Melancholia and unresolved endings

Norskov, Kierkegaard and television crime dramas

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How did Kierkegaard end up in a recent Danish television crime drama? Is there a relationship between Scandinavian crime fiction and the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard? And how is this related to the idea of melancholia?

These are the three questions that I intend to touch upon in this paper. I will do so by firstly relating television crime fiction and the crime genre in general to some lines of thought in Kierkegaard's writings and to the recent Danish television drama *Norskov* (2015). I will then show you how Kierkegaard showed up in our production study of this television drama. And finally, I will relate this to the idea of melancholia based on the findings in this production study.[1]

Season set-up in Norskov

The television crime drama *Norskov* was shown on Danish television last year. It received great reviews, but it did not attract the viewership that the commercial public service channel TV 2 intended, and as a result the follow-up season was cancelled. The narrative is about the policeman Tom who returns to his hometown in order to assist in investigating local drug-related issues. Here, he quickly reunites with his youth friends Casper and Martin, old habits are taken up again, but only to be disturbed by Tom's realization that both his friends are deeply engaged in activities in contiguity with his investigation. In the end, Casper turns out to be a central figure behind drug smuggling, while Martin – however idealistic he may appear – turns out to be politically corrupt. Caught in the middle is the local, young ice hockey player Oliver, who turns out to be the result of Martin's former romantic relationship, and Tom, who tries to balance the relationship between work and social life. At the end, Oliver reacts emotionally, drives away on a motorbike, crashes, and in closing Casper is vanished, while Oliver hovers between life and death.

Such an unresolved ending is not unusual in recent television crime dramas or television drama in general. In crime dramas the central investigator is often left in a state of despair, even though the crime plot has ended in closure (Brooks 1984). We see this in crime dramas such as *Beck*, *Wallander*, *The Killing*, *Broadchurch*, *Hinterland*, *True Detective* and *The Wire*. An unresolved ending is very normal as a set-up for the next season, and it is widely used and with great popularity in dramas such as *Game of Thrones*, *Breaking Bad* and *Homeland*. In crime fiction, however, this sense of an unre-

solved ending is often not built into the overall narrative arches of the drama, but it is rather intimately tied to one of more central characters. For instance, the first season of *Broadchurch* closes down with a resolved murder case, but basically everybody associated with the murder is left dangling in an unexplainable sense of desolation.

The problem, however, arises, as in *Norskov*, when the season set-up never receives the narratively promised pay-off: What happened to Casper? Did Oliver make it? Did the local administration ever expose Martin's abuse of power? Did Tom's hesitations as a policeman (because he realized that his friend was mixed up in the criminal activities) have an effect on the outcome of his investigation? Could Tom, as a result, have prevented the accident that may have caused the death of Oliver? Such questions linger as a result of the unresolved ending of *Norskov*. Consequently, a Facebook protest group was set up in order to influence the broadcaster's choice of cancelling the drama. Today, the group is still active and most recently a member of the group wrote the following: "We want a second season – so the good story can continue or if not only at least a proper ending…" (Facebook comment, August 2, 2016). This comment is highly representative of the overall line of communication on the Facebook page, which indicates that the viewers of the drama experience this unresolved ending as unsettling too.

Kierkegaard's policeman

For Kierkegaard there is an obvious relationship between being a policeman and the state of despair:

> "At one time my only wish was to be a police official. It seemed to me to be an occupation for my sleepless, intriguing mind. I had the idea that there, among the criminals, were people to fight: clever, vigorous, crafty fellows. Later I realized it was good that I did not become one, for most police cases involve misery and wretchedness — not crimes and scoundrels. They usually involve a paltry sum and some poor devil." (Kierkegaard 1847: 164)

> "it is often sad to be an observer. It can be depressing in the same way that it can be depressing to be a police officer, and when an observer genuinely follows his calling he must be regarded as a police informant who is serving a higher purpose because the art of observation is to bring forth what is hidden." (Kierkegaard 1843: 6)

The act of bringing forth what is hidden appears at first as a rewarding activity, serving a higher purpose, fighting wise criminals, but to him this activity has a disquieting and unsettling effect on the policeman as well. The policeman is an observer, one who sees things, and these things may not be pleasant to see, because police cases involve misery and wretchedness. The police officer's gaze is, according to Kierkegaard, tied to misery, wretchedness and – in the English translation above – depression. However, in the original Danish version of *Repetition*, Kierkegaard uses another word for the depressing experience of being an observer: "melancholic". Uncovering the hidden truth does not, for the observer, the investigator, liberate and stabilize, because it rather appears unset-

tling and often connected to coincidence, petty change and poor wretches. Here, it sounds surprisingly like Kierkegaard is writing about the gloomy characters of Nordic Noir and what Bo Lundin once dubbed 'the ulcer syndrome' with reference to Martin Beck's growing ulcer in the Sjöwall and Wahlöö novels (Lundin 1981: 10).

