

Away from London: Crime and Regional Film Commissions in the UK

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The purpose of this essay is to investigate the role played by regional film agencies in the new Millennium production of TV crime drama in the UK by looking in particular at the portfolio of Screen Yorkshire. The recent development of production hubs and the global competition for studio spaces, location, and facilities, led to increased importance of regional settings and support for the screen industries which is evident in the activities of national and regional agencies in the UK. After an overview of the location market in the UK and the production support available at the regional level, the essay will address the crime narratives set in local settings, and the role played by the film agencies, in particular Screen Yorkshire. Screen Yorkshire since its establishment in 2002 proved successful in developing the growth of screen industries in the area, thanks to its specialisation in commercial content investment and the introduction of the Yorkshire Content Fund (YCF). The essay will engage with the different supporting mechanisms available in the areas, through the analysis of the crime productions to reveal how matters of location and heritage play a role in the crime narratives.

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INTRODUCTION¹

The British film and television industry is the fastest-growing sector within the UK. According to the British Film Institute, the production volume in the UK accounted for £1.9 billion in 2017, an all-time high which signifies a 125% increase within the previous ten years, stimulated primarily by inward investment from US studios.² Even though Covid-19 put a stop to most productions in 2020 and the effects of Brexit for the industry are as of now hard to predict,³ the latest numbers from 2019 saw a staggering £3.616 as combined total spend on film and high-end TV production in the UK.⁴ Britain's and Northern Ireland's film and TV studios are struggling to cope with the demand. A recent study by Lambert, Smith, & Hampton about the UK's property markets estimates that there are up to 1.9 million sq. ft. of new studio space necessary to accommodate the rising demand.⁵ Film franchises such as Marvel, *Star Wars*, to the *Harry Potter* spin-offs, have been a key driver of this development, but high-end TV (HETV, productions



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costing more than £1 million per episode), has been equally impressive. According to the BFI, the total UK production spend on HETV was £938 millions in 2017, which is the highest recorded number since the HETV-tax relief came into effect in 2013.⁶

Crime, as a genre, plays a strong role within the production ecosystem in the UK. While 'Nordic Noir' reigns supreme, British crime productions such as *Broadchurch*, *Luther*, *Hinterland*, *Marcella* or *Gangs of London* are more popular than ever and with the growing demand, production space becomes scarcer. Since the UK's significant advantage is its pool of highly skilled specialist labour, which means that most productions can be crewed locally, international productions, attracted by localised tax incentives, choose London's renowned production facilities.⁷ The studio infrastructure boasts big names such as Pinewood, Leavesden, Ealing, Elstree and Twickenham, which have an outstanding reputation in servicing international productions. However, even the executive chairman of London Film, Adrian Wootton, admits that the success of London, 'breeds increased demand, and while our overriding message is 'always busy, never full' there is a rising demand for additional studio space.'⁸

Regional production hubs have never been more important for the UK and regional film agencies play an important role in this development. Within the framework of the economic and cultural imperatives of British politics and policies that have lastingly reshaped the British film industry since the late 1990s, this contribution aims to examine the significance of these regional agencies for the British film industry in general and the crime genre in particular.

This essay will examine the policies of the last thirty years that have given rise to the regional screen agencies whilst drawing on quantitative data from the British Film Institute, Ofcom, Oxford Economics, ONS, and others to verify the economic impact and viability of these strategies. The essay will engage with the different supporting mechanisms available in the Yorkshire region, home to the most successful screen agency in the UK outside of London and analyse its mission statements. As the aforementioned policies combine economic and cultural goals, the importance of crime fiction productions within this framework will be evaluated and a case study of *The ABC Murders*, a prototypical production for Screen Yorkshire will discuss the importance of location, heritage, and regional diversity for production hubs outside of London.

