

## Lines across genres in Danish tv-series

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# LINES ACROSS GENRES IN DANISH TV-SERIES

*Lynge Stegger Gemzøe*

Since *Forbrydelsen* (2007-12, English title: *The Killing*) was aired in the UK on BBC4 in 2011, Danish TV drama has been enjoying unprecedented success with the British audience (Bauer et al. 2013; Stougaard-Nielsen 2016). Further, following up on the TV-series, a wide selection of books on Denmark and Danish national culture have been published in the UK (Kingsley 2012; Booth 2014; Russell 2015; Higgins 2016). There is no doubt that the British reception paved the way for a broader international attention to Danish TV series (Esser 2017; Hansen & Waade 2017, 208) – to Danish culture, and further to Nordic productions and culture. But how are such constructions of Danish national culture interwoven with the Danish TV-series? That is what this article sets out to answer, prompted by the recent great interest in both categories in the UK.

It is my assumption that this story cannot be told from linear point of view, pointing out causes and effects. As an attempt to explain some of the lines involved, my point of departure will be Tim Ingold's understanding of the thread as "a filament of some kind, which may be entangled with other threads or suspended between points in three-dimensional space" (Ingold 2007, 41). These threads weaving a "delicately woven fabric composed of a myriad of interlaced threads" (Ingold 2007, 61) are suggested to be useful as a supplement to traditional genre categories and conceptions of influence, in describing prevalent relationships in

Danish TV-series as well as the break-through of Danish TV series and culture in Britain.

Studying national culture poses an array of methodical and theoretical challenges because there are so many approaches to ideas about national identity. In spite of these obstacles, thoughts on national identity and national narratives refuse to die. On the contrary, they exist and thrive, as the literature on the subject amply proves. From an anthropological approach, non-Danes have done work in Denmark (Jenkins 2012; Reddy 1997; Borish 1991). Other accounts of the Danish way of life have been made by journalistic reports of what it means to live in Denmark. To create a point of departure for the analyses of modern Danish TV drama in the article, I shall briefly refer to these studies and accounts, at the outset supplied with a Danish point of view.

Danish anthropologist Anders Linde-Laursen has done a historical/ethnographical piece on Danish-Swedish relations (1995), establishing the advantages of a comparative approach and 'the foreign view'. His studies explore the historical background of the strange mixture of goodwill and animosity that has dominated the Danish-Swedish relationship through changing periods of war, competition and cooperation. In this way, they contribute to explain the mutually complicated feelings, which – to a certain degree – persist between Danes and Swedes, and which are renegotiated in TV drama productions such as *Bron/Broen* (2011-2018). Several non-Danish anthropologists have also mapped important parts of Danish traditions and culture.

British social anthropologist Richard Jenkins (2012) directly approaches the question what it means to be Danish, and in which ways 'Danishness' is interpreted and defined. His study primarily stems from his two years spent observing people and living in the Danish provincial town of Skive in the late nineties, supplied by further studies in Denmark 2008 and 2009. It is built on extensive observations of everyday life in Danish institutions such as kindergartens, schools and a trade union, as well as daily meeting places such as squares, streets, shops and for instance McDonalds. He also includes festive occasions such as birthdays and confir-

mations. Jenkins makes use of extensive quotes from interviews with Danish citizens to support his observations. This approach enables him to deliver a thorough analysis of salient aspects of the welfare state, including the interaction between the state and civil society, the egalitarian society, and the traditions of consensus in political debates – and the ambivalence towards newcomers. These interactions result in what he calls ‘paradoxes of identity’.

He is not the first to point out the importance of the Danish welfare state and the dilemmas it includes. Indian anthropologist Prakash Reddy described Denmark like this in 1997: “I believe that the Danes have three religions. The first one is Christianity, of course, but very few are interested in that. The second one is the welfare system and the third is the folk high school.” (1997, 15). Prakash Reddy’s work is based on stays in Denmark during the 1990s resulting in several books, among them *Danske dilemmaer* (1998). Significantly, Reddy, just as Jenkins, points out that though egalitarian beliefs and practices prevail, they also represent some difficult dilemmas for social conduct, seen, for instance, in generation gaps and parents’ prevailing feeling of spending too little time with their children.

