

# Post-Nordic-noir landscapes: Competition through localisation in Finnish streaming media

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**Sanna Wicks** 

Coventry University, UK

**Pietari Kääpä** 

University of Warwick, UK

## Abstract

This article discusses the ways locality and sense of place are used in the production and promotion of streaming media from small nations. We concentrate on location-related decisions behind *Man in Room 301*, a Finnish thriller series produced by VOD service Elisa Viihde Viaplay. While locality acts as a significant tool for Nordic Noir, a genre of film and TV characterised by a distinct ‘localised’ style, this article explores how the Finnish streaming industry is progressing towards a ‘post-Nordic-noir’ framework, a direction that focuses on an intense sense of place, both on the level of representation and production-related decisions.

## Keywords

Nordic noir, location, streaming, finnish drama production, post-nordic-noir, television

## Introduction: the increasingly global demand for high-end TV drama

The 2010s saw a large shift from feature films to television drama as the most desirable form of fiction production (Engelstad, 2016; McElroy and Noonan, 2019). Increasingly, talents, directors and actors are looking to not only work in feature films but also on television drama, particularly the high-end drama which expects to appeal to global

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### Corresponding author:

Sanna Wicks, Coventry University, Jordan Well, Coventry CV1 5FB, UK.

Email: [sanna.wicks@coventry.ac.uk](mailto:sanna.wicks@coventry.ac.uk)

audiences. [Audun Engelstad \(2016: 2\)](#) suggests international high-end television drama can be identified by some of the following features: high budgets, cinematic production values, well-known talent and creative innovation from narrative complexity to mixing of genres, leading to television series which qualify as must-see global phenomena. Consequently, the convergence between cinema and television has resulted in cinema, which has become more serialised with sequel-ready high budget scripts, and television, which is more cinematic especially in high-end drama production ([Hudelet and Crémieux, 2020](#)), a process which extends far outside of the conventional parameters of Hollywood domination (or indeed ‘Global’ Hollywood).

This new wave of production and content delivery has especially impacted the international marketplace for audiovisual content ([Lobato, 2019](#); [Ulin, 2019](#)). English-speaking countries have traditionally been seen as having an advantage with language ([McElroy and Noonan, 2019](#)) when it comes to television programmes crossing national boundaries, with many other countries having limited domestic markets and lower exports. More recently, the changing landscape with pay-for-view and subscription video on demand (SVoD) platforms has led to international organisations like the European Audiovisual Observatory ([Grece, 2021](#)) investing in European high-end television drama. Simultaneously Netflix has expanded its services to most international markets, with the company currently projecting to reach over 40 million global viewers by 2023, a strategy relying especially on investing in local productions not only for local audiences but for global distribution ([Reuters, 2022](#)). Such demand has led to both advantages and challenges for European producers ([Iordache, 2021](#)). Dominant platforms like Netflix can simultaneously perpetuate cultural homogeneity through purchasing and commissioning decisions and increase diversity by providing series like [Dark \(2017-2020\)](#) and [La casa de papel \(2017-2021\)](#) much more globalised visibility (partially enforced by the European Union’s requirements for a 30% of subsidised European content; [Rankin, 2018](#)). In addition to Netflix, pay television and streaming services such as HBO and Amazon Prime have also realised the need for local content on their platforms to attract and retain subscribers, telling stories that are local but with a global appeal.

Such developments are important as they highlight the diversification of the international media landscape, but also the vocabulary (linguistic as well as audio-visual) of much of mainstream genre-based media content. It provides a critical vantage point to interrogate one of the more recent international film and TV success stories, Nordic Noir, and the ways its genre lifecycle uses culturally-specific identifiers in different media industry contexts – in our case, the small nation context of Finland. In this article we evaluate how generic parameters are used and transformed by small nation media productions in order to achieve international competitiveness and explore how the Finnish streaming industry is progressing towards a ‘post-Nordic-noir’ framework, a progress we suggest largely focuses on representations of local environments and an intense sense of place. Our case study concentrates on the location-related decisions behind [Man in Room 301 \(2019\)](#), a six-part series by Elisa Viihde (Elisa Entertainment), screened via the SvoD Elisa Viihde Viaplay platform in Finland and sold widely internationally.

## Finnish noir in context

Nordic countries have been able to successfully sell programming globally by balancing between appealing to domestic audiences and engaging with the visibility generated by streaming platforms facilitating increased flow of content across borders. Several recent interdisciplinary edited collections, including [Anne Marit Waade, Eva Novrup Redvall and Pia Majbritt Jensen \(2020\)](#) and [Linda Badley, Andrew Nestingen and Jaakko Seppälä \(2020\)](#), link such media industry developments with the international breakthrough of Nordic Noir. Finland has not been as successful as its Nordic neighbours in terms of producing high-end television drama, struggling to produce series which reach the same production standards and international success as shows from the other Nordic countries.