FILM AND TELEVISION PRODUCTION IN THE UK

According to a report by Oxford Economics, three-quarters of the jobs in the core UK film industry were based in London and the South East in 2010. London alone claimed 26,300 jobs (including employees & self-employed), or 55% of the total number. There is, however, a significant number of



employees throughout the UK, i.e., 2,200 jobs in the South West and 2,100 jobs in the North West. The report indicates that there is a trend for the UK core film industry to become less 'London-centric' over time, with more production shifting to areas outside of London. Interestingly, these shifts are primarily attributed to the growing demand for TV production employment rather than film. The report argues that increases in regional funding for both TV and film production over the past decade have made locations outside London and the South East viable bases for media firms in the UK.⁹ Furthermore, the quotas set for Public Service Broadcasters (PBS, namely BBC, Channel 3 services, Channel 4 and Channel 5) by Ofcom ensure that a sizeable proportion of their network programmes are made outside of the M25. To qualify as a regional production, the PBS need to meet at least two of these three criteria: the production company must have a substantive business and production base in the UK outside of London, 70% or more of the production budget must be spent outside of London, and at 50% of the crew must consist of local talent whose employment is not registered in London.¹⁰

And while Channel 4's relocating to Leeds 'undoubtedly marks a significant step in turning the tide of London-centrism within the UK,'¹¹ the British capital remains the powerhouse for film studios and TV production in the UK. Soho itself is the centre of London's production industry, with major players such as Working Title, Number 9 Films, Potboiler Films and Gorgeous Enterprises based there, along with post-production houses like De Lane Lea, Prime Focus and DNeg, and a huge variety of agents and casting directors on tap. Elstree, Leavesden and Shepperton are film studios within touching distance of London's centre, all equipped with a range of stages, backlots and even underwater filming facilities.

London, however, is by no means the only place ready to host film and TV productions; the 'rest of England' is catching up. Major production companies are spread throughout the country. The Bottle Yard Studios in Bristol have become a thriving hub over the last few years, hosting a wide range of productions from feature films to crime shows such as *Broadchurch*. Glasgow's STV productions have been operating since 2008 and are home to Ian Rankin's highly popular *Rebus* adaptations for television and also for *Taggart*, the longest-running Scottish crime show. Northern Ireland boasts three major production companies in Belfast: The Paint Hall, Titanic Studios, and The Belfast Harbour Studios. Productions such as *Game of Thrones* and *The Fall* have turned Belfast into a major player and there is a major rise in productions and interest from all over the world. *The Doctor Who* franchise has completely transformed film and TV production in Wales and the region remains attractive for films and television shows. Pinewood Studio Wales in Cardiff is the largest complex of its kind ever built in Wales. In 2016, part of the internationally successful show, *Sherlock*, was shot here.

The most striking example of the rise of regional production hubs outside



of London is the growing popularity of Yorkshire. In 2018, Screen Yorkshire's contribution to the creative industries was recognised by the BFI following the aforementioned study of EU Funding of the UK screen sectors between 2007–2017. The report showed how EU funding had enabled the screen sector and the economy to grow, attract investment, and generate jobs. Screen Yorkshire – through its Yorkshire Content Fund – was cited as having delivered unprecedented growth in turnover and employment in the screen industries, delivering high-end television and film productions across the region such as *Peaky Blinders* and *The Great Train Robbery*.¹²

THE RISE OF REGIONAL PRODUCTION HUBS

While London is an internationally recognised capital of filmmaking with 54.6% of UK firms in the sector and more than 80% of their turnover (BFI, 2015b), the upward trajectory of regional production hubs outside of London is undeniable. This corresponds with the regionalisation of media and film policies in the last 20 years in the United Kingdom and, simultaneously, with a 'hybridisation of British film with the US.'¹³

Ever since the 1920s, concerns about the dominance of Hollywood, Americanisation, and, subsequently, 'the erosion of British culture'¹⁴ have played a key role in the UK's film policies. Until the mid-80s, the UK's film policies attempted to bolster the national industry by applying protectionist measures imposed on distributors and exhibitors alike, and subsidy of the National Film Finance Corporation (NFFC) which was supposed to be 'an economic and ideological imperative to foster an alternative to Hollywood.'¹⁵

However, until the 2000s, all attempts to bolster the UK film industry has not succeeded in creating a strong alternative to the US, hence, leaving the production sites in a 'corporately-dispersed' state. As Margarete Dickinson and Sylvia Harvey point out, for the longest time, UK films had to find a way to co-exist with Hollywood, which led to collusion rather than competition,¹⁶ as the local industry remained strongly dependent on Hollywood financing and had to work within a distribution system and exhibition market which was essentially shaped by Hollywood too.¹⁷

One important factor that altered the UK's production landscape thoroughly was the New Labour government (1997–2010): 'two key elements – cultural nationalism and economic intervention –[were] at the heart of the UK government's "creative economy" policy.'¹⁸ To warrant their interests, the UK government created the Film Council as a body in 2000: the UK Film Council (UKFC) was a non-departmental public body to boost UK films on the level of production and distribution. Constituted as a private company and owned by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, it was funded from various sources including the National Lottery.

