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Nordic noir and lifted localities

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What I would like to do here is to draw attention to a particular visual quality of recent Nordic noir and to relate the visuality of TV-drama to what I – with a term borrowed from Roland Robertson – dub *lifted localites*. The presentation here is based on research that I have been doing for two research projects that I am part of at the moment. The one being *What Makes Danish TV Drama Series Travel?* and the other being a small project that I conduct together with Jørgen Riber Christensen called *Film and Television Production in Northern Jutland*. Together with Jørgen I have been doing production studies of a new Danish Nordic Noir-series, which has been shot on location in Frederikshavn in Northern Jutland. The results here are based on our findings.

Let me start out with showing you two images from two different TV-series. The first is from the recent Welsh BBC-production *Hinterland* (2013) and the next image is from the very fresh Danish Nordic noir TV-drama *Norskov*, which premiered last week on the Danish commercial public service channel TV2:

Translocal images from *Hinterland* S1:E2 8:50 (left) and *Norskov* S1:E1 0:13 (right).

For those of you who have seen a fair share of crime fiction, these images should appear fairly familiar. Such bird's eye views are widely used, not only in crime fiction, but in TV-drama and film in general. The intention is as such related to establishing shots, which lead the viewer into a specific locality in the piece of fiction. However, images such as these are not particularly establishing a particular scene or sequence. Instead, views across a town determine the place where the overall narrative takes place, and in a very indicative way they authenticate the place where the images were shot too. Basically, these images interlink the diegetic world with the extra-diegetic locations.

However, what is interesting to me about these two images is the fact that they not only appear very early on in the two episodes of *Hinterland* and *Norskov*. They have striking visual similarities in the way that the camera is positioned up high in order to catch a particular view of a local bay area, respectively Aberystwith in Wales and Frederikshavn in Denmark. I would call such images *translocal images*, because the images – even though they are from different geographical

locations – share conspicuous similarities and they function the same way across geographical distance.

Why, then, do I choose these two images out of the many possible images? Firstly, of course what struck me here was the visual resemblance between the two towns. Secondly, the reception of *Hinterland* has related visual style and sense of landscape to Nordic noir. *The Independent* even brought an article telling how Welsh Nordic noir now, when the series was bought by Danish DR, went back home again (Sherwin 2012). Ruth McElroy also wrote an online piece on *Hinterland* with the title "What can Wales learn from Nordic noir?" (McElroy 2013). Thirdly, when a new Danish TV-drama then shows such striking visual similarity with *Hinterland* it tells something about how genres and visual style travel transnationally. The images are at once very local, because they draw attention to senses of localities, but the images are at once very translocal: they appear in drama across production cultures and have by now become very symptomatic of what has been branded as Nordic noir with its "exoticism of settings, light, climate, language and everyday life" – with a quote from Pia Maibritt Jensen and Anne Marit Waade (2013).

Nevertheless, this way of portraying a town has an interesting precursor in what has been called *panoramic maps*, *pictorial maps* or *bird's eye view maps*. Panoramic maps are these decorative maps of cities that, by now, have become attractive wall decoration in houses:

Four panoramic maps of popular cities: Quibec (1755), London (1845), St. Louis (1859), Copenhagen (1640)

Such maps and images have historically been closely connected with commercial interests. John R. Hébert and Patrick E. Dempsey writes that panoramic images usually “depict the vibrant city” where harbors “are shown choked with ships” – even though harbours normally were not. Panoramic maps were often, then, used “to promote sales” and as a “descriptive geographical tool” much rather than sheer navigational representation (Hébert and Dempsey 1984). As Melinda Kashuba writes, panoramic maps “not only show what some of these communities look like but what our ancestor wanted them to look like” (Kashuba 2005: 185) – cities were, here, presented at its best. This particular bird’s eye view that we see so often in Nordic noir – and in TV-drama in general – has surprisingly numerous similarities with commercial interests and what later has been dubbed “place branding” (Moilanen and Rainisto 2008). Then, it may come as no surprise that the panoramic view of a city is widely used in three dimensional tourist maps.

Two 3D tourist maps, respectively from Istanbul and Dublin, and a map from the Eyewitness tourist guide to San Francisco. Relate that, here, to the panoramic image from the first episode of *The Bridge III*.

The bird’s eye view of a city location in Nordic noir is then, in its imagery, deeply linked to place marketing and commercial pictorial qualities. With this, however, I do not suggest that productions such as *Hinterland* or *Norskov* are directly or intentionally imbued with touristic interests and commercial concerns. In my interviews with the people behind *Norskov*, the commercial value of such images never really comes up, and the conceptualizing cinematographer

Adam Wallensten actually insisted that he had tried to move away from images such as the very first bird's eye view across Frederikshavn, a drone perspective.