Whilst others have highlighted the success of localised drama produced in the UK in reaching global audiences ([McElroy and Noonan, 2019](#)), we focus on the use of locality and sense of place in high-end television drama produced in the small nation context of Finland. The aim is to highlight how they can be used to position (or subvert) generic expectations in the international marketplace. While Finland does have a long history of crime fiction adaptation in programmes such as [Raid \(2000\)](#) and [Rikospoliisi Maria Kallio \(2003\)](#), these were all low budget productions with little international interest ([Grundström et al., 2020](#)). For example, [Ib Bondebjerg and Redvall \(2011\)](#) and [Annika Pham \(2017\)](#) note that Finland stood out as having remarkably low figures for domestic drama and that it was the least active Nordic country to export television drama. The change came in 2016 with the success of Finnish series [Bordertown \(2016-2020\)](#) followed by [Deadwind \(2018-\)](#), both bought and streamed by Netflix and sold widely internationally. 2021 saw the first Finnish series in the 'Nordic slot' on BBC4 when [Man in Room 301 \(2019\)](#) was broadcast.

These transformations have been attributed to policy changes in supporting Finnish drama production ([Grundström et al., 2020](#)). One of the main off-screen deciding factors in the Finnish context is the tax rebate system and the resulting financial decisions made by producers ([Business Finland, 2021](#); [Sim, 2021](#)). For Finnish productions to succeed in the international marketplace, producers have needed to consider ways to improve the quality of their productions and seek new forms of funding to do so. Finnish producer [Aleksi Bardy](#) explains (cited in [Grundström et al., 2020](#)) that production values have changed significantly, which has been achieved, for example, by new financial structures leading to increasing the number of shooting days, being more ambitious with cinematography, adding a variety of locations and facilitating more international casting.

However, we also suggest that Finland, as a latecomer to the Nordic Noir boom, is uniquely positioned to expediate the normative development of genre content, including consciously moving away from the strictures of the genre to avoid audience fatigue. We suggest this is premised on an understanding of Nordic Noir as a defined genre, as outlined in a range of collections (see for example [Badley et al., 2020](#)), with a clear set of cultural (genre-based) features and industry-economic-creative parameters. However, we are not interested in regurgitating these identifiers but suggest, instead, that the Finnish streaming media environment is approaching such genre developments from a self-conscious perspective that capitalises on Finland's late-mover advantage.

To explore how contemporary Finnish productions simultaneously affiliate and distance themselves with Nordic Noir to carve out a space in the international media landscape, we draw on location studies, and the approach developed by Kim Toft Hansen and Waade (2017) to explore the commercial implications of spatiality in Nordic Noir. While this history has been covered extensively in scholarship (Waade and Hansen, 2017), for us, the key focus is on the use of location as a particularly important feature of the genre, with narratives rooted in specific locations through an intense sense of place. By sense of place, we do not merely refer to the unique features of place, but also to the dimensions that define people's 'identity in relation to the physical environment of place' (Proshansky, 1978: 147), which, in the context of location-based crime drama, focuses on a mirroring between the characters and the landscape.

The use of location is nothing new to crime drama – the crime site is, after all, a key feature of a crime story and the clues are usually found in the surrounding area – and shows such as *Inspector Morse* (1987-2000) and *Luther* (2010-2019) are both tied to place, Oxford and London respectively. For Nordic Noir, however, location is a key part of the narrative and often provides the grounds for their dark and gloomy tone. In *The Killing* (2007-2012) the dark Copenhagen reflects not only the 'sombre and desolate mood of its gruesome murder, but also the personality and disposition of its central detective' (Creeber, 2015) as well as the things that have gone wrong in the Nordic welfare state. In the Finnish Nordic Noir series *Bordertown*, the small border town of Lappeenranta provides a setting for the key storylines. Lappeenranta has an idyllic lakeshore and is surrounded by forests, but unlike the lead detective's expectation of better work/life balance, the proximity to the Russian border and crossing point provide him with more gruesome crimes than he ever expected. For Nordic Noir this emphasis on specific locations is one of the key elements of the story and provides a significant selling point for international distributors (Hansen and Waade, 2017:13).

### **Sense of place and *Man in Room 301***

Driven by the genre's emphasis on place, we study both off-screen decision-making regarding location and onscreen representation of locations in the context of a case study of the Finnish streaming show *Man in Room 301*. Written by Brit Kate Ashfield and directed by Mikko Kuparinen, the show focuses on dualities: first, at the level of narrative which deals with two families on the opposing ends of Finnish class society, namely, the affluent Kurttis whose holidays at their countryside house clash with the local farmers, the Leppos. Second, the duality plays out at the level of location as the narrative flips between the countryside home and the Kurttis' holiday in Greece. The dual locations reflect the tensions in the narrative and facilitate the show's play with genre conventions, which essential in understanding its relationship with Nordic Noir.