Following the 1997 election victory, New Labour's first Culture Secretary, Chris Smith, announced the 're-branding UK' cultural project, designed



to transform its cultural image from a national heritage culture to what was termed 'Cool Britannia.' This marked the monetisation of the UK's creative sector and an increasingly economic dimension in how culture was perceived.¹⁹ The UKFC, 'an iconic New Labour creation,'²⁰ was primarily designed to adjust the UK's film policies and production infrastructure to conform to the commercial orientations of the Hollywood studio system.

Following a major review of the film infrastructure in England from April to September 2000, the UKFC set up nine Regional Screen Agencies for each of the regions of England, to deliver support for filmmaking, related media activities, and to foster the 'wealth of talent and ambition in the regions.'²¹ While the economic motivations of the UKFC are undeniable, the report emphasises the cultural importance of film as the single most important source of education and information and links this with each region's capacity to determine its own cultural priorities.²² The report makes repeated mention of the cultural impact of these regional production funds: they will aim to 'produce innovative work, provide opportunities for creative risk-taking, bring new voices and new visions to the screen';²³ 'cultural and ethnic diversity and countering social exclusion will be central to the fund';²⁴ the funds will be used to aggressively promote cultural imperatives;²⁵ will reflect the rich cultural diversity of the UK;²⁶ take account of differing regional characteristics.²⁷

This is noteworthy as it signified a rhetoric shift: The tension between film *culture* and film *industry* has not been dissolved during the New Labour years, but the semantics certainly changed, promoting the cultural worth of film for the British identity.²⁸ Hence, promoting a culturally diverse Britain and all the various iterations of 'Britishness'²⁹ was at the very core of how this new shift was communicated and 'education, heritage and cultural exhibition' took the centre stage not only on a national but also a regional level.³⁰

These imperatives also have implications for the crime genre which 'is clearly the most popular genre across Europe' for novels, television series, and films and crime fiction productions are in high demand in most European countries.³¹ Within the policy framework above, crime has an important role to play as it not only one of the 'most popular genres for European audiences' but also 'arguably also the most culturally sensitive and nuanced.'³² As the UKFC encourages and supports productions that 'make contributions to the creation of community and identity within their regional context,'³³ this should lead to more localised crime fiction in the UK. As crime fiction is often described as a mirror of society,³⁴ crime is the ideal vehicle for introducing this regionalism to a wider audience. This illustrates that the trend for crime fiction to shift away from criminal activity towards highlighting the spatial setting of the crime which often includes the characters' attachment to it has been an essential part of crime fiction from its very inception.³⁵ Crime fiction has, since the second half of the 20th century, given increasing importance to specific local and regional settings



as crime provides a framework for a wider interrogation of society.³⁶ This heightened interest in localism and regionalism makes the crime genre a tool for regional value creation at a time when both regionalism and the creative industries moved up the political agenda.³⁷ In a globalised world is more important than ever for regions and cities to evoke a sense of geographical distinctiveness:

Today's film viewers maybe tomorrow's tourists, investors or economic migrants. The pop culture of moving images defines places; be it Guernsey in Bergerac, Dorset in The French Lieutenant's Woman or the streets of Gateshead in Get Carter. The national campaign currently led by some Gateshead residents and enthusiasts to save the multi-storey car park featured in the film is a testament to the power of the moving image to define places and create local pride.³⁸

With the popularity of the genre and the various funding mechanisms in place in the UK's different regions, crime stories that explore local societies and promote the locations where they are made are to be expected.

In that sense, a significant part of this initiative was to deal with problems many of the English regions outside of London were facing, such as a disparity of funding for culture (Stark *et al.*, 2013) and a shortage of cultural productions which limited cultural discourses associated with these regions and their image.³⁹ While almost every board member of the UKFC did stem from 'a London-centric and transatlantic orientated elite'⁴⁰ the funds correctly identified that talents and skills pivotal for a thriving industry could be groomed all over the UK. This development is

emblematic of a broader move in the entertainment industry to shift production out of London, which has long hogged the industry's attention, talent and resources. The goal: to spread the wealth and identify new stories and new voices from parts of the U.K., including Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, which have historically been overshadowed by the British capital.⁴¹

The nine regional screen agencies were: Screen East (East of England), EM Media (East Midlands), Film London (Greater London), Northern Film and Media (North East England), Vision+Media (North West England), Screen South (South East England), South West Screen (South West England), Screen West Midlands (West Midlands), Screen Yorkshire (Yorkshire and the Humber).

