Auld Rock meets Nordic Noir: A Danish Gaze on Shetlandic Scandinavian-ness

By Gunhild Agger, Hanne Tange

The Scandinavian traveller arriving through Sumburgh is greeted in a homely way. On the road taking drivers out of the airport area stands a multilingual sign, which welcomes voyagers in the four languages of English, Norwegian, German and French. To the Scandinavian the sign is an oddity, signalling at once historical connectivity and geographical distance. For while the choice of Norwegian acknowledges Shetland's legacy as a nodal point connecting the string of islands making up a Viking kingdom stretching from Bergen to Dublin, any present-day visitor from Nordic Europe will inevitably arrive through British (air)ports such as Edinburgh, Glasgow or Aberdeen, which would be difficult if s/he was capable of managing in a Scandinavian language alone. To provide information in Norwegian seems unnecessary, leaving one to wonder what exactly is the purpose of the Sumburgh signpost?

The authors rely in this paper on a specific reading of signs, accepting their power to create simultaneously a sense of connectivity and distance. The core concept of connectivity is inspired by the Swedish anthropologist Ulf Hannerz[1], who argues how shared migration experiences, cultural representations, communication and trade networks evoke in people the feeling of being related to communities positioned in other parts of the world. Connectivity builds on a logic of similarity, suggesting that relationships create a shared we-ness, which is reinforced through the cultural practices, traditions and symbols linking a historic settler society such as Shetland, to Norway, as the Shetlanders' imaginary 'land of the fathers'.[2]

The Sumburgh signpost offers a physical expression of connectivity where Norwegian, as a linguistic sign, is selected because it can communicate both a Shetlandic desire to connect with Norway/Scandinavia and a perceived sense of distance, linguistic and cultural, to the British Mainland and Scotland in particular. Distance is the second key concept when seeking to understand Shetlandic representations of Scandinavian-ness. The Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth has argued how societies can only establish a feeling of we-ness by highlighting the elements that distinguish them from the what or who that does not belong to the community.[3] This makes boundary-drawing essential to cultural identification. Borders rely on a logic of difference and can be manifest in the form of a physical boundary (e.g. a national border), a linguistic divide (e.g. Lallans vs. English), an emphasis on cultural distinctiveness (e.g. the 'Scottish' ballad vs. an 'English') or alternative readings of history (e.g. Shetland history vs. Scottish history). Boundary-drawing is used to manage the relationship between particular societies, e.g. Scotland as WE vs. England as THEM or Shetland as WE vs. Scotland as THEM. In consequence, one may speculate how a Shetlandic attempt to create distance to Scotland by emphasising connectivity to Scandinavia works for Danes, who have the native's claim to Nordic tradition, but no similar need to foreground difference from Scotland. To answer this we offer an examination of Shetlandic Scandinavian-ness, as represented in three forms of cultural production, namely: 1) the linguistic signs marking the Shetland landscape; 2) the fictional Shetland constructed in Robert Alan Jamieson's novel *Da Happie Laand* and 3) the merger of island culture and Nordic Noir drama in the *Shetland* TV series.

The Shetland landscape is full of signposts marking a linguistic and historical connection to Scandinavia. One example is the 'Eshaness' road sign in North Mavine, NW Mainland. The sign is bilingual, displaying the present name of the area and what is claimed as the original Norse name. An English explanation is offered, but bracketed, thus creating the impression of a landscape named by people connected to a Norse-speaking world rather than the British mainland. To the Danish traveller, the text invites a comparison with Denmark where numerous locations carry the suffix -ness. Yet

the Dane also experiences distance, for geologically this 'volcanic rock' is a strange place not easily accommodated within the scenery conventionally associated with Scandinavia. Hence, the idea of the 'Nordic' is constructed through the naming of the landscape rather than geography itself.

A similar effect of simultaneous connectivity and distance is produced by the coat of arms of the Shetland Council. The rambling Dane will recognise the motto: *Med logum skal land byggja* and probably ask what this is doing in the alien setting that is Lerwick. For the Dane versed in history knows this as the opening line of the Jutland Law, dated 1241, which is linked to two Danish sites, the original 'thing' in Viborg, Jutland, and the neo-classic building housing the Danish supreme court in Copenhagen. So how was this piece of Danish legal history exported to Shetland? Historically, Shetland was once part of the twin kingdom of Norway-Denmark, which means that the Jutland Law could have applied here. Yet it seems odd to maintain a Danish wording that few present-day Shetlanders are likely to understand. If interpreted as a linguistic sign rather than an actual message, however, one may argue that the Danish motto is another attempt to signal Shetlandic difference, reminding readers of a legal and cultural history predating the introduction of Scottish law in the fifteenth century.