Anthropologist Steven Borish has previously pointed out the importance of the folk high schools. However, his book goes far beyond that. According to him even your average American might have heard about the Danish welfare state, but has little (or only inaccurate) knowledge about it: “It soon became clear to me that what little knowledge of Denmark exists in the American awareness is bound up with stereotypes about pornography and the welfare state ...” (1991, 46). Primarily, he characterises the Danish culture as a culture based on equality, and he points out that there are positive as well as negative sides to this. The positive side is that the prevailing consensus culture enables conversations ending in compromises. The negative side is that in a culture of equality no one is allowed to stand out.

In this culture of equality, at least two components stand out – social equality, guaranteed by the norms and practices of the welfare system, and gender equality. Being in the absolute top on

the Global Gender Gap Index of 2014, produced by the World Economic Forum (2014), all the Nordic countries are renowned for their gender equality, occupying the five first places. Significantly, this Index maps gender equality within four key areas: health, education, economy and politics.

Summing up, scientific, anthropological accounts of Danish culture and Danishness are primarily concerned with describing and understanding the traditions of equality and education in the Danish welfare state. Recently, such accounts have been supplemented by a huge set of journalistic writings. After the acknowledgement of Danish TV series abroad, a great many articles on Danish TV drama have been published in the UK, the US and Germany, among other countries (Eichner 2017; Hansen 2016; Sparre 2015). These articles are not the main focus of this article. A thorough media coverage analysis of non-Danish newspapers writing on Danish TV drama simply encompasses more data than can meaningfully be integrated here. However, based on the quantity of reviews of Danish TV series and their predominantly positive evaluations, it is safe to say that the newspaper *The Guardian* played a major role in the British reception.

Against that background, it is not surprising that three books on Denmark and Danish culture were written by three different journalists from *The Guardian*. These authors are not anthropologists, even though they all apply anthropological methods, and the books are not meant as scientific accounts. The books are interesting in this context because they are either partly inspired by or at the very least assume knowledge of some of the Danish TV series that are the subject of this article. In this way, they contribute to the texture of “delicately woven fabric” of imaginations of Danish contemporary culture in a British context.

Inspired by the success of *Forbrydelsen* and *Bron/Broen*, and using the series to sell the book, on the cover of Kingsley’s guide to being Danish (2012) it reads: “Denmark is the country of the moment. The motherland of *Borgen* and *The Killing* ...”. With half of its contents clearly picked out to pique the interests of the tourist (food, design and Wonderful Copenhagen), the book is a mix-

ture of observations, reflections and a travel guide. Like Jenkins, Reddy and Borish, Kingsley is genuinely fascinated with the Danish welfare state, its model of education, including the folk high schools and the, in Kingsley's view, strange way of financing private schools with 80 % subvention from the state.

Michael Booth published *The Almost Nearly Perfect People* in 2014 on "the truth about the Nordic miracle", in which he tries to add some perspective to the idea that the Nordic way of life is superior. The book is marketed as a humorous critique of Nordic countries, and while it does offer said critique, the author obviously also sees the positive side of Danish culture and way of life. The most prominent critique is a worry that the Danes' laid-back attitude towards work might make them happy but might also ultimately lead to problems with the national economy. This line of thought could be seen as a continuation of Barry Forshaw's point of view launched in his book about Nordic crime fiction: "But the appeal remains the same: we are shown a country which is different from Britain – but not too different. The lure of the (slightly) exotic, plus a vague sense of schadenfreude that the wheels are coming off the utopian welfare-state bus." (2012, 8)

Booth's publication did not keep fellow journalist Helen Russell from publishing *The Year of Living Danishly* – "uncovering the secrets of the world's happiest country" (2015). In this book she makes apparent that, before moving there, her only knowledge of Denmark as a country had been gained from watching Danish TV series: "Other than Sarah Lund's Faroe Island jumpers, Birgitte Nyborg's bun and *Borgen* creator Adam Price's knack for making coalition politics palatable for prime-time TV, I knew very little about Denmark. The Nordic noir I'd watched had taught me two things: that the country was doused in perpetual rain and people got killed a lot." (Prologue, xvii).

