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Hansen, Kim Toft

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Local noir

and regionalization of Danish TV drama production

Kim Toft Hansen, Aalborg University

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Today, I will talk about a TV drama that I have yet to see. At the moment, the Danish TV drama *Norskov* is in the final stages of postproduction. It will probably air next month on Danish television. The drama is produced for the TV-channel TV2, a commercially funded public service mother channel in Denmark. Basically, the fact that the media institution is commercially oriented leaves room for different funding models than the one we have seen with TV dramas produced for DR, the institution behind successes such as *The Killing* (2007-12) and *Borgen* (2010-13). In my paper I will relate this to the notion of regionalization of TV drama production.

Norskov is not the first regional TV drama production in Denmark. There are several examples of productions in Denmark outside Copenhagen where most of Danish drama series are located. In the context of popular international crime fiction, the production of *Unit One* (2000-4) visited a large number of smaller and larger Danish cities with quasi-authentic plots of investigation. The investigative unit was a team of expert police officers who travel around the nation – and the Danish title of the drama, with specific reference to an authentic Danish police unit, was in fact *Rejseholdet* (the travelling team). Before this, provincial orientation in crime fiction can be found in the TV drama *En by i provinsen* (a provincial town) (1977-80), however the style and narrative of this drama has no direct resemblances to the trend or cycle called Nordic noir.

In my paper I will not get into the historical roots of the concept (Ove Solum has done that for this particular panel). Instead, I would like to link the idea of Nordic noir to the concept of *local noir*. The idea of ‘local noir’ was probably conceived by Anneke Leenhouts in her work on James Lee Burke’s Louisiana-based crime fiction, however Leenhouts never really develops the concept, which for her mainly rests as an illustrative title of her article (Leenhouts 1996). Last year, in her inspirational work of port cities, Alice Mah almost makes a similar reference to the idea of noir

being very local. She refers to what she calls “*noir* port cities” as a typical setting of what she terms “local *noir* literature and film” (Mah 2014: 30). Please, note that she only italicizes *noir* and not *local*, but nevertheless the reference to port cities as local places of narrative intrigue in crime fiction does reverberate in a similar manner as it does in Leenhouts article on Lee Burke. I am, then, interested in coining *local noir* as a location oriented concept for analyses of ‘localisation’ of crime fiction. Even *port noir* would be an interesting way to shift attention from a very diffuse idea of the Nordic onto an attention towards the actual process of placement in TV drama production.

Nordic noir – rather than crime or detective fiction – points towards place in the same way as crime fiction points towards ‘criminality’, detective fiction or the police procedural points towards the investigator. The forerunners of Nordic noir, *film noir* or *roman noir*, signals a particular medium centric style or genre. In such a way Nordic noir indicates, by the lack of media specific reference a cross media appropriation as well as a place-oriented view of the style: it’s *Nordic* (whatever that may mean).

This placement issue is, indeed, very interesting in almost every aspect of the TV drama *Norskov*, which takes place in a fictional, provincial city in the North of Denmark. The production took place in Frederikshavn, a local Jutland city with a lot similarity with Norskov, however the cities are not the same. Both Norskov and Frederikshavn are, though, cities and municipalities with typical peripheral problems, which should be spelled out in the series. The very first words spoken in the promotional show-reel are the following: “If anyone tells you that this is peripheral Denmark, tell them that the world is not flat”. They are spoken by the mayor of the city Norskov, which is the city where the plot takes place. This initial statement signifies that it is not only the production in itself that challenges the political and social construction and separation of central and peripheral Denmark. It is at the very heart of the narrative as well.