The understanding of 'Scandinavian-ness' as a connection constructed from signs originating in an authentic Norse context, but obtaining new meanings when carried into a Shetland landscape, is a central theme in Robert Alan Jamieson's *Da Happie Laand*. Jamieson's fiction is a collage composed of diverse pieces of text, including the 'I' narrator David's personal story, a 'History of Zetland', mail correspondences, 'wiki' references, and an interview with the last Shetland-born inhabitant in Tokomua, an imagined 'New Zetland' in the Pacific. The reader looking for symbolic spaces find multiple reference points in Jamieson's novel, which reflects how the narrators are positioned in/out of Shetland, 'the North', Scotland, Britain and the world. Places in the novel are always connected – through travel, conquest, trade, colonisation and immigration – and ambiguous in meaning, marking at once a physical location and a relationship to other places,

times and cultures.

Lerwick, which in *Da Happie Laand* is renamed as 'Larvik', provides the nodal point that people pass through on their way to other places. The 'I' narrator David arrives in Lerwick on his voyage to Norbie, wondering why his father 'chose to go, as far north as he could get in Britain'.[4] Others visitors such as the writers Walter Scott and Robert Louis Stevenson find in 'Larvik' a meeting place where they can interact with whalers and travellers heading for Greenland, Norway or Denmark. Accordingly, *Da Happie Laand* bring together the conflicting narratives of Shetland as 'ultima Thule', the faraway place in the North, and Shetland as a central location on the North Atlantic trade routes linking Scandinavia with Mainland Britain, Norse settlements in the Faroes and Iceland, and, finally, North America. A special effect is created through Jamieson's adoption of names from Nordic geography and history. To the Scandinavian reader 'Larvik' brings to mind the Norwegian harbour town Larvik as well as Lerwick, which establishes a symbolic relationship between ports located at different ends of a viking seaway. Similarly, Norbie carries the Norse suffix *–by* for a township, while Thulay will be known to Danes as the northernmost settlement in Greenland (named by the Danish explorer Knud Rasmussen in 1910). Hence, many place names in *Da Happie Laand* refer simultaneously to a physical Shetland setting and locations beyond Shetland, which underlines how the narrators' understanding of the landscape are shaped by their reading position as Shetlanders, Scots, Britons, Scandinavians or 'New Zetlanders', respectively.

The construction of an imaginary archipelago at once detached from and connected to Shetland reality can also be seen in our third example, the *Shetland* TV series, where the actual island landscape is re-imagined first through the fiction of English author Anne Cleeves, then through British producer Sue de Beauvoir's appropriation of the Nordic Noir production technique. Anne Cleeves motivates her choice of setting in the following way: "Shetland is perfect for my kind of traditional crime fiction. It has everything that I need: an enclosed community so only a limited number of suspects could have committed the murder, the possibility of secrets that go back for generations and a backdrop of bleak open spaces and wide horizons."[5] Central to Cleeve's novels is Detective Inspector DI Jimmy Perez, a Shetland native. Perez shares with Jamieson's characters in *Da Happie Laand* a connection to multiple locations, e.g. his place of birth (Fair Isle), his town residence in Lerwick, past and present crime scenes in

island villages, and Inverness, Glasgow and Edinburgh, as sites of power and opportunity for the ambitious police officer.

In the TV series a powerful Nordic connection is established partly as an effect of setting, and partly because of Sue de Beauvoir's decision to seek inspiration in the 'Nordic Noir' TV drama tradition. Accordingly, 'Red Bones', which forms the introductory part of BBC Scotland's *Shetland* series, offers a distinctive package of island history, traditions, language and geographical peripherality, where Cleeve's fiction is transferred into the TV medium in a manner that brings to mind the Swedish TV series *Beck*, which is commonly regarded as a 'game changer' in Nordic TV production.[6] Shetland producer De Beauvoir acknowledges the influence of 'the Scandi noir shows', arguing how this connection has helped Shetland target a British as well as an international audience. Hence, the *Shetland* series offers an example of appropriation that is exceptionally consistent with traditions developed in the Nordic region, using this to produce a sense of cultural connectivity stretching across the North Atlantic. This is particularly evident in the use of history/tradition, landscape/geography and pace.