Recently, an impressive array of titles on *hygge* (a supposedly Danish way of having a nice, easy-going and cosy time) has swept across the British market. Significantly, this phenomenon is also discussed by Jenkins as well as Reddy and Borish. Jenkins' definition can be found in his list of important Danish words: "a desirable

social atmosphere or feeling, characterised by small-scale settings, informality, relaxed intimacy and inter-personal warmth, and is related to the notion of ‘home’.” (Jenkins 2012, xiv). The British 2016-publications on *hygge* have been so numerous that more critical voices coined it “The *hygge* conspiracy” (Higgins 2016). A great many of these publications were self-help books that promised readers a happier life. Apparently, constructions of national culture can be repackaged into, and sold as, self-development.

The link between the TV series and an interest in constructions of Danish culture is underlined by an array of Nordic Noir tourist tours in Copenhagen specifically catering for audiences of these TV series (Visit Copenhagen 2017). In 2013, the London based magazine *The Economist* argued that the world could learn a lot from the success of the Nordic welfare states (*The Economist*, February, 2013), especially highlighting the *flexicurity*-system in which most employers have a high degree of flexibility and employees a high degree of security. It seems that the TV series, coupled with the reports about Denmark being the world’s happiest country (Wiking 2013; Helliwell et al. 2012-2016), and reports about the Nordic countries’ economies have allegedly sparked a wider interest in tales about Danish national culture in a British context. These combinations of interests have been big enough to warrant tourism, different recent accounts of what it means to be a Dane, books and articles on the Nordic noir phenomenon and a myriad of self-help publications on Danish *hygge*.

So far, I have shown that the Danish welfare state and an emphasis on social equality and gender equality are an important part of how Danes are seen from the outsiders’ perspective – and that you can draw lines between anthropological and journalistic accounts of Denmark. I have also suggested that the success of Danish TV series and reports about Danish happiness have contributed to an interest in Danish national culture. In the following, I aim to show how stories about the welfare state and powerful women are interestingly also interwoven with Danish television drama across genres, and how the series showcase different aspects and constructions of Danish national culture.

My cases will be *Forbrydelsen* (2007-12), *Borgen* (2010-13), *1864* (2014) and *Arvingerne* (2014-2017). I choose to focus on these cases, because they are all primarily produced by Danish public service broadcaster Danmarks Radio (DR), they all stem from the same period, they have all been made primarily for the Danish national audience which DR is bound by law to consider their primary audience, they have all been reasonably successful outside of Denmark (Lauridsen 2016, 62; Hansen 2016, 308; Bondebjerg & Redvall 2015), and lastly because they span a wide range of genres. *Forbrydelsen* is a crime show, *Borgen* is a political drama, *1864* is an historical drama, and *Arvingerne* is a family drama in a melodramatic form. One could also have picked other cases, because these traits really are typical for DR's series. *Bron/Broen* (2011-2018) would also have made for an interesting case, for example, with a strong female lead and comments on the welfare society, but the Danish-Swedish-co-production form – and the fact that the lead scriptwriter on *Bron/Broen* is Swedish – makes it difficult to include it in a sample which otherwise consists of exclusively *Danish* TV drama. It should be noted that these series share commonalities just by virtue of being made by DR in this specific time period. These commonalities include being produced under the *One Vision* dogma inspired by and somewhat akin to the American showrunner-model, as well as the mandatory ethical or societal dimension of the *double story*, which has been richly documented by Redvall (2013). Also, while it is a fact that all of these productions are made primarily for a Danish national audience, it has been an explicit strategy of DR to cooperate with foreign investors and producers to heighten the production value of the shows, which is also well-described by Redvall (2013) as well as Hochscherf & Philipsen (2017), Bondebjerg & Redvall (2015) and several others. While these production circumstances and the public service responsibilities of DR are certainly interconnected with the following analysis, they cannot fully account for the commonalities I find in the analysis.