For us, *Man in Room 301*'s sense of place exemplifies how 'the relationship between narratives 'taking' place and a production 'screening' place involves implications on different levels of screen production, including place representation, geographical and media policy implications of production and the commodification of place in a transnational market culture' (Hansen and Waade, 2019: 103). The description can be applied

to *Man in Room 301* to uncover the ways off-screen and onscreen factors emphasise the importance of location as a means of understanding the choices made during a production. Location and sense of place are vital factors in facilitating competition from small nation contexts as locality comprises some of the key cultural capital with which these productions can compete externally. Such factors can be used to distinguish the content of these productions, but they also act as important markers of industrial or policy support often premised on tax or other incentives enticing external productions to shoot in these contexts.

## Locating noir in Finland

*Man In Room 301* embodies Finnish attempts at Nordic Noir and showcases innovative indications of the ways the genre is transforming after having saturated the markets with a heavy dose of programming. To explore what Finland (and specifically *Man in Room 301*) does differently in relation to 'orthodox' Nordic Noir (see, [Stougaard-Nielsen, 2016](#)), it is important to place Finnish television drama in the context of the genre. The producers interviewed by Grundström, Bajo and Matila for their 2019 overview of developments in Finnish television production, acknowledge that Finnish drama is still trying to catch up with foreign television series, especially with the best series from its Nordic neighbours. As in other countries, Finnish productions are competing over highly skilled people and talent from feature films are working across both film and television drama ([Grundström et al., 2020](#)). Recently, we have seen attempts to diversify the range of television produced in Finland by using the general templates set by the Nordic Noir brand. This brand provides an obvious consideration for any Nordic production planning on international sales due to its prominent global profile (see [McElroy, 2020](#), for the mobility of the concept of Nordic Noir; [Hansen et al., 2018](#), for further observations on Nordic Noir in the context of European television drama). For example, *Bordertown* fits clearly within the Nordic Noir genre, with its neurodiverse lead detective reminiscent of *The Bridge* (2011–2018), gruesome murders which expose societal issues and moral dilemmas, and sense of place in the eastern border region with a border crossing to Russia playing a part in the narrative. *Deadwind* also follows many of the Nordic Noir conventions, with a strong female lead detective, the cold, dark and realistically grim surroundings of Helsinki and the already familiar storylines around childhood trauma.

While Finnish drama has found some international success with the above-mentioned orthodox Noir shows, distinguishing Finnish productions from their international competition has been one of the aims of both the public service broadcaster YLE ([Niemi, 2018](#)) and streaming providers such as Elisa Viihde ([Sim, 2021](#)). There are both cultural and economic arguments for such approaches. Culturally, some would argue that 'our society, language and mentality are different to those in other Nordic countries. This has to be the starting point and something which YLE will invest in' (Vilén, cited by [Niemi, 2018](#)). From an economic-industrial perspective, Seija-Liisa Eskola, Creative Director of Warner Bros International Television Production Finland, explains that Finnish production budgets are still a fraction of those available in other Nordic countries which has an obvious impact on production ([Eskola, 2021](#)). She suggests that Swedish producers

continue to make Nordic Noir extremely well and that there is not much point in copying these established approaches. Alan Sim, the Executive Producer of *Man in Room 301* and Commissioner at Elisa Viihde, agrees that it is pointless trying to compete with countries which have access to bigger budgets: ‘Your best bet is to do what you can do best for the money’ (2021). Eskola explains that television channels are asking for high-end series, but budgets are not going up to enable production companies to produce them. As an example, she states that the average fee for a script is 10,000€ per episode, which includes all versions from initial concept development to final version: ‘We are asked to produce high quality work with minimum budgets’ (Eskola, 2021). As a consequence, many creatives are frustrated and feel their work is undervalued. Distributors can also be weary of coming aboard series produced on low budgets.

In response to these complications, Sim (2021) states that the best strategy is to produce something small, contained and local, because it can be done well rather than compete with bigger budget productions, an approach exemplified by *Man in Room 301*, as explained below. Competing with other Nordic Noir productions is not rational or justifiable for producers working in the smaller-than-small context of Finland – in addition to a domestic audience of just over 5 million people, Finland is also the least active Nordic country in exporting local drama (Pham, 2017). Thus, instead of directly competing with the other better-resourced Nordic media industries (Bondebjerg and Redvall, 2011), some Finnish players like the SVoD platform Elisa Viihde have started to develop strategies based on distinguishing their products from more ‘traditional’ Nordic Noir. Elisa Viihde entered the market in 2014 and merged with the Swedish Nordic Entertainment Group (NENT Group) in 2020 to form Elisa Viihde Viaplay, quickly becoming one of the biggest producers of Finnish drama. Elisa Viihde’s key series, *Arctic Circle* (2018), *All the Sins* (2019), *Shadow Lines* (2019) and *Bullets* (2018), have all sold internationally and they have capitalised on the audience’s familiarity with Nordic content in the wake of the international success of Nordic Noir. At the same time, shows like *All the Sins* and *Man in Room 301* deviate from the conventions of orthodox Noir by, for example, setting these shows during summer, thus deviating from the genre’s emphasis on darkness.