Though, what I do suggest is that the culture of such images has a commercial branding background that really goes back even before cinema was invented. We find the same perspective in old 17th and 18th century panoramic maps, and we find them today in tourist maps. The intention behind panoramic and tourist maps are very similar: it is a matter of presenting the town from an attractive angle in order to attract diverse commercial interests. The cinematographer of *Norskov*, then, mentioned in our interview that representatives of the municipality of Frederikshavn – who put money into the production as well – asked the production team to really use "those beautiful images across town". This suggest that the very interest in 'housing' a media production like *Norskov* in a smaller peripheral Danish town comes from the same basic interests that we find in panoramic mapping and tourist material: it is a matter of mapping, of placing a location on the map, a matter of being seen in a globalized and mediated world.

Lifted localities in a world of flux

This means that my short presentation here really has nothing directly to do with Nordic noir or crime fiction as a genre. But it has a lot to do with how a popular genre can help place a town on the map for visitors or even for dwellers, i.e. tax-payers which are much needed in towns such as these. And this is where I come to the idea of 'a lifted locality'. In his article "Globalisation or glocalisation?", Roland Robertson refers to what he calls "a counter-urbanisation trend" in which there can be no global without the local. This trend, he writes, "proceeds in terms of the standardisation of locality, rather than straightforwardly in terms of "the principle of difference"." And he proceeds here by introducing his idea of 'lifted localities':

> "In contemporary 'international communication' the standardisation of locality is crucial. A 'lifted' locality – a sense of locality that is communicated "from above" – has to be a standardised form of the local (whether it be a neighborhood, a city, a country, or even a world region). An 'international TV enterprise like CNN produces and reproduces a particular pattern of relations between localities, a pattern which depends on a kind of recipe of locality. This standardisation renders meaningful the very idea of locality, but at the same time diminishes the notion that localities are "things in themselves." (Robertson 2012: 195)

I really like this quote – and I am very fond of the idea of lifted localities. What I have shown in my references to *Hinterland* and *Norskov*, as well as to old and new map styles, is that the sense of locality in a global world of flux has by all means become standardized. It may, though, as I suggest by referring to 17th century material have been so for quite some time too. I too agree with Robertson when he writes that media, such as CNN, are in part responsible for producing the ideas of locality. The very first sentence spoken in *Norskov*, by the town mayor, refers to the idea of peripheral Denmark, which in Danish media debates really has become a very standardized mode of presenting local outskirts of Denmark.

Such communication seems to come "from above" (from powerful media and politics), but I'm not sure that the ideas of 'lifted localities' are *only* communicated from above. Popular reactions like

crime fiction, which has been widely read, and has been widely written *into* localities, appear to come "from below" as well. It seems surprising to me that a dialectic thinker like Robertson, who has popularized and employs the dialectics of globalization in the concept of *glocalisation*, does not perceive 'lifted localities' as something that is communicated from above *and* from below.

What I too would like to suggest is that it is not only 'real' images of CNN – or Danish local TV broadcasts – that puts places on the map. In fact, I regard factually based communication like news as only one exponent of localities. Rather, fiction seems to be much more powerful in the way that it can choose images much more freely than news editors can. In my interview with the producer of *Norskov*, Senia Dremstrup said: "I think that we are very nice to Frederikshavn" – well-built into this comment lies an idea of how cinematography in TV-drama may do what the artist did in panoramic maps: present a local town from the best angles. Fiction may here move with much more liberty in creating "Norskov" as a fictional place, while the news room has to uphold a reality-contract with the viewer in depicting "Frederikshavn" as a place.

Why do we then see this reaction? Well, there are of course numerous reasons for this. However, one is – I think – a very interesting explanation of this so-called 'counter-urbanisation trend'. In his book *Media, Place and Mobility* (2012) Shaun Moores refers to how various media may present 'forms of dwelling in a world of flux'. This catch-phrase is lifted from David Morley's work on "transnational mobilities and local-global intersections" (Moores 2012: 69). What Moores, in his book, suggests is that media technology and media presentations produce – here, with a reference to Doreen Massey – "a global sense of place" where the relationship between local and the global are constantly negotiated.

Instead of being 'routed' locals may instead become 'rooted' (ibid. 79). Basically, if a city branding process is successful a peripheral town may appear as a lifted locality and a town where locals would stay and visitors would end up dwelling (Wallander's Ystad is of course a very successful example of this). In my interview with the local municipality administration of Frederikshavn this appears to be the particular intention behind 'housing' and financially supporting the production of *Norskov*. Whether or not it will turn into a 'lifted locality', only time (and further research) will tell.

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