## POWERFUL WOMEN

A female lead in a TV series is not uncommon, but the focus on powerful and remarkable female characters in Danish television drama across genres stands out, as I shall show in the following. Waade & Jensen (2013) argue that Danish TV-series are characterised (among other things) by strong women in power and single mothers leading successful careers.

*Forbrydelsen* (DR 2007-2012) is arguably the show that drew international attention to Danish TV series. Weissman (2013) highlights *The Killing* as Danish television drama's claim to fame in the UK and abroad. It was a domestic success, and the series was quickly sold to other countries – for instance, it was shown on ZDF in Germany in 2008. *Forbrydelsen* stood out in its ability to do well in English-speaking markets, normally a great challenge for subtitled content. It was shown in a subtitled version on BBC4 in 2011. It is an established fact that this started a trend with Danish TV drama in Britain which was covered energetically by the British press and presumably also sparked the above-mentioned British books about Denmark.

Although Danish TV series were also bought to some extent in the US (*Borgen*, for example, has been available through cable operator DirecTV), American broadcaster AMC allegedly thought it more profitable to purchase the rights to do a remake of the series. Hence *The Killing (US)* premiered on April 3, 2011, on AMC. After being cancelled several times, the show was resurrected for a fourth season by cable operator Netflix. As the American remake helps to profile the value of the female lead, I shall briefly involve it in the following.

The first season of *Forbrydelsen* is the story about the murder of Nanna Birk Larsen. At the same time, it is the story about power and sacrifice: an obsessive female detective who gets things done at all costs, leaving her personal life in a shamble, and the story of politician Troels Hartmann's rise to become the next mayor of Copenhagen, sacrificing his ideals along the way.

The protagonist in *Forbrydelsen* is the lead detective, Sarah Lund. She is a prime example of a powerful, brave and resourceful

female. One of the things that Veena Sud (the creator of *The Killing*, the American remake of *Forbrydelsen*) has characterised as one of *Forbrydelsen's* great selling points is Sarah Lund – not because a troubled female investigator is something new or special, but because Sarah Lund is also a thoroughly bad mother (Gemzøe 2015). While absent and incompetent fathers are quite ordinary in popular fiction, according to Veena Sud bad motherhood is rare and a bit of a holy cow in an American context. As such, Sarah Lund moves into an area originally occupied by males. Sarah Lund is in a sense desexualised and defeminised, always wearing a big jumper and little or no make-up. When the series starts, she is engaged to Bengt, a Swedish psychologist, and while her son is dissatisfied with her level of interest in his life, he still talks to her and obeys her. Sarah Lund does put some effort into maintaining the relationships to her son and Swedish boyfriend from time to time in the first season, but work is always more important than her personal relations and feelings. At the end of the third season, Sarah is single. She is unable to talk to her son and sacrifices her career and the remains of her personal life by becoming a vigilante, executing the villain in the final episode. Sarah Lund ends up as a rebel against all the expectations that a conservative or old-fashioned society might have about what it means to be a woman: she lacks traditional feminine features, she always prioritises work over family, and she cannot raise a child. The character was so popular in the UK that Sofie Gråbøl, the actress playing Sarah Lund, made a cameo as Lund on UK hit sitcom *Absolutely Fabulous* in 2011 (Gilbert 2011), further suggesting that the strong female lead played an important role to audiences abroad.