This means that there are several types of *travel* or *mobility* going on in relation to *Norskov*¹. In order to find new and fresh images for a Danish noir-production, the *production* ‘travels’ to Frederikshavn. This raises a few both practical and economic challenges which are raised by the

¹ Regarding travel, mobility and place I am very inspired by Shaun Moores (1993 and 2012).

respondents in my production study of the series. *Money* ‘travels’ to the production as well from both nationally internal and external sources, which then again motivates ‘mobility’ in international *distribution*. However, the very *plot* of *Norskov* revolves around travel as well. The main character of the story, a policeman from Copenhagen, ‘travels’ back to Norskov where he grew up, which addresses the dichotomy in question between center and periphery in the state of Denmark. Basically, in all communication facets of the production *Norskov* may be said to address travel in one way or another.

However, one particular notion of travel is interesting in this case, and here I return to the practice of bridging local cultural and industry policies: The main reason for the local support of the drama is that Frederikshavn, the location, hopes to brand itself as an attractive city for work-force. In the years to come the port city is planning to expand the harbour which, in all probability, means they will come to lack workforce. In the past years the area of *film tourism* has expanded and local attention towards the attraction of tourist based on local popular media production has exploded (Roesch 2009, Waade 2013). Both *internal and external tourism* are attractive types of ‘travel’ that may be motivated by a conspicuous production like *Norskov*. Of course, local tourism has entered the financial attractiveness of the production, but the industrial policies are much more dominant in my discussions with local administrators in Frederikshavn. The city not only hopes for travellers ‘visiting’ the city; the city (as well as the port company) hopes for travellers ending up ‘staying’ or ‘dwelling’ (as place theory sometimes calls it (see Moores 2012: 69f)) in the city because it is possible to find a place of employment here. And here the local initiative becomes transnational too: Frederikshavn may be at the periphery of Denmark, but the city – as a port city – lies ‘at the heart of Scandinavia’ (quoted from a local administrator), which means that they too hope to attract work-force (and tourists) from Norway and Sweden.

This means that *Norskov* as a production is a very interesting case, because the TV-series may tie together several issues connected to the success of Danish television drama. It supports the idea that Danish TV-drama challenges international distribution models of television, but it also trials somewhat new funding and production models for Danish public service television. When the series is aired next month, the opening of the drama will, according to my sources, be very closely linked to the local interest in port expansion and the issue of lacking work force. At the moment, I cannot

disclose how the local industry and cultural policies rub off on each other; my information is, unfortunately, still marked as confidential material. However, what I can say is that the commercial policy of the TV channel, interests the local industry policy, and the interests from local cultural policies to attract a 20-30 mio. TV production are brought together in a complex and interesting funding model that points towards a probable second season of the drama. At root, this model may be a commercial challenge of the traditionally non-commercial public service productions by DR, and it is a deeply webbed entanglement of cultural and industry policies. This means that theories of media policy and/or cultural policy should perhaps be re-thought in the light of local trade and industry policy.

Additionally, it ties in with several generic discussions about Nordic noir, and here I return to the series in question; *Norskov* may be a very indicative example of *local noir* or even *port noir* as subgenres to the overarching idea of Nordic noir. In the application for funding from Frederikshavn Municipality the producers marked that it will be a “Nordic crime drama”. The series is shot on location in Frederikshavn, which is in itself a huge challenge for a 10 episode TV drama. This means that the cooperation between the production company and the local administration has been very close, and the location manager has been a much centered figure in the production. Actually, the plot revolves, among other things, around the development of a new port in Norskov, which means that the idea of *port noir* may be a very obvious term to apply here. In all, this drama, then, calls for a ‘newly wed’ cross-method approach that employs location studies at first, but the ‘localisation’ of the drama is indeed supported by the interchange between policy studies and production studies.

This interchange may be indicated by three illustrations (next page) that come from:

- 1) *Norskov*’s promotional material (which was used to sell the series internationally),
- 2) online promotional material for TV series
- 3) a pamphlet on the port expansion in Frederikshavn,
- 4) a still from the recent *Wallander*-film *Sidetracked* (BBC, 2008).

