Transnational Television, High-End Drama, and the Case of Denmark’s Forbrydelsen

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Introduction

Lauded as “Denmark’s biggest export since Carlsberg, Hans Christian Andersen and the Vikings” (Gilbert, 2012), Danish crime serial Forbrydelsen has been an outstanding example of the transnational success of non-American TV drama. With reference to the first season of this programme, this paper will examine the significance of Forbrydelsen in four areas. These are: first, the new opportunities for TV drama in the current ‘post-network’ era; second, Forbrydelsen’s emulation of the key characteristics of contemporary high production value (or high-end) TV drama; third, the ‘narrative transparency’ of Forbrydelsen’s murder investigation tropes; and fourth, Forbrydelsen’s exemplification of the successful integration of the creative strategies of ‘American quality drama’ (a commercial TV form) into the ‘public service’ objectives of Denmark Broadcasting Corporation’s Fiction Department (DR Fiction).

Forbrydelsen is richly revealing of the complex tensions between the transnational ambitions of high-end TV dramas and the continuing influence of American exports on non-American drama creation. In all but one instance, which involved its adaptation for American ‘basic cable’ network AMC as The Killing, Forbrydelsen was exported as a finished programme. Accordingly, despite the increased influence of format adaptation in other categories of TV production Forbrydelsen can also highlights the particular challenges of drama, a genre in which (indicatively when non-American dramas are adapted for American channels) failure has been more prevalent than success. Even though AMC’s The Killing performed well, enduring for three seasons, its modest success as an American adaptation was easily surpassed by the international circulation of the original Danish production.

Setting a new record for the international penetration and popularity of high-end foreign-language TV drama, Forbrydelsen has exported to an estimated 120 countries (Weaver, 2013). In Britain and Germany as larger markets, its ratings on specialist channels are indicative of its unusual appeal. For example Forbrydelsen I averaged 2.79 million on German channel ZDF, and 500,000 on BBC4, with its British ratings increasing to around one million in later seasons (Redvall, 2013b: 163). As a drama that has challenged the traditional resistance of English-speaking TV networks to subtitled imports, Forbrydelsen has not only...
stimulated international interest in Danish TV drama but has also helped to break down the traditional resistance of English-speaking audiences (Steemers, 2004: 23) to subtitled dramas (Frost, 2011). Nevertheless, success for TV drama always begins in its originating market, which in terms of subsequent international interest, operates as its ‘test’ audience. It was important, therefore, that *Forbrydelsen* cultivated a strong domestic response. Important to this was its creation as a high-end ‘Sunday night’ drama for DR1, Denmark’s oldest TV channel and one with the audience size to support high-end drama. The strength of *Forbrydelsen*’s initial Danish audience response is reflected in the high ratings for season one whose final episode drew an estimated 2.1 million (TNS Gallup), or one third of Danish viewers.

The international success of *Forbrydelsen*, followed by that of political serial *Borgen*, has placed DR Fiction and the organization of its drama production in the international spotlight. As Danish scholar, Eva Redvall underlined, this level of international circulation and success was unprecedented “for a small production industry used to targeting a population of 5.6 million Danes” (2013a: 153). Yet underlining the importance of the international context in which it succeeded, *Forbrydelsen* developed under the influence of Sveistrup’s ambition to create a “worldclass” and thus exportable drama product (cited in Redvall, 2013: 165).

*Forbrydelsen* as ‘Post-Network’ Television

The international success of *Forbrydelsen* can be explained first in terms of the new opportunities for high-end TV drama attributable to television’s still unfolding ‘post-network’ era, a label that recognises not the end of broadcast television, but the emergence of a competitive, multi-platform context for TV production, distribution and exhibition. In high-end drama, an important element of the post-network era (as exemplified by American television), has been characterised by the increased involvement of non-broadcast networks in high-end original drama. Their entry into original TV drama has stimulated a considered ‘golden age’ for the genre, as evident in the conceptual, and/or aesthetic innovation associated with such examples as *The Sopranos* (HBO), *Mad Men* (AMC) and *House of Cards* (Netflix). Four elements of the ‘post-network’ era have converged to provide the institutional stimulus for this perceived ‘golden age’ for TV drama, to which DR’s *Forbrydelsen* has been important as a Scandinavian and PSB example.