These regional screen agencies had to fulfil a variety of cultural, economic and social objectives. They were responsible for the use of public funds (National Lottery funding and the Regional Investment Fund for England) in the support of production and project development, and for encouraging investment from the private sector; the promotion of crews



and facilities within their respective regions to producers nationally and internationally; working with regional development agencies to guarantee sustainable growth; providing supervision, training and funds for regional talents; dissemination data on the film sector at the regional level and coordinating the activities of other organisations, both private and public; educational activities on film and film culture within the community and educational institutions; support of emerging filmmakers; organising of local film-festivals; establishing archives for the audio-visual heritage of the UK regions; providing financial support to bring under-represented communities into the regional cinemas. The agencies had to promote the uniqueness of their locations: 'RSAs promote the landscapes and urban environments that can be used for location filming, stressing the uniqueness of each region and the diversity which is to be found within it.'⁴² To attract producers, the screen agencies created a network of local businesses within the audio-visual sector and by fostering a highly skilled workforce that could take over various steps of the production process.⁴³

The regional screen agency network was closed very hastily and surprisingly in 2011,⁴⁴ with several services consolidated into Creative England and the majority of screen agencies dissolved. While the main goal of the UKFC was 'to unify the previously diffuse elements of UK film production, it re-emerged as fragmented.'⁴⁵ However, even though most regional agencies were stripped of their autonomy, a few continued to thrive, most notably Film London and Screen Yorkshire.

SCREEN YORKSHIRE

Screen Yorkshire is one of nine regional screen agencies by the UK Film Council in 2002 and launched their first production fund in 2003 which went on to invest in prestigious films such as the BAFTA-award-winning *This is England* (director and date). Unlike most other screen agencies, Screen Yorkshire became a stand-alone private company specialising in commercial content investment. Since its launch in February 2012, the Yorkshire Content Fund, with backing from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), has invested in more than forty film & TV projects including many crime films and shows such as *Official Secrets*, *Yardie*, *The Great Train Robbery*, *Unforgiven*, *Black Work* (BBC, 2015), *Exhibit A*, *Kill List*, *This Is England*, *This Is England '86* (Channel 4, 2010), '71, and *Peaky Blinders*.

In June 2017, Screen Yorkshire announced figures from the Office of National Statistics (ONS) that revealed that the growth of Yorkshire creative industries performed better than any other region in the UK, including the South East (ONS 2017). The figures showed that between 2009–2015, Yorkshire's Film & TV Industries generated an annual turnover of £424m (an increase of 247% against the UK average of 118%). The ONS data also



showed that the number of business units across Yorkshire and Humber grew 57% vs a UK average of 47%, while employment across the film and TV industries in the region grew 88% against a UK average of 32%.⁴⁶

According to Sally Joynson, chief executive at Screen Yorkshire, the Yorkshire Content Fund was the main driver for the success of the agency. As of 2019, the fund brought £157 millions of new business to the region through its investment activities:

That production and activity have been growing for several years now and a lot of that growth is off the back of Screen Yorkshire activities and the Yorkshire Content Fund. It allows us to part-finance film and television. That has been a really important factor, particularly in drama, and it's drama where you get these big international sales; they are high profile and big budget.⁴⁷

Either producers based in Yorkshire or producers planning to film or establish a base in the region are eligible to apply for the fund. Managed by Screen Yorkshire, the fund can contribute from £10,000 to £500,000 to an individual film or TV production — as long as there is equal private backing available. Investment returns will be reinvested in the fund to ensure sustainability and allowing for continued long term support of content development and production in the region:

The fund exists to address the issue of a lack of access to capital for screen industries companies that need to part-finance the production of projects. It aims to make a return on its investment to be able to continue to support these industries within the region. It also aims to create jobs and increase the GVA (Gross Value Added) of successful applicant companies. Job creation and regional spend will be monitored throughout the project.⁴⁸