The attempt to disassociate from orthodox Noir, a conscious decision as explained by Sim (2021), provides an indication of how Finnish producers circumvent the dominance of Nordic Noir. Sim explains that he is trying to deliberately move away from the tag of Nordic Noir, explaining that portraying a different aspect of Finland and the Nordics can be achieved by, for example, deliberately shooting in mid-summer. Similar self-conscious disassociation tactics are used by the Icelandic series *Katla* (2021) which moves away from the police procedural and the crime drama as it adopts generic references from a range of influences. These include sci-fi conventions from the afore-mentioned *Dark* but the show also positions these in a frame that maintains fidelity to ‘traditional’ Noir shows such as the fellow Icelandic show *Trapped* (2015). Interestingly, the main means for distinguishing *Katla* from other similar shows comes from its sense of place as the story is centred around the village of Vik during a prolonged volcanic eruption. The grey, brutal landscape, covered in ash is a main driver of the story as all the strange happenings are

explained through the Icelandic volcanic landscape (that also serve as the roots of many indigenous myths and stories that the show mines).

It is not unexpected to see Nordic productions move away from the genre while keeping family resemblance to appeal to audiences. Shows like *Katla* comprise what we call a ‘post-Nordic-noir’ framework of series that transform or challenge the by-now established features of Nordic Noir. In addition to the Elisa shows described above or *Katla*, other examples of such Nordic post-Nordic-noir series include the Norwegian *Twin* (2019), a crime drama which breaks many of the expected conventions of Nordic Noir, whilst still looking familiar. Although several of these series offer good examples of what a post-Nordic-noir landscape might look like, in this article, we focus on *Man in Room 301* which is especially productive as a case study as it 1) embodies Finland’s late arrival in the international marketplace for high-end TV drama, and consequently, 2) it has the opportunity to carve out a novel approach to genres like the Nordic Noir. Such approaches allow us to demonstrate how the use of place and location function as one of the key indicators in defining post-Nordic-noir, and conversely, how the use of locations requires an ‘escalation’ of Nordic Noir to a post-Nordic-noir landscape.

*Man in Room 301* has a pronounced noirish theme, focusing on the murder of the 2-year-old son of the Kurttis. Eskola (2021) explains that ‘It’s a drama about a family, where something terrible has happened. We cut most of the scenes with the police out in the edit stage, when we realised that they didn’t add anything to the main narrative’. The intention was never to abide by the conventions of Nordic Noir, even if the director Mikko Kuparinen introduced elements from the genre. The narrative choices do not indicate a substantial deviation from Nordic-noir parameters outside of the conventional ways that genre product invariably extends such boundaries. Instead, we suggest that it is the politics of locality and sense of place, both on the level of *Man in Room 301*’s production context and its content, that illustrates these emerging approaches to redefining the Nordic Noir media landscape. To do so, we start by exploring the ways the selection of locations for this show influences its production dynamics and how these dynamics, in turn, filtered into its content.

## **The off-screen factors influencing choice of location**

*Man in Room 301* features various culturally significant locations, including a Finnish holiday home, a contrast between rural and urban settings, and a holiday destination abroad that foreground questions of place and location. The choice of locations for filming these scenes provides important insight into the creative and pragmatic production context of the show and influences the ways it seeks to break with the conventions of orthodox Nordic Noir. Underpinning these choices are a myriad of factors at play, influenced by decisions around economic questions, regional funding, tax breaks, public service requirements as well as practical production requirements and creative decisions around narrative and aesthetics that influence the depiction on screen. Off-screen factors, defined as concerns that dictate the production’s shooting locations, such as budgeting concerns or tax incentives, can be decisive ones in shaping a TV series. Both Sim and Eskola (2021) mention that in the contemporary Finnish screen media landscape, funding and financial

decisions act as the main influences in choosing locations. Here, Business Finland's production incentive scheme has played a major role. A pilot for the scheme launched in 2017 offering a tax rebate for productions prior to which Finnish productions had often travelled abroad to places where such schemes were available.