I have previously discussed the relationship between the character Wallander, violence in the Wallander novels and Kierkegaard's philosophy (Hansen 2010). Analysing characters in Scandinavian crime fiction, Kierkegaard's idea of 'the tragic hero' would be very useful (Kierkegaard 1962: 55). Kierkegaard launches his notion of a tragic hero in *Fear and Trembling* (1843) – published the same year as *Repetition*. The tragic hero is 'left' at the ethical stage of existence; he has not (yet) 'leaped' into faith. Wallander's continuous question: 'what is happening to Sweden?' and his corporeal manifestation of the ill-fated welfare society qualifies him as a tragic hero. Interestingly enough, according to Adam Kelly (2013), for Kierkegaard the tragic hero is too an "observer-hero", one who sees things that makes him 'fear and tremble', just like for instance Wallander fears and trembles in a short story in the collection *The Pyramid* and the characters in the final episode of *Broadchurch* fear and tremble facing the unfathomable results of murder.

This is in fact what the critic Mitzi M. Brunsdale in her *Encyclopedia of Nordic Crime Fiction* catches a glimpse of when she describes what she refers to as 'the cultural context of Danish crime fiction', and to her Kierkegaard is an apparent part of that. According to her account of Kierkegaard, the "existential approach increases one's awareness of God, but if one cannot make the "leap of faith" that inability intensifies despair at not being able to achieve eternal truth" – and then she concludes that such "despair often imposes the inner conflicts in which today's protagonists of Danish crime fiction find themselves" (Brunsdale 2016: 13). The gaze of the ethical policeman is the gaze of a tragic observer-hero.

Kierkegaard goes on TV

This is, however, not the only way that we may locate Kierkegaard in *Norskov*, because he apparently played a role very early in the production process as well. Here, I leave aside the philosophical account of Kierkegaard and turns to my communication with the creator of *Norskov*, the scriptwriter Dunja Gry Jensen.

The first question is, then, why did I ask her about Kierkegaard in the first place? Here, I have to take you through the three main characters of the drama once again. Casper who turns out to be 'the villain' in the drama, is named Casper Bondesen. His last name is a prosaic and typical vernacular Danish last name which means 'son of a farmer'. He is an entrepreneurial working man and an opportunist. The main character Tom is named Noack, which may be an English variation of Noah.[2] The last main male character, Martin, the mayor of the town, is the most interesting for our discussion here. His

name is Kierkegaard. What is even more persuasive is the fact that the scriptwriter maintained the 18th century spelling of Kierkegaard with an 'e' after the 'i'. Today, it is common to spell the name 'Kirkegaard' (the Danish word for a cemetery). This was why I asked her about Kierkegaard – and it turned into a lengthy discussion about his philosophy of life stages.

First of all, she said that they were "just cool names" and that the name Kierkegaard had "an element of poetry" in it. Then, I asked her why she maintained the 'e' in the name, and at first she was surprised about the question, but she then recalled that they actually had been discussing Kierkegaard's philosophy in the writer's room as a basis underneath the three main male characters of the drama.:

> "at a time in the writer's room we talked about these three: the ethical, the aesthete and the religious. We actually talked a lot about that. It was very fun. This may really be why I came to think about that Kierkegaard, but I had forgotten the connection. Then we talked about: could these three men… We talked about them in many different ways. Could they be Nordic gods, could they be Greek gods, could they be three temperaments: the choleric, the melancholic and the sanguine? We also talked about that with the ethical, the aesthete and the religious." (Jensen 2015)

Of course, this clearly indicates that many different ideas were debated in the writer's room, and that Kierkegaard did not serve as a direct influence on the final narrative. However, in the interview she ends up referring to Casper (Bondesen) as becoming an aesthete, Martin (Kierkegaard) as becoming the ethical, and Tom (Noack) bordering on a leap of faith, what she terms "a higher level of consciousness".