Birgitte Nyborg in *Borgen* is another prime example of feminine power – perhaps even more so than Sarah Lund in *Forbrydelsen*. *Borgen* is a series about Birgitte Nyborg, the leader of a moderate political party, and her rise to power. *Borgen* is also a series about the personal costs of pursuing a demanding career. That being said, Birgitte Nyborg is in many ways a very different character from Sarah Lund, as I will illustrate in the following. Lastly, *Borgen* is a series about politics, and while the series does emphasise the

brutality, pitfalls and superficiality of politics, it is also a testimony to parliamentary democracy. Like *Forbrydelsen*, *Borgen* did remarkably well for a subtitled series in the UK.

TV shows about powerful male politicians are nothing out of the ordinary. *The West Wing* (1999-2006) and *House of Cards* (BBC 1990, Netflix 2013-) are perhaps the two prime examples of this, while at the same time painting entirely opposite pictures of what it means to rule a country. *The West Wing* upholds the idealist notion that politicians believe in a better world, while *House of Cards* presents a political system of power-hungry sell-outs. In this spectrum, *Borgen* is closest to the idealism of *The West Wing*. The whole premise in *Borgen* is that Birgitte Nyborg, female leader of the Moderates, becomes the prime minister in Denmark and that she does an excellent job leading the state. *Borgen* is, to my knowledge, the only TV show in the world with a female prime minister as the main character.

While Sarah Lund was effectively killing feminine virtues in order to accommodate her workaholic and obsessive ways, Birgitte Nyborg's feminine side is a source of her power. Her voluptuous curves are explicitly themed in the very first episode of the show. She wins the heart of the country when she abandons her scripted speech in a live political debate and admits that she could not fit the dress she was supposed to wear for the debate because she had gained weight. In the same improvised speech, she fuses the professional with the personal. She wins the debate by *not* being too professional or obsessed with her work, admitting that her political advisor is shaking his head in the background because she is not sticking to the plan. After the speech, the camera jumps to her husband and kids, who are watching her on TV. "That's your mother, right there. You should be proud of her", the husband exclaims to the kids, making the connection between the professional and private even clearer. As the series moves forward, Nyborg does in fact end up losing touch with her husband because of her demanding work, but she never loses touch with her feminine side. The series focuses on gender dilemmas several times as it goes on – for example the issue of being a female prime minister

accused of having an affair with your political advisor. In the series, Nyborg is also a supporter of the feminist cause, in the fifth episode passing a bill to force companies into always having 45% females as board members. The power of the Nyborg character in *Borgen* has captured the attention of – and forced comparison with – real-life female politicians like Hillary Clinton, Nicola Sturgeon and Julia Gillard (Gritten 2013; Murphy 2013).

*Arvingerne (The Legacy)* is also themed around female dilemmas. It is the story about the aftermath of the death of Veronika Grønnegaard, a powerful, rich and eccentric artist and matriarch. She leaves behind a legacy in the form of her art and a huge house. In essence, *Arvingerne* is the tale about how her children fight over her legacy as well as her posthumous reputation. Veronika's heirs are Gro, Signe, Frederik and Emil, her two daughters and two sons, who all have different opinions on how the legacy after Veronika should be controlled.

*Arvingerne* is constructed over powerful female characters. Even though the most powerful of them all, the matriarch Veronika, dies in the first episode, the show keeps revolving around her and the decisions she made throughout her life. It is an echo of her life. Her daughter Gro is the perfect example of a self-assured, empowered, modern businesswoman, sporting chic blazers and exuding massive confidence. In the first episode, the first thing said about Gro is: "There she is, the woman behind our great success. [...] Your first show as a director and you turn it into a record." Throughout the series' first season we are constantly reminded of Veronika's achievements and Gro's sometimes almost cynical resourcefulness.