*Man in Room 301* uses international shooting locations in a way that distinguishes its content from Nordic Noir (and from the international variations playing with the genre's loosely-defined set of associations identified by Nestingen, 2021, as a network of influences). Key scenes of the show take place in sunny Greece, a decision that illustrates how policies of place can be used in creating a post-Nordic-noir cache of attractions. The Finnish tax incentive scheme (2021) currently dictates that costs occurring in Finland can be a maximum of 80% of the total costs of the production (Business Finland, 2021), meaning that producers need to secure international funding for 20% of the total costs. The current incentive and its demand of international investment often moves parts or even full productions outside Finland (Sim, 2021), meaning that either creatives have to include scenes that rationally take place in external locations, or they have to camouflage the shooting location to appear local and in the process risk losing some of the local colour. Eskola explains that the decision to have a co-production partner for *Man in Room 301* was necessary in order to satisfy Business Finland requirements and the choice of Greece was partly due to the tax rebate system in place there. Warner Bros Finland had an existing connection with Inca's Film in Greece, which made the co-production work well from a logistical standpoint. According to Eskola, every production has a different model for finding 20% international investment—it could also be achieved through pre-sales or distribution agreements, requiring comparatively little influence over the creative aspects of the product. Yet, in the case of *Man in Room 301*, the choice of Greece was both a creative and pragmatic/economic consideration as it allowed the show to showcase visual imaginaries that extend the range of Nordic Noir programming even as it used this connection to log into European tax incentive collaborations.

Public service broadcasting is intrinsically connected to the concept of place (McElroy and Noonan, 2019), with national public broadcasters such as the Finnish YLE maintaining regional offices and production facilities and having to abide by law to represent the cultural diversity of Finland (YLE, 2015). At the same time, commercial providers like Elisa do not have the same obligations to consider diversity in their production and representational operations. Yet, as explored elsewhere in this article, it is often in the interest of commercial operators to tell stories that draw from specific locations and from the stories of people from that place in their narrative and creative aspects. Sim (2021), working for the commercial Elisa Viihde, states that making drama at different locations and representing the local dialect, atmosphere and different parts of the country can be culturally and commercially beneficial. Elisa Viihde series *All the Sins* (filmed at Ostrobothnia) and *Arctic Circle* (mainly filmed in Lapland) executive produced by Sim arguably succeeded in doing just that. He is thus keen on commissioning more local drama as this will also help distinguish Elisa's production from the glut of similar domestic and Nordic production. *Man in Room 301*'s Finnish scenes were based in the capital region, including the family's holiday cottage with the cottage location providing a fortuitous opportunity, in that the location was sufficiently spacious for filming purposes



and included several properties on the same site, which worked well in the context of three family units coming together to celebrate Mid-summer (Eskola, 2021). Consequently, the show's focus on economic inequality became much more pronounced and its thematic connections were largely mirrored through this serendipitous meeting between filming logistics and creative practice.

The above examples from *Man in Room 301* emphasise how both space and location in terms of off-screen choices resonate in the on-screen worlds created. These locations and the authenticity of local colour are not only vital for connecting with local audiences, but they are especially significant for selling content to international markets. In this context, these localised elements both ground them in 'exotic' cultural locations but also 'naturalise' transnational connections on the level of content, enabling a more organic rationale for securing funding through transnational co-production arrangements and, furthermore, establishing an organic distribution route for such shows. These ideas are most explicit in the content-based aspects of *Man in Room 301* to which we now turn.

### **Onscreen features for representing place and local colour**

According to Hansen and Waade (2019), location studies can be used to outline five onscreen features which are key to understanding how places represent locations in television drama. These features are based on topographical, cultural, societal, and ecosystemic features and include the following: '(1) shore, inland, island; (2) architecture, arts, design; (3) mobility, infrastructure; (4) climate, weather, season; and (5) the distinction between urban and rural' (2019: 106) Hansen and Waade analyse Nordic crime dramas through these five features, placing a typical Nordic Noir crime drama on an urban shoreline during a rainy autumn/winter period, marked by different forms of mobility through space such as driving a police car or running, and an emphasis on showcasing modern Nordic architecture and design.

The orthodox Finnish Nordic Noir crime dramas, *Bordertown* and *Deadwind*, maximised the use of these onscreen features to enter the market clearly under the Nordic Noir brand. If we apply the same framework to *Man in Room 301*, we find that it introduces subtle shifts in the ways these locations and place-based imaginaries are used. These shifts comprise 1) shooting locations, 2) architecture and design, 3) mobility and 4) aesthetic representation of locations. In terms of *shooting locations* (1), the show takes place along a shoreline, but the urban shorelines are replaced by, firstly, a rural inland location at the lakeshore of the Finnish holiday home and, secondly, island locations at the Greek resort. All these locations are captured in very un-noir-like ways with ample sunshine and natural scenery, far distanced from the urban dystopias that much of the genre represents. Sim (2021) explains that with *Man in Room 301* being shown around Christmas time in Finland, the Finns would enjoy seeing 'some brightness on their screens.' According to him, the Greek scenes worked well for Finnish audiences but also functioned as ways to differentiate the show from the gloomy spaces of orthodox Nordic Noir, indicating the over-saturation of the marketplace with Nordic Noir content. It is worth noting that the Greek scenes are very much presented from a Finnish holiday-makers' point of view and include only superficial flashes of local Greek colour.