When the fund launched in 2012, the first script they received, and later funded was *PeakyBlinders*, productions like *Downton Abbey* and *Gentleman Jack* quickly followed, raising the profile of production in Yorkshire and the reputation of Yorkshire 'as a very serious place to do production business' and the Yorkshire Content Fund is by now 'the largest regional fund in Britain.'⁴⁹ To further the attractiveness of the region, Screen Yorkshire set up an adapted film studio. The studios encompass three former RAF hangars spanning 440 acres midway between Leeds and York and hosts facilities such as offices, garages, and workshops. According to Sally Joynson, the opening of the studios has been made possible by the success of the Yorkshire Content Fund and presents a 'significant landmark for the UK film and TV industry.' And while the fund brought many projects 'that have made great use of our existing portfolio of studio space' to the region, a 'lack of a larger-scale production facility, however, has prevented many



major long-term film and TV productions from basing themselves here.⁵⁰

With almost twenty years of managing investment funds and coordinating the creative industries within the region, Screen Yorkshire offers a wide range of support for producers: if there is a need for studios, locations, crew, facilities, office space, or other suppliers, Screen Yorkshire will help source these or put the producers in touch with someone who can. The agency's portfolio features many testimonials from people who have used their services. One example is *Official Secrets* (Gavin Hood, 2019). The true-life story as journalist Katharine Gun, who leaked a top-secret National Security Agency memo was produced by Raindog Films and ran into production problems after a previous version of the film came undone during pre-production. This left Raindog films with budgetary restraints, making it financially unfeasible to shoot on location in Cheltenham and London. After getting in touch with Screen Yorkshire, they secured funding from the Yorkshire Content Fund, were put in touch with local crews and location scouts, and within days, it became clear that the locations in Yorkshire could easily double for Cheltenham and London,⁵¹ but at a fraction of the cost.

Especially Hull's Old Town, which is home to many listed buildings, real ale pubs and the period cobbled streets and alleyways that make it a perfect double for Dickensian London has become a popular area for filming. Harriet Lawrence, the supervising location manager of *The Personal History of David Copperfield* (Armando Iannucci, 2020) reports similar experiences with Screen Yorkshire:

*Hull is an astonishing gem of an old city and filming David Copperfield there was an absolute pleasure. Our director and production designer were impressed and inspired by the extensive range of period architecture in Hull's Old Town - particularly the network of numerous historic cobbled streets which allowed us to recreate 19th century Dickensian London.*⁵²

Screen Yorkshire's reputation as being incredibly 'film-maker friendly' is expressed by many filmmakers. Filmmakers are impressed with the freedoms granted to them to film within a city, the city councils provide affordable logistical support which is 'vital when persuading producers that travelling out of the capital will offer a really viable option.'⁵³

CASE STUDY: *THE ABC MURDERS* (2018)

The ABC Murders is a very specific drama that, since it is an adaptation of Agatha Christie's 1936 novel of the same name set in London, and one could immediately argue that it is difficult to see the cultural diversity of the region on the screen. That, however, is quite fitting as this is quite often the case. The most prestigious project of Screen Yorkshire, *Peaky Blinders*, is



famously set in Birmingham and the fact that Screen Yorkshire prominently uses these two series to showcase their achievements is quite telling on what kind of productions they are trying to attract. Other, less noticeable crime productions, such as Netflix's *Residue* (date) and the Channel 4 mini-series *National Treasure* (date) are also primarily set in London.

A show that does illustrate the cultural diversity of the Region, BBC's *Happy Valley*, was shot in Yorkshire in locations such as Todmorden, Luddenden, Mytholmroyd, Bradford, Keighley, Sowerby Bridge, Hebden Bridge, and Heptonstall. Huddersfield, Halifax, Bradford, Leeds and other West Yorkshire cities are actively mentioned even though no actual filming took place here.⁵⁴ This 'true Yorkshire' crime drama was realised without any involvement from Screen Yorkshire which means that within their portfolio, the aforementioned cultural diversity is scarce.

The *ABC Murders* is a 2018 BBC One mystery-thriller television mini-series adapted by Sarah Phelps and directed by Alex Gabassi and broadcast December 26–28, 2018 in three instalments. Driven by the star power of John Malkovich as Hercule Poirot, Rupert Grint of *Harry Potter* fame as Inspector Crome, and Andrew Buchan, Tara Fitzgerald and Shirley Henderson in supporting roles, this prestige project is the fourth Agatha Christie adaptation produced by Mammoth Screen and Agatha Christie Limited for BBC One. The prior adaptations, however, *And Then There Were None*, *Witness for the Prosecution* and *Ordeal by Innocence* are standalone mysteries, *The ABC Murders* is the first to feature Agatha Christie's most beloved detective, Hercule Poirot.