Even the historical drama *1864* manages to fit a powerful female main character and narrator into its storyline, despite the fact that this series is based on Denmark's historical defeat in the Second Schleswig War, a war primarily fought by men. Inge, the female main character, is remarkably empowered and self-assured for a woman born in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to the point of being anachronistic. Throughout most of the series, nobody tells her what to do; and even though she does end up accepting a marriage of con-

venience to the series' villain in the final episode, she does so only because she thinks her true love has died in the war. In most of the series she confronts her parents as well as the doctors at the battlefield, insisting that women can work as well and hard as any man. While *1864* is based on actual history, it becomes clear, as the series goes on, that it does not claim complete historical accuracy (if such a thing is even possible). Several times in the series one of the soldiers, Johan, performs supernatural feats such as predicting the future or miraculously curing the sick. Thus, *1864* uses its narrative freedom to include both empowered women and metaphysical sensations and relations.

So far, I have shown how recent Danish TV series across genres seem to highlight powerful and resourceful female leads at the core of the stories, even when statistics or history would suggest that male characters would be more realistic. Though there are exceptions, the majority of police detectives, prime ministers and wealthy artists are after all male, also in Denmark, as were most resourceful story tellers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to the Gender Gap Index, as mentioned, women are already doing well in Denmark, but they might be doing even better in Danish TV-series. These series present a variety of female willpower, ability and capability combined with some obvious weaknesses revealing the costs of dedication and power that forces comparison with real-life powerful and accomplished women. This pattern contributes to highlight prevailing dilemmas in gender equality – dilemmas which seem to possess a strong appeal to audiences in various countries, struggling with the same dilemmas.

### **OMNIPRESENT WELFARE AND OCCASIONALLY BRUTAL POLITICS**

As non-Danish anthropologists unanimously have pointed out, the Danish welfare state is an integral part of Denmark. In the following, I shall illustrate that it is also an integral part of recent Danish TV-series. These series depict conflicts generated by the welfare state and current politics in Denmark in a variety of ways.

*Borgen* provides us with insight into the workings of Danish

democracy and the Danish welfare state. While a predominant point of view in the series is the strategic, bargaining perspective of the politician and her communication adviser, it also shows how a welfare state and a democracy with many different political parties can work. In this way, the political culture of seeking agreement, cf. Borish, is nicely illustrated by *Borgen*. For instance, Russell refers to "... Borgen creator Adam Price's knack for making coalition politics palatable for prime time TV ..." (2015, Prologue, xvii). *Borgen* thematises important political issues like the above-mentioned female professionals on the boards of multinational companies, but also encompasses other controversial issues such as American illegal prisoner transports in Greenland (S1E4), arresting political activists on foreign soil (S1E6), illegal surveillance (S1E6), etc. Though not blind to its dilemmas and shortcomings, *Borgen* is an ode to the possibilities of democracy and the welfare society.

*Forbrydelsen* is a testament to the fact that politics can also be brutal in a Nordic welfare state. There is a strange ambivalence towards politics in the first season of the show. On the one hand, *Forbrydelsen* is a tale of loss of innocence. Politician Troels Hartmann starts out as an idealist, always wanting to do the right thing. For example, in the first episode he turns down an opportunity for a debate at a high school that might promote his campaign because he wants to do right by a pending murder investigation and police investigator Sarah Lund. He ends up with his hands dirty in the final episode, desperately trying to confess his sins, but ultimately, he realises that no one wants to hear his confessions. He rises to become the next mayor of Copenhagen even though a prominent member of his campaign has systematically disrupted the murder investigation and lied to the police. The moral is clear: you cannot go far in politics without getting your hands dirty at some point. On the other hand, you could argue that Hartmann himself has acted in good faith and that the blame is on his staff. *Forbrydelsen* offers a glance into a political system where strategy and deals are an important part of the setup, but in which democratic negotiations between several po-

litical parties actually occur and in which the politician in focus wants a better city. I would argue that the ending is a critique of politics in general, not of the welfare state.