The similarities between the images are, hopefully, conspicuous. The images has a particular *intertextual quality*, since we may recall numerous images from other TV dramas that take place in Scandinavian port cities, such as Port of Aarhus in *Dicte*, port of Lillehammer in *Lilyhammer*, or

even the Port of Baltimore in *The Wire*. Such a view may support the idea of developing place-oriented or location-oriented approaches to Nordic noir. The plots are, often, very local, and many plots and images of Nordic noir draw heavy attention towards port environments where, according to Alice Mah's study of ports, criminality finds its place of transit. Ports are, like crime fiction and even crime in itself, transnational connections, which may be an important reason as to why we see so many crime fiction plots taking place in port cities.

References

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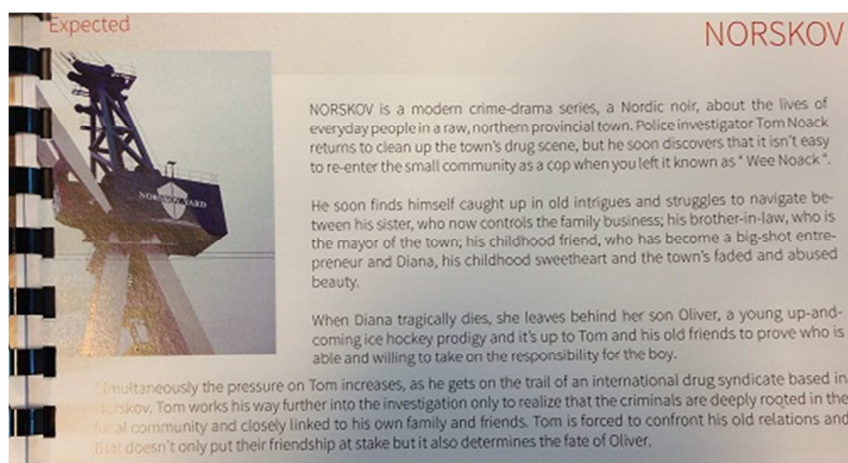
Mah, Alice (2014), *Port Cities and Global Legacies: Urban Identity, Waterfront Work, and Radicalism*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

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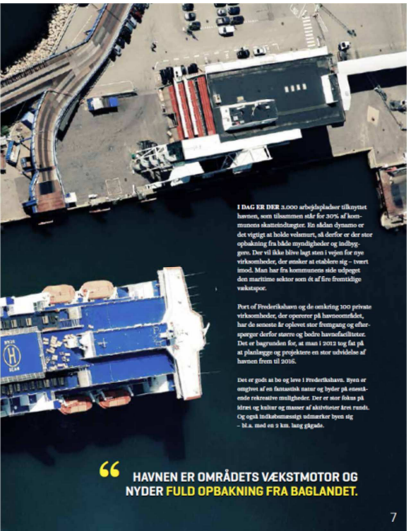
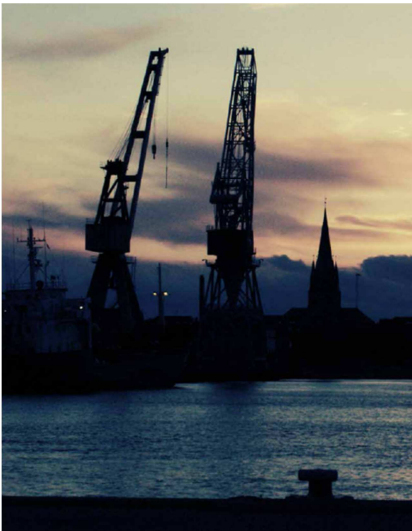
1) Early international promotional material for *Norskov* (2014).

These images show graphic similarities between 1) international promotional material from *Norskov*, 2) online promotional still, 3) images in a promotional folder about the port expansion in Frederikshavn, and 4) a still from a recent Nordic noir film.

This indicates how local imagery may be used in different communicative strategies with very different intentions. Nevertheless, the strategies may end up crossing into each other.



2) Promotional still from canaldigital.dk.



3) Images in promotion folder about port expansion (“Port of Opportunities – Sæt kurs mod fremtiden”)



4) Still from Wallander – Sidetracked (BBC, 2008)