Here, I would not claim that it is so, because the character constellation of the drama is much more complex than this. However, I find it interesting that all three characters according to the scriptwriter are in a process of becoming, which is of course powerful narrative material in a television drama. And what is much more interesting for our discussion of 'melancholia' here is the fact that both Kierkegaard's philosophy and the ancient notion of personal temperaments were discussed here.[3]

Melancholia and the despair of an ending

This is not the time and place to go deeply into the long and complicated history of the concept of melancholia (see Hornbæk 2006, Bell 2014). Instead I would like to discuss the notion of melancholia in our data about *Norskov* – and finally relate this to the philosophy of Kierkegaard.

In an interview with the conceptualising cinematographer Adam Wallensten I asked him what sort of atmosphere they were going for in *Norskov* – and he answered: "A bit sad with a touch of melancholia" (Wallensten 2015). In the scriptwriter's conceptual presen-

tation about *Norskov* (Jensen 2012) she touches upon an interesting source of inspiration in relation to the idea of sadness and melancholia:

> "There is a Russian inspiration in the form too. The Russians have a sense of both the comic and the tragic, a sense that human beings are both deeply laughable and close to tears. The tragic is related to the comic and in this drama both aspects shall meet. There may not be death lurking in every scene, but it is the law and moral and the possibility of stepping out of line. There is a scale, of good and evil, of right and wrong, and everything is measured by it, strung over a deep abyss. It is easy to fall and it is almost impossible to cross to the other side" (Jensen 2012)

This appears as a basic poetic basis underneath the production of the drama,[4] and this early presentation of it is, of course, very textual, but in order to visually capture the atmosphere that she is seeking, the final page of the conceptual presentation holds a photography taken by the scriptwriter herself:

Illustration 1: Dunja Gry Jensen's inspirational photography from Hobro (reprinted with kind permission by Dunja Gry Jensen).

I asked her about the image and in her response she touched upon the idea of melancholia:

> "I think that melancholia is a good word to describe both the mood of the image and the mood that we have been working with all the way. It is probably the mood that won over other options too. It is probably a mood that comes quite close to the Nordic spirit [folkesjæl]. And to me, the mood was fitting for the series. Trees, birds, some nature, some beauty, a bit of Denmark, some winter, and something with light and shadow." (Jensen 2016)

This image is very interesting for those of us are trying to make out what Nordic Noir is (which is a reference too in our data on *Norskov*), and Jensen's note on light and shade is of course convincing with noir in mind. The eternal sense of November in many Nordic crime dramas appear as a sound intertextual consciousness deeply embedded in the visuality of this image.

In addition, I find it fascinating that Jensen's photography (which was taken in a Danish town called Hobro) has obvious similarities with the tree paintings of Wallander's father in the novels by Henning Mankell (an image that he paints over and over again).[5] The father's artwork for the English adaptations of Mankell's novels was done by the artist Christine Bechameil, and here we also find the naked trees, interplay between light and shade (see below). On her presentational website she refers to the images that she made for the adaptations as "melancholic landscapes from around Ystad."[6] So once again the idea of melancholia is invoked in order to describe a particular mood in crime fiction.