The welfare state is also omnipresent in *Arvingerne* in the sense that no one in the series is poor. *Arvingerne* is the story about who gets more. Three of the main characters grew up in riches. The last main character, Signe, was raised in an ordinary working-class family. She and her boyfriend might wish they had more money or dream of things they would do if they were rich, but they never have any *real* financial difficulties. Emil does struggle financially, but his problems stem from the overconfidence, carelessness and lack of work ethics resulting from being spoiled as a child and teen, leading him into dubious investments in Thailand. In *Arvingerne*, if you want to get into *serious* money problems, you need to get far away from Denmark. While this can easily be interpreted as another ode to welfare, one could also read it as a slight critique: the Danes have nothing better to do than engage in petty fighting over material wealth.

Even the historical TV series *1864* has a parallel story set in contemporary Denmark about the Danish welfare state. Troubled teenager Claudia meets the welfare system as she drops out of school and is unable to properly handle any job the state finds for her. As a last resort, the municipality sends her off to work as a care assistant for an old landlord. While the social worker that connects Claudia with the landlord is depicted as unnecessarily rude and perhaps tired of her job, she does end up saving Claudia, whose relation to the landlord turns out to be meaningful and constructive for both of them. The welfare state may be worn-out, but it still helps people lead better lives.

*Borgen* is, as I have pointed out, an ode to democracy, the art of compromise and the welfare state. In the other series, the other representations are quite diverse, and they certainly do not all paint an idealised picture of the way things work in Denmark. However, I can conclude that the modern-day welfare state is always present – even in a story about the historical defeat in *1864*.

## REPRESENTATIONS OF DANISH SETTINGS, SOCIETY AND WAY OF LIFE

Some TV series are set in fictional settings – from Fairview in *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012) to *Gotham City* in *Gotham* (2014- ). By contrast, Danish TV series are set in recognisable parts of Denmark, and they are usually full of Danish national symbols, language and settings. This is also true for fictions set in fictitious locations such as *En by i provinsen* (1977-1980), located in ‘Svanbjerg’ and *Matador* (1978-1981), located in ‘Korsbæk’. The previously mentioned Nordic Noir tourist tours in Copenhagen suggest that the settings are somehow linked to the success of the series and thus worth exploring. Waade and Jensen (2013) also argue that “setting, climate, light and language” are an important part of the series.

According to Michael Billig in *Banal Nationalism* (1995), national identity embraces the subtle national reminders we might forget about in our daily routines like the little flags on public buildings, national symbols on the currency, the political discourse, the distinction between domestic and foreign news, etc. Danish historian and scholar Inge Adriansen makes a distinction between official and unofficial national symbols (2003, 13). The official symbols are the flag and currency, the regent, the national constitution, the national anthem, etc. The unofficial symbols are what Adriansen calls the cultural key areas like the nation’s language, history, landscape and countryside, incarnations and heroes. It is illuminating to have these perspectives in mind while watching, for example, the first five minutes of the third season of *Forbrydelsen*.

After a two-minute teaser on the boat *Medea*, in which we witness the first of a series of crimes, the series starts out with a snapshot of Copenhagen. We are then met with shots of Copenhagen’s iconic police station while listening to a national radio broadcast in which the national bank and economy is mentioned, thus putting emphasis on the national currency. In the same broadcast, we are introduced to multinational industrial giant *Zeeland*, a metaphorical nod to real-life Danish industrial giant Maersk. Just a few minutes into the episode, the Danish national flag presents itself

on an anniversary cake. Even for a viewer who has only partial a knowledge about Denmark, there can be little doubt as to where the series takes place: location is highlighted. Though *Forbrydelsen* can be seen as a homage to film noir (Agger 2013, Agger 2015, Creeber 2015), it does not refrain from making use of traditional national and local symbols in the Copenhagen environment.

The national symbols can also be found in *Borgen*. The title sequence is cut in black and white, but with hints of red and white, connoting the colours of the Danish national flag. Viewers are bombarded with images of the Danish national parliament, Christiansborg, and an episode about Danish farming showcases the beautiful Danish countryside (even though the farmers are criticised). There is an obvious emphasis in showing people riding their bikes to work, which is an ordinary way of transportation in Denmark, though not for all politicians (cf. Gritten 2013; Murphy 2013). *Borgen* showcases a Danish reality in front of and behind cameras – a strongly mediated reality.