In terms of *architecture, art and design* (2), these elements are much more traditional than conventionally seen in Nordic Noir. The main locations feature a traditional bright yellow wooden house as the family's holiday home, an old farmhouse and traditionally furnished older Finnish apartment houses. More modern houses also make an appearance, but they are peripheral to the main narrative belonging to acquaintances instead of family members. Eskola (2021) explains that locations are key to the story, as whether the protagonist's family had an old wooden cabin or a smart villa, they reveal a lot about their class status in Finnish society. While rural locations, especially ones designed to show off wealth, are part of Nordic Noir, from *Girl with a Dragon Tattoo* (*Män som hatar kvinnor*, 2009) to Wallander's adventures in rural Skåne in Wallander (2005–2013), here, as in *All the Sins* and *Arctic Circle*, they are much more concerned with distancing the show from these genre-setting predecessors where class critique is used to undermine the constitution of the Nordic welfare state. Similar thematic concerns are mobilised here too, especially as the show focuses on how the wealthy protagonist family exploits prejudices against people in rural areas in covering up the role of one of 'their own' in the shooting. Yet, by making the wealthy party the protagonists, and thus normalising these well-off locations (instead of the other way around as happens in a lot of orthodox noir), *Man in Room 301* again provides an unexpected twist on genre conventions.

Another area in which locations gesture to an alternative approach to genre is linked to *mobility* (3). While mobility still plays a part in *Man in Room 301* with the protagonist travelling in a car, by plane and walking at key moments, these are featured in much less density to how such activities are emphasised in more traditional noir programming. While the movement is used in template-setting shows as *The Bridge* as explicit attempts to capture what Pei-Sze Chow (2021) calls the regioscape of Nordic Noir (that is, as a geo-cultural location that marks the boundaries of the genre), here, we stay much more grounded in place even as the location changes. Such dynamics are vital as means of representing an alternative generic imaginary that disassociates from the more orthodox connotations of the genre including representations of the Finnish capital region and rural Finland for the holiday home and the farmstead. Such differentiation is especially explicit in the ways the programme captures these *locations aesthetically* (4). Importantly, the series takes place in summertime, around the mid-summer celebrations – an important aspect of Finnish life – with a lot of natural daylight, rather than the typical cold, dark, wet season of noir programming, we can see another self-aware deviation from the established conventions of the genre. While a typical Nordic crime drama uses a cool-blue colour scheme (Hansen and Waade, 2017: 132) *Man in Room 301* uses warm colourways for both the Finnish and Greek scenes. *Man in Room 301* is not alone in linking scenes of natural beauty with a criminal reality that hides within, but the difference with *Man in Room 301* is the added threat taking place in a sunny Greek holiday resort with the aesthetically pleasing cloudless sky, sunshine and sea, in complete contrast to Nordic nature and melancholy.

These are good indicators of the post-Nordic-noir framework in which the show operates as it connects with other Elisa shows like *All the Sins* but also with a wide range of programming (*Blood, Katla*) that fits with some of the more identifiable general patterns discussed by Hansen and Waade but which now consciously position themselves

in a way that is about their difference from the genre framework. Here, location acts as a narrative device that can be directly linked to competitiveness – by diversifying the scope of critique endemic to Noir, the show carves out a niche in a cluttered market that showcases what we describe as post-Nordic-noir tendencies. Such tendencies are characterised by a self-aware approach to genre conventions, not so much as post-modernist plays on genre structures, but much more as explicitly commercial decisions designed to reinvigorate the genre and make the show more appealing to both domestic and international audiences. These are good indicators of the post-Nordic-noir framework in which the show operates as it connects with other Elisa shows like *All the Sins* but also with a wide range of programming (*Blood, Katla*) that fits with some of the more identifiable general patterns discussed by Hansen and Waade but which now consciously position themselves in a way that is about their difference from the genre framework, hence gesturing to what we have described as post-Nordic-noir.

To illustrate this, we can turn to another one of Hansen and Waade's (2017) approaches: local colour as a means of locating post-Nordic-noir, particularly because of the transnational scriptwriting process of the series. Hansen and Waade quote the Oxford English dictionary to describe 'local colour' as 'the customs, manners of speech, dress, or other typical features of a place or period that contribute to its particular character' (2017: 30). We link local colour with theories of sense of place borrowed from human geography, and include in this the intangible elements, such as personal relationships, dreams and emotional meanings attached to a place. In the case of *Man in Room 301*, an arduous process of ensuring that local colour and a sense of place was carefully thought through was implemented. When Eskola first heard the concept for *Man in Room 301* she did not think it would resonate with Finnish audiences: 'Although stories are universal, we react to them differently compared to the British' (Eskola, 2021). Wall to Wall, the company behind the original concept hired Kate Ashfield as a scriptwriter and the Finnish production company, Warner Bros International Television Production Finland, had scriptwriter Laura Immonen involved from the start. Immonen's role was to read, advise and story edit, ensuring that the series fitted its intended Finnish setting: 'We kept on picking on dialogue and behaviours, which were not natural to Finns' (Eskola, 2021). As Sim (2021) explains the Finnish production company was not just translating the script for *Man in Room 301* to Finnish, but adapting it to a Finnish setting, ensuring that local colour was authentic and rang true. This included, for example, cutting down on dialogue, since Finns make less small talk than the British.