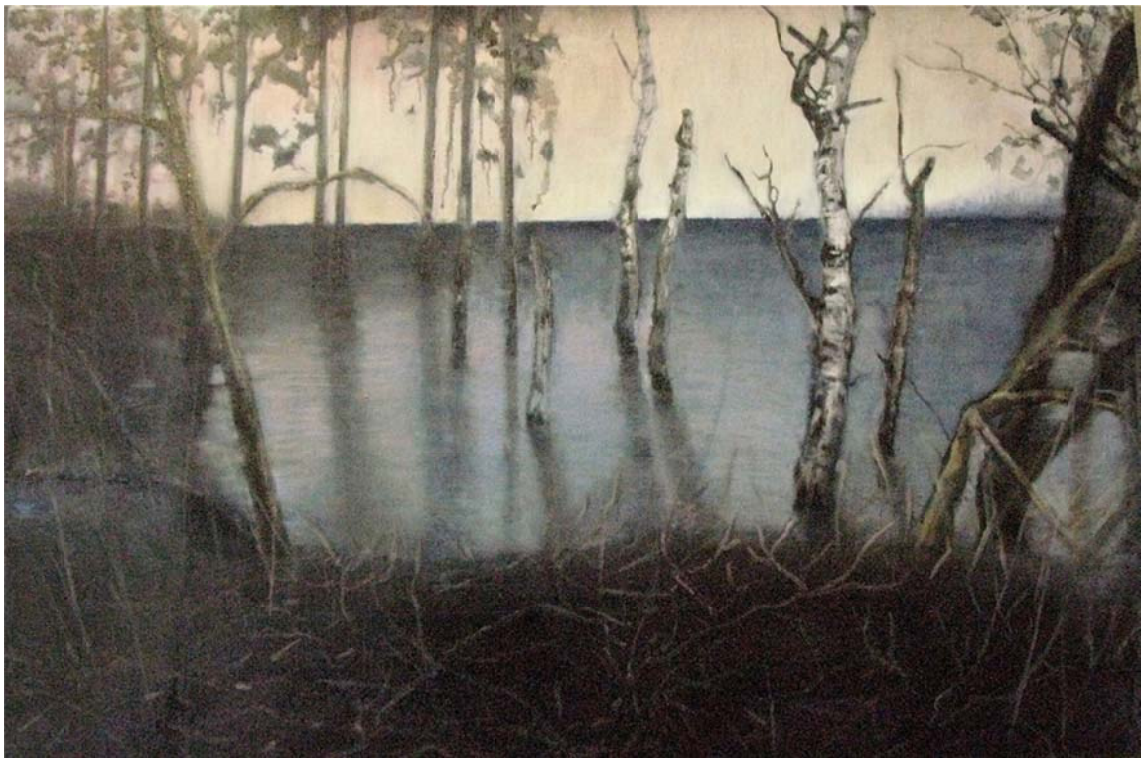

Illustration 2: One of Christine Bechameil's paintings for the BBC adaptations of Mankell's Wallander-novels (reprinted with kind permission by Christine Bechameil and Yellowbird)

To sum up the indications here we may say: Melancholia appears in Kierkegaard's philosophy in the gaze of the observer, which for him is stunningly similar to the role of a policeman; melancholia was an intentional mood aimed at during the production of *Norskov*; the sense of melancholia is perhaps a much more general trait of modern Scandinavian and international crime fiction; and the sense of a tragic ending is somehow connected to these aspects. Of course, there is much more to say about these matters, but that is unfortunately all I have time for here.

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Notes

[1] The findings in this paper are based on a comprehensive production study of *Norskov*, including elite interviews, deep texts, access to documents from both the municipality where the production took place and from The Danish Film Institute, and interviews with local policy makers. The production study was done in close collaboration with Jørgen Riber Christensen (Aalborg University).

[2] According to the scriptwriter, *Norskov* is about “masculine solicitude”, and the name Noack has an obvious consonant, masculine ring to it. The idea that Noack is on the verge of a higher consciousness and has an almost biblical name is, of course, striking in relation to Kierkegaard’s stages of human existence where the final stage is the religious.

[3] Working with Kierkegaard and melancholia, some references have been inspirational: Khan (1985), Brady (2003), McCarthy (1977) and Ferguson (1995).

[4] The idea of a relationship between Russian film and unresolved endings is highly interesting too. Danish silent films were, for instance, often produced with a ‘Russian ending’ in order to please the Russian spectators with a sad ending. See for example August Blom’s film *Atlantis* (1913).

[5] The notion of painting the same motive over and over again is also known from the Danish painter Einar Wegener. Lately, he was portrayed in Tom Hooper’s film *The Danish Girl* (2015) where he paints similar images of trees again and again. In relation to Jensen’s photography from the town Hobro it is a striking coincidence that Wegener too found his tree motive in Hobro. Here, in his image “Poplerne ved Hobro” (1909)

(below). Interestingly enough, the scriptwriter of *Norskov* and Wegener were absorbed by the same landscape.

[6] See http://www.christine-bechameil.com/wallander-1/ (last visited August 4, 2016). Bechameil used similar images for some of her artwork for the second and third seasons *The Killing* (2007-12). In fact, Bechameil was the scenic painter for *The Danish Girl* as well. Besides this work, Bechameil was also associated on the Danish TV dramas *Follow the Money*, *The Legacy, 1864* and *Badehotellet* and several films by Lars von Trier, including *Melancholia*.