*Arvingerne* is set in the middle of Denmark, on the island of Funen. Funen is famous for its picturesque landscapes with beautiful rapeseed fields and old, half-timbered houses, and the production design pays due attention to this (cf. Wille & Waade 2016). On the one hand, *Arvingerne* is true to this glamourised version of what Funen might look like. On the other hand, the show is about an artist and a rebel who deconstructs or redefines the way things are supposed to look. This ambiguity is perfectly illustrated in the house over which the family is fighting. On the outside, it looks like an old farm. On the inside, it looks like a chaotic mix of old and new, representing the mind of the deceased artist, as well as the changes made by all its new inhabitants. Further, Funen is linked to Zealand and the capital by the Storebælt Bridge and tunnel, and this is emphasised every time Gro and her siblings pass from one region to another.

The high cost of *1864* is mirrored in the beautiful pictures of Funen (again), with the protagonists running through the beautiful fields of Denmark past. It should be noticed that *1864* as well as *Arvingerne* were subsidised by the regional film fund Film Fyn. On

the one hand, *1864* is a testimony to the luscious Danish scenery and countryside, a nostalgic tribute to what was and perhaps still is. On the other hand, *1864* is arguing for an anti-national ideology, suggesting that infatuated nationalist fools led Denmark into a bloody and unnecessary war that cost the country one third of its former territory.

There is nothing to suggest that these official and unofficial national symbols heighten the quality of the series in their own right. What I have wanted to point out is that they all in various ways contribute to construct an image of a nation. My four cases have allowed me to identify similarities across genres, but more work needs to be done on analysing constructions of Danish national symbols and culture in the specific series as well as the international appeal of Denmark in particular.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this article, I have presented a selection of accounts about what it means to be Danish, some of them produced by anthropologists during the last thirty years, others produced by journalists inspired by the constructions they have seen in recent Danish TV drama, along with reports about Danish happiness, *hygge* and welfare. I have combined these reports and used them as a starting point for analysing representations of national culture in the series, as well as a platform for exploring the lines that can be drawn between Danish TV drama and an interest in constructions of Danish national culture.

I can conclude that the series share certain properties across genres. Even though the four series are very different and span genres such as crime show, political drama, historical drama and family drama, they all tell stories about powerful women, the welfare state and constructions of Denmark as a nation. The women in question are very different, but they share a genuine resourcefulness as well as a spot at the core of the narratives in the series, making these Danish TV-series a showcase for female accomplishment. The series also share the fact that they are all tales about different aspects of the Danish welfare society – from the political aspects in *Forbrydels-*

en and *Borgen* through the land of plenty in *Arvingerne* to the ambiguous critiques in *1864*. On the whole, they do not idealise, and their discussion of the options reverberated on a national level as well as abroad. Lastly, the series offer sometimes similar, sometimes very different constructions of Denmark and what it means to live a life there – from the rough political struggles between many different political parties in *Forbrydelsen* and *Borgen* to the beautiful countryside of Funen in *Arvingerne* and *1864*, where in both cases compromises between generations must be made. All the series contain official and unofficial markers of Danish national culture. These national symbols are not special or unique in their own right. Neither is the emphasis on strong women, which we see in shows as different as *Orange is the New Black* (2013-2019) and *Homeland* (2011-2019), but put together with the other elements they create a noteworthy synergy – much like the myriad of interlaced threads that according to Ingold create a fabric.

Crossing genre borders and established lines between anthropology, journalism and TV drama can open up for finding meaningful lines across more traditional typologies and categories. This might help to capture and define Danish TV-series in its complexity in order to better understand for example, the branding category of Nordic Noir (see for example [www.nordicnoir.tv](http://www.nordicnoir.tv)) and the reasons why Danish TV drama has been able to travel.

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