BAFTA-nominated writer Sarah Phelps explores the 20th Century through Christie's work, originally published in 1936. Set in the 1930s, a time when fascism and xenophobic sentiments are on the rise. In these challenging times, Poirot has to track a serial killer known as A.B.C. Poirot receives letters signed with A.B.C. which foreshadow crimes that will soon be committed. More letters soon arrive at Poirot's London flat, each shortly followed by a murder being carried out by A.B.C. and committed in alphabetical order. First, the killer strikes in Andover, then Bexhill. As the murder count rises, the only clue is the copy of *The ABC Railway Guide* at each crime scene.

While the plot is set in London and nearby parts of Southern England, the mini-series was filmed at the Prime Studios in Leeds. *The ABC Murders* filmed extensively in Yorkshire over three months during summer 2018 and features a range of period Yorkshire locations, doubling for 1930's London and its surroundings, including; Leeds City Varieties Music Hall, Leeds Town Hall, Quebecs Hotel, Leeds, The Queens Hotel, Leeds, Victoria Leeds, Bradford City Hall, Ripon Spa Baths, Keighley and Worth Valley Railway, Embsay Historic Railway and St John's Square Wakefield, Little Germany in Bradford, Saltaire Village, North Yorkshire Moors Railway, Newby Hall and Allerton Castle. (Fig. 1)

Charlie Thompson, the location manager of *The ABC Murders*, is full



Fig. 1: Clockwise from top left: Allerton Castle, Bradford City Hall, Leeds City Varieties Music Hall, Leeds Town Hall.

of praise for the work done and support provided by Screen Yorkshire: 'Yorkshire offered us the perfect base for *The ABC Murders*. We had a wealth of period locations at our fingertips all within easy reach, including doubles for 1920s London. Couple that with a film-friendly environment, Yorkshire is one of the best places for location filming in the U.K.'⁵⁵

Economically speaking, as an HETV production that costs at least £1 million and is backed by a PBS, the *ABC Murders* certainly qualifies as the kind of project that sits well within the Screen Yorkshire portfolio. The market value, recoupment position, distribution deals, broadcaster commission, and 'star-studded' cast all make this mini-series a prestigious project for the region that also benefitted in a broader sense as the production spend within the region, of course, contributes to the overall growth of Yorkshire and Humber.

The cultural contribution, a pillar purpose of the original regional screen agencies, deserves some attention too. It is hard to understate the importance of Agatha Christie: 'For many, Agatha Christie is as quintessentially English as queueing for Pimm's at Wimbledon. But as the best-selling novelist in history, her reputation goes far beyond the UK.'⁵⁶ Christie is one of the world's best-selling novelists with sales estimated ranging between two and four billion sold copies. Spanning sixty-six detective novels and fourteen short stories have been translated into over a hundred languages and her readership is thought to be around half a billion. Christie is one of the most translated authors worldwide and a large number of people are learning English by reading her novels and are also introduced to English culture by proxy. Her mass popularity often overshadows the fact that she was published by The Bodley Head, 'a publisher known for its support of the avant-garde and experimental highbrow works.'⁵⁷

Given this context, it would be difficult to argue that Christie qualifies



as a 'new voice' or that her work presents audiences with 'a new vision.' However, *The ABC Murders* writer Sarah Phelps' script takes some liberties which are noteworthy:

One of the themes that the series brings up, which is not so prominent in the book, is the rise of fascism in 1933 England. From the start, the series points to posters with slogans such as "March for England. We must stem the alien tide." The Belgian Poirot is faced with this growing nationalism in which a train ticket inspector drops his ticket on the floor after hearing his accent. The connection with today's Britain and Brexit is flagrant and obviously deliberate... While the posters may not exist in Christie's book, the animosity toward Poirot because he is from Belgium does appear in the letters in Christie's original story.⁵⁸