The cross-cultural team also had various conversations about family relationships, the relative independence of children and young people in Finland, the use of alcohol, cabin life, and how Finns celebrate midsummer. The aforementioned lack of small talk, the requirement for personal space, and the way neighbours interact are other such issues that translate from script to screen. Choosing names proved impossible for the British writer, as it is hard for a foreign writer to pick up on names that are current and suitable for each character and their backstory. Another detail that required changing was in regard to doors for a scene where a character tries to break into a house. In the UK doors open inwards, but in Finland they open outwards, requiring different methods for breaking in. Releasing Chinese lanterns to remember the deceased child were replaced by balloons (Sim, 2021).

Even on a conceptual level, the whole story of the series worked better in Finland due to the country's judicial system, explains [Sim \(2021\)](#). Children who commit a serious crime do not go to jail as they do in the UK, enabling the main premise of the series to take place. Although Finland is a relatively equal society, it is obvious from the narrative that the family are highly educated and have a measure of wealth. Even the perceived antagonist, although from a less wealthy family, lives in a very traditional Finnish farmhouse.

All these elements are vital to ground the show in an observable Finnish cultural landscape and an authentic sense of place. When designing this cultural palette, Finnish audiences would come first, but Elisa Viihde would also have an eye on the international market. As [Sim \(2021\)](#) explains, locations are not only important for local markets but for international ones too: 'Interestingly enough the international market wants Finnish stories, which is why *Man in Room 301*, although it's written by an English writer, feels and looks like Finland'. This correlation between domestic and international attractions is significant as it allows us to show how *Man in Room 301* distances itself from many of the traditional conventions of Nordic Noir. A central concern here is its location which enables it to heavily rely on some of the most obvious aspects of Finnish life, providing a common factor in appealing to both domestic and international audiences.

## Rebranding Nordic noir

In locating *Man in Room 301* within the confines of the Nordic Noir genre, it is necessary to loosen some of the genre's founding parameters. Shows like *Man in Room 301* have transcended the Nordic Noir genre to what we have suggested comprises post-Nordic-Noir due to the ways the show plays with and in many ways rejects the genre's conventions in its narrative and aesthetic choices. Simultaneously, as we have suggested above, these conventions remain productive as they maintain substantial cultural capital for marketing purposes. Here, the remnants of the genre comprise elements that act as 'free-floating signifiers' (see [Kääpä's, 2020](#) analysis, of the use of Nordic Noir genre identifiers in the marketing of British Nordic Noir adaptations). Free-floating signifiers can be repurposed for a variety of cultural-political aims by playing on the conventions of the genre and its network of associations to distinguish or associate a specific product with a genre. [Hansen \(2020\)](#), for example, has written about the ways Nordic Noir has been adapted into a European framework where Nordic Noir provides an important associative framework for creative decisions in the production of European crime shows. Such perspectives indicate the generic malleability of the cultural phenomenon but also the ways in which elements of the genre can be adopted for the purposes of marketing and branding of content.

*Man in Room 301* is a prime example of the use of Nordic Noir signifiers in carving out a space in the market – especially crucial due to its Finnish context and its loose affiliation with the genre. The use of genre conventions proliferated all aspects of its international release, with the associated publicity, including BBC's trailer for the show, highlighting many of the by-now stereotypical elements of Nordic Noir (as highlighted by Waade and Hansen) in addition to publications from *Sight and Sound* to *The Guardian* positioning it as a new addition to Nordic Noir. At the same time, the generic features and associations

created by Nordic Noir are used by shows like *Man in Room 301* as free-floating signifiers that can be repurposed. Firstly, they are used for distinguishing it in Finland from the confines of its over-saturated generic 'home' (Nordic Noir) in order to provide it with more novelty value. Yet, secondly, the same set of references are closely adopted in its international marketing in order to package an unknown product from an unfamiliar media industry (Finland) with a clear set of cultural identifiers familiar to its intended audiences in the UK. Such tactics can lead to more competitive programming which utilises the appeals of the post-Nordic-noir framework.