First, the *Shetland* series foregrounds the Shetlanders' connection to a shared Nordic history. A spectacular example is the Shetland festival Up Helly Aa, which takes place every year on the last Tuesday in January, and which celebrates the islanders' Viking heritage. Up Helly Aa was originally used in Cleeve's novel *Raven Black* (2006), but is here transferred into the TV version of *Red Bones*, where it frames the culmination of the plot. One may speculate whether this decision was made in order to create an effect of 'strangeness' in the opening episode, signaling to British Mainland viewers that Shetland is culturally different. A second example is the historical reference to the 'Shetland Bus', a shipping route connecting Shetland and Norway during World War II. Perez' investigations reveal how current events are linked to money transfers made by 'The Shetland Bus' crew during WW II, while the presence of a professor in archeology of Norwegian origin, Paul Berglund, functions as a red herring.

A second Nordic connection is geography. At the end of 'Red Bones', Jimmy Perez makes the observation that from Shetland, on a clear day, you can spot Norway to the east and Iceland to the west. As in *Da Happy Laand* this highlights the position of the archipelago as a string of islands connecting to other, North Atlantic places, which suggests a Nordic horizon shared by all communities

located along the Viking seaways linking Scandinavia to Island, Dublin, the Faroes and, ultimately, North America. More intimate is Shetland itself – a landscape foregrounded in the opening sequence, which zooms in on the place of crime, an isolated croft in Whalsey, as well as the many ferries that link the islands with one another. In such an environment one cannot force speedy connections. Modernity may have arrived in the shape of aircraft, mobile phones and computers, but connecting is not always possible. Distance, remoteness and isolation are conditions to be taken seriously, as are wind, weather and the natural rhythm of day and night.

A final element is (slow) pace, which is an important feature in the TV version and one that is clearly attributed to 'Nordic Noir' TV drama. Shetland is represented as a place where people are never in a hurry, but take their time before moving, talking or opening their homes to a stranger. On several occasions dialogue is cut off, at least on the phone, and people are generally not very talkative. Often silence prevails, which underlines the melancholic disposition of the characters, including Perez himself.[7] A similar effect is created by the light. 'Red Bones' starts in darkness where access to memories seems easy, and the music is subdued, striking a tone of reflexivity. Particularly in the outdoor scenes light plays a major role, indicating not only the supposed time of year and the rhythm of day and night, but also the mood of key characters. This brings to mind the melancholic atmosphere of *The Killing* (2007-2012); during its three seasons, all episodes were set in November, grey was the dominant colour, and Sarah Lund was not supposed to smile – ever.

This paper set out by asking what effect the Shetlandic appropriation of Nordic culture may have on two Danish readers. Through analyses of Shetland signposts, fiction and TV drama we identified a sense of Nordic connectivity, highlighting how linguistic signs, place names, Viking heritage, and island scenes forged a link between Shetland communities and a Scandinavian homeland (real or imaginary).

What also became evident was that the Shetlandic adoption of Nordic symbols was often ambivalent, sending out messages that might differ from those expected by Scandinavian observers. Yet Shetland culture has multiple reference points, which means that Nordic-ness can here function as the means enabling islanders to construct a physical and mental distance between their North Atlantic archipelago and the British Mainland. When read from this perspective,

the target audience becomes Mainland Britons, not Scandinavians, which transforms Shetlandic Nordic-ness into a cultural boundary-marker. The implication is that one can only fully grasp Shetland if willing to approach this space from a variety of linguistic, cultural and geographical positions. What is gained is the image of an archipelago that can be simultaneously connected and detached, a nodal point placed on the margins.The Scandinavian traveller arriving through Sumburgh is greeted in a homely way. On the road taking drivers out of the airport area stands a multilingual sign, which welcomes voyagers in the four languages of English, Norwegian, German and French. To the Scandinavian the sign is an oddity, signalling at once historical connectivity and geographical distance. For while the choice of Norwegian acknowledges Shetland's legacy as a nodal point connecting the string of islands making up a Viking kingdom stretching from Bergen to Dublin, any present-day visitor from Nordic Europe will inevitably arrive through British (air)ports such as Edinburgh, Glasgow or Aberdeen, which would be difficult if s/he was capable of managing in a Scandinavian language alone. To provide information in Norwegian seems unnecessary, leaving one to wonder what exactly is the purpose of the Sumburgh signpost?

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(c) The Bottle Imp