a typical trait of Nordic Noir, are mostly of snowmobiles speeding across the fells in a snow-covered landscape. Snowy surroundings have been seen for example in the Icelandic *Ófærð* and the British *Fortitude* (2015) (Waade 2020, 38), but in comparison with these productions, the visual appearance of *Ivalo* is quite bright and not nearly as melancholic and gloomy as is typical of Nordic Noir (Toft Hansen and Waade 2017). The main impression is one of luminous crispy winter days, even though the cold causes mortal danger and there are nighttime scenes as well. The series was shot in February (Kinnunen 2018), when in the Arctic there is a lot of snow, but already quite a lot of daylight. A tranquil fell scenery is repeatedly seen through a window, which heightens the impression of a beautiful view, almost like a painting. Only a limited amount of local specificity is allowed to be on view. This includes reindeer and some buildings made out of wood. There is no sign of the touristic activities that in reality bring people to the region, such as downhill skiing and husky safaris. The kind of serious crime that erupts in remote cabins and abandoned factories has rarely been seen in audiovisual productions set in Lapland.

A sense of physical isolation is created by emphasizing the vastness of the country that surrounds Ivalo. Going to the crime scene across these open spaces takes a long time, and often snowmobiles are the only way to get there. The closest city, Rovaniemi, is hours away. However, when the action starts for real, this sense of isolation is cancelled out. Planes bring people to Ivalo and a helicopter transports them around the area. When it is revealed that the virus originated in the Balkans, the world seems to shrink. Ivalo is constructed as a place that is connected in complex ways to far-away places. In the narrative, it becomes, briefly, a setting for unexpected events and a meeting place for some suspicious people. The criminal activity and the investigation sweep through the place and

change the lives of many, not least the police, whose daily routine used to revolve mainly around settling local brawls. In the last episode, Nina Kautsalo is offered a job as the head of a special unit that would be located in Ivalo. This suggests that perhaps international crime has come to the North to stay.

Concluding remarks

Although the series was made for an international audience, it is altogether relevant to reflect on its place in Finnish national audiovisual culture (c.f. Higbee and Lim 2010, 8). I have argued that *Ivalo* challenges the way northern Finland is represented in audiovisual productions, by turning the location into a translocal place, where local and global elements are brought into tension.

Although *Ivalo* is not entirely free of exoticism, it challenges the view of the Arctic as an elsewhere. By making use of the transnational ethos of Nordic Noir, it emphasizes connections not just between Lapland and southern Finland, but between Lapland and the rest of the world. In *Ivalo* Lapland does not merely appear as Finland's "internal other" (Jansson 2003), as in earlier films, such as *The Earth is a Sinful Song* (*Maa on syntinen laulu*, 1974) (Hiltunen 2019). In Finnish cinema, Lapland is often represented as a large, unnamed place. The fact that here the location has a name emphasizes that it is a place and a center of activity in its own right.

By answering to the expectations of global audiences, Arctic noir produces visions of a North that are increasingly cosmopolitan. *Ivalo* is a "geopolitically inflected text" (Saunders 2017, 5), which shapes our understanding of the North in general and the Finnish-Russian border in particular and can even be said to have "predictive force" (Saunders 2017, 7). Like earlier Nordic Noir series, *Ivalo* draws attention to the negative consequences of globalization, but in a way that could hardly be more topical. A deadly virus developed for biological warfare in southern Europe during the Balkans war threatens the northern community. The story is not only about finding the culprits, but also about taking care of the ordinary people who might fall sick with the virus. In this way, it also emphasizes the power of international co-operation and the need to fight together against an invisible threat that resembles closely the challenge we are facing today in the real world.

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