## Conclusion: locating Finnish post-Nordic-noir

The use of locations, both as representational and production-related elements, in *Man in Room 301* necessitates viewing it through a post-Nordic-Noir framework. Key to this definition is that it does not act as pastiche or revisionist attempts to rework genre as arguably takes place in 'Neo Noir', where the postmodernist films of, for example, Roman Polanski, David Lynch, John Woo or Quentin Tarantino play with genre conventions in a self-reflective way (see [Silver and Ursini, 2015](#)). While Neo Noir is often about affectionate reuse of genre conventions, post-Nordic-noir is more concerned with repurposing the cultural, political, aesthetic, or formative associations created by Nordic Noir in explicit opposition to their normative construction – hence, all the unconventional, for Nordic Noir, uses of location in *Man in Room 301*. This is part of a wider pattern of location-based transformations in Nordic Noir as variations on the general parameters of Nordic Noir continue to be produced, with Irish examples of Celtic Noir like *Blood* (2018–) featuring very similar thematic and aesthetic deviations like *Man in Room 301*. What makes *Man in Room 301* novel is its Finnish context (that is, its position in the geocultural confines of Nordic Noir; and the media industrial difference of Finland in comparison to the other Scandinavian countries), especially the ways the show's production uses and diverts away from the confines of the genre. Here, the locations of the show have a polysemic function, as part of the genre's use as a free-floating signifier, in that they can be antagonistic towards the use of such locations in traditional Nordic Noir (that is, when Finnish producers want to diversify their product from other similar productions) while they also complement the genre's diversity (when the genre connotations of the show need to be drawn back into a more traditional framework – that is, its marketing in the UK). In doing so, *Man in Room 301* works as a particularly useful case study that highlights the importance of location studies ([Hansen and Waade, 2017](#); [Roberts, 2016](#)) as a key analytical framework to understand the lifecycle of Nordic Noir and how culturally diverse productions diversify its constitution – even as they challenge its existence. And while the show is only one example and cannot be used to identify a consistent production pattern, the conscious decisions made in its production history to differentiate it from Nordic Noir, as seen from the testimonies of Eskola and Sim, highlight the urgency of prioritising the relevance of this framework especially in the Nordic media environment.

Whilst Nordic Noir series continue to be produced and sold internationally, the post-Nordic-noir framework, identifiable in a variety of film and television content explicitly distancing from the genre, suggests a new approach to thinking about small national

media production. The complex production and creative history of *Man in Room 301* exemplifies the ways localisation operates in the contemporary cluttered streaming media environment where similar patterns of distancing from traditional Noir can be seen. These patterns are not necessarily entirely novel – the spoof show *Fallet/Case* (2017) has taken up similar ideas and suggests that the genre has reached saturation. Similarly, the range of shows that now make use of some patterns from Nordic Noir but which explicitly twist these conventions is growing. We argue, the post-Nordic-noir framework is most identifiable in shows like *Man in Room 301* that use some of the genre's dominant conventions, including associations created by their marketing and publicity, but mobilise them in ways where the connection with Nordic Noir is 'free-floating' at best, both in order to capitalise on the brand value of traditional Noir while simultaneously distancing it from these confines to facilitate a competitive edge.

Here, *Man in Room 301* produces some unexpected resonances through its positioning in the post-Nordic-noir framework. It shows how rooting productions in location/place can act as a clear financial and artistic incentive through tax and other incentives, which then resonate in the representation of place. Though often financially challenging, such tactics are especially significant in a transnational media landscape where the ability and necessity of content to be able to travel and cross-cultural boundaries are emphasised. But such travels are often firmly rooted in place, as products are still marketed and consumed based on national and regional distinctions. Thus, the ability to distinguish a product and avoid cultural discount is increasingly a dominant concern especially as the omnipresence of popular genres continue to diminish, including that of Nordic Noir – which used to command this distinction in a marketplace cluttered with largely American or British television content. The post-Nordic-noir framework identified in this article is an indicator of this lifecycle as it implies the ephemeral cultural-economic value of genre as a brand. Yet, while the brand continues to command weight as a marketing tool, the post-Nordic-Noir framework, embodied by *Man in Room 301*, indicates how such dynamics survive in an interconnected and ever-transforming content marketplace.

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### **ORCID iD**

Sanna Wicks  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5322-0582>

Pietari Kääpä  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1616-2058>

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### **Author Biographies**

Sanna Wicks is an Assistant Professor in Film Production and Course Director for BA Film Production at Coventry University. She comes from a professional practice background having worked as an editor, producer and director before moving onto teaching. Her research interests centre around cultural heritage, sense of place and television drama.

Pietari Kääpä is Reader in Media and Communications at the University of Warwick. He has written extensively on Nordic screen media, including the books *The Politics of Nordsploitation: History, Industry, Audiences* (Bloomsbury, 2021) and *Ecology and Contemporary Nordic Cinemas: From Nation-building to Ecocosmopolitanism* (Bloomsbury, 2014). He has also edited several collections exploring Nordic film culture including *Nordic Genre Film: Small Nation Film Culture in the Global Marketplace* (Edinburgh University Press, 2015) and *Directory of World Cinema: Finland* (Intellect, 2012).