There is undoubtedly cultural merit in this production and as it examines today's British society through the lens of a crime novel published between the two World Wars. The aspect of regionality, however, remains muddled. Screen Yorkshire goes at great length to make a connection between the crime author and the location hub used for this production: 'Agatha Christie once ran away to Harrogate, so it's fitting that filming came to Yorkshire for *The ABC Murders*' (Screen Yorkshire 2020). This link is somewhat weak. It is true that Christie famously disappeared in 1926 which caused one of the biggest national manhunts the country had ever seen, with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Dorothy L. Sayers involved in the search. After eleven days, Christie resurfaced at the Swan Hydropathic Hotel in Harrogate. Yet, Harrogate has never fully capitalised on its close association with Agatha Christie in terms of tourism marketing and it has never had any lasting effect on the regional identity.⁵⁹

Speaking of (screen-)tourism, it is noteworthy that being a stand-in for another location can still benefit a region and its cultural heritage. *Broadchurch* is set in a fictional town, however, the real location Dorset capitalised on the huge success of the ITV crime show by using *Broadchurch* to leverage both landscapes and small towns as perfect tourism destinations. Shot across the South West in Clevedon, North Somerset, Yate in South Gloucestershire, and West Bay and Bridport in West Dorset, *Broadchurch* is set in an area traditionally dominated by literary tours following the footsteps of Jane Austen and Mary Anning along the Jurassic Coast. It is fair to say that especially the cliffs that are omnipresent in *Broadchurch* qualify as a tourist attraction. Even though *Broadchurch* is a purely fictional location, the show goes at great length to illustrate the significance of the specific locality, which in turn created touristic interest for the region.⁶⁰

The same does not ring true for *The ABC Murders*: Yorkshire, as a region, is neither culturally present nor represented in this television production. Few people will look up where Poirot's London flat actually is or whether



this is the real King's Cross that they get to see in *The ABC Murders*. The production brings prestige and economic benefits to the region but in turn, does not do much to publicly reflect the rich cultural heritage of Yorkshire.

CONCLUSION

While London will remain the centre of film and television productions, creative hubs away from London are thriving, partly because of the steadily growing availability of film crews and facilities, but also because of the touristic appeal of the regions. Regional film agencies such as Yorkshire Screen play an important role in attracting producers by offering highly skilled workforces, significant funding opportunities, a rich portfolio of unique urban and rural locations. Facilitating shooting on location is only one of the many support mechanisms and one of the most potent tools the regional agency has to 'develop the identity of their region by connecting it with national audiences.'⁶¹

This tension between 'industrial and a cultural remit'⁶² has always characterised the UK's film industry. The audio-visual sector is both part of an industry and a cultural practice⁶³ and the film policies of the new millennium acknowledge film as 'a complex combination of industry and culture. Common to both are creativity and commerce. [...] we assume that industry and culture are inextricably linked.'⁶⁴ All attempts of the UKFC to combine 'cutting edge' neoliberal economic policies with cultural approaches have tended to fail or, eventually, reveal their true priorities. In his article, 'British film policy in an age of austerity,' Jack Newsinger rightly states that the UKFC failed to make a case cultural diversity or regional heritage, as the criteria for funding and support were primarily commercial.⁶⁵ The UKFC and the bodies that absorbed it when it was dissolved 'attempted to develop a form of state subsidy that could nurture and promote industrial growth as well as further social agendas of cultural value, diversity and equality of opportunity, provided that such societal imperatives did not supersede the overriding economic agendas.'⁶⁶

London still attracts the biggest projects and global competition for studio spaces, location, and facilities, make regional production hubs and supporting regional screen agencies a necessity to ensure the UK's standing as a competitive production market.⁶⁷ The main effect, as this article attempted to show, is that the regional hubs mainly act as stand-ins for London — and effectively pitch themselves as cheaper placeholders. Productions that struggle to book studios or afford on-location shoots in the capital will find cheaper alternatives in the northern parts of the UK and boost the local economies. The new voices, the regional stories, and the cultural diversity that was an integral part of how this shift towards regions outside of London has been communicated in the respective policies remain at the fringes of the UK's film production. The regions



might host the actual productions, but the stories remain a lot more London-centric than the success of an agency such as Screen Yorkshire might indicate.



Notes

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² British Film Institute, *BFI Statistics 2017*, online publication, 31 January 2018, <https://www2.bfi.org.uk/sites/bfi.org.uk/files/downloads/bfi-press-release-bfi-statistics-new-record-uk-film-high-end-tv-production-spend-2018-01-31.pdf> [accessed 10 January 2021].

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