First, original high-end drama has become a necessary asset for networks amidst more intense competition between broadcast and non-broadcast channels, an environment in which successful, critically acclaimed drama has allowed hitherto unknown networks, like the American FX and AMC, to attain an international profile. In American television today, the commissioning of high-end drama by a number of additional non-broadcast providers (including A&E, Starz, Discovery, History, and Amazon) has instigated what Jon Lafayette (2014) called an “arms race” between networks to commission TV drama. Encouraged by this more intense network demand for original ‘flagship’ drama, the American adaptation of foreign drama formats (including *Life on Mars, Skins, Forbrydelsen, Hatufim, House of Cards, The Bridge*) has itself increased, with the adapted programmes more often succeeding with American audiences.
Second, the post-network era’s proliferation of platforms and TV services, has increased the diversity of hour-long drama, bringing new opportunities for innovation in concept design and narrative form, a change that has helped cultivate export markets for non-American drama. Fuelling these changes, is that drama is being created for smaller, more specialised audiences, and the ratings thresholds for it to be declared successful have fallen (Pearson, 2005: 14) in the context of audience fragmentation. Although non-American and PSB drama has always been open to formal and conceptual experimentation (undergirded by the ‘risk capital’ that public funding allows it), the new diversity of American hour-long drama coupled with the emergence of specialist TV drama channels, has left international markets receptive to a greater range of TV drama imports. Leading PSB drama paradigms are well positioned to benefit from this as export products, particularly where (as with both BBC Drama and DR Fiction) their domestic creative models have combined the conventions of ‘American Quality Drama’ with PSB drama objectives. The impacts of these changes are exemplified by the BBC’s offerings in drama, these involving original as well as acquired dramas. By virtue of its regular scheduling on PBS and BBC America, BBC drama is benefitting from precedent exposure to and success with American audiences, *Downton Abbey* and *Doctor Who* being indicative examples (Ensor, 2014). The BBC’s strong domestic market position, has also made its channels an effective platform through which to stimulate a British appetite for non-American drama. Although its offerings are broader, BBC4 has developed a specialist niche for this drama. As Elke Weissmann observes (2012: 189), BBC4 caters for “a small, culturally elite audience” a strategy with an American precedent in the subscription-funded HBO. As the host channel for *Forbrydelsen* among other European dramas, BBC4, as Weissmann argues, has helped to “redirect the nation’s interest in television drama to non-American nations” (ibid.).

Third, has been the explosion of new outlets for TV programming which combine broadcast and cable with additional internet services. Assisted by increased data carriage and faster download speeds, new 21st Century options for drama’s distribution and consumption include the video-on-demand (VoD) services provided by TV networks and the subscription video-on demand (SVoD) services provided by internet streaming service providers (leading American examples of which are Netflix, Amazon and Hulu). The additional revenue opportunities enabled by the potentially extensive ‘afterlife’ of successful TV dramas has driven up the production values of hour-long formats in particular. As Denise Mann (2012: 100) contends “[i]ncreasingly, the networks believe that the high production values in most TV drama today are what are drawing viewers to television.” For non-American public broadcasters, whose dramas compete, both domestically and internationally, with the product of production companies owned by some of the world’s most powerful media conglomerates, this has raised what were already high production costs for drama, made the prospect of ratings failure even more daunting than before, and is requiring the cultural objectives for which PSB dramas have always been produced to be reconciled with ‘exportability’, so aa to amortise their production costs.

Fourth, the ‘post-network’ era has brought profound changes to the reception culture into which new dramas are released, the internet assisting the global reach of this culture. Amanda Lotz used the term ‘phenomenal television’ (2007: 37) to delineate the type of programming that manages to attain the social importance that TV programmes in earlier eras did, a time when TV shows could become ‘phenomenal’ just by being broadcast. In the
‘post-network’ era, Lotz suggests, ‘phenomenal’ television will have demonstrated its cultural significance in ways additional to its broadcast, since airing on TV is no longer enough for them to generate sufficient audience attention (ibid.) to qualify them as ‘phenomenal’. Crucially then, post-network era dramas are augmented by a diversity of what Jonathan Gray (2010) termed ‘paratexts’, as exemplified by ‘narrativized extensions’ to the text (Caldwell, 2004), internet-published trailers and clips, and interviews with creative personnel. The international attention attained by ‘phenomenal’ TV dramas has also been boosted by on-line fan communities (Nelson, 2011: 43). With the capacity to generate discourses that function independently of network-sanctioned paratexts, on-line communities can augment a programme’s reception and cultural profile in new ways. One manifestation of this in *Forbrydelsen* is the ‘cult’ status achieved by the Faroese jumpers worn by lead character, Sarah Lund. These generated their own fan website and their appeal formed the basis of a Christmas ‘Save the Children Fund’ appeal in which Lund berates her colleagues for not wearing festive knitwear as instructed (*Media Monkey*, 2012). Moreover, one *Daily Mail* article (De Lacey, 2012) was titled “They’ll Make a Killing” in acknowledgement of the huge demand generated for Gudrun and Gudrun, the Faroe Island company that produced these jumpers.

*Forbrydelsen* and the Characteristics of High-End Post-Network Drama

*Forbrydelsen* is a leading example of Danish high-end drama, a category that is represented by such programmes as *The Legacy, Borgen, Better Times, The Eagle*, and *Nikolaj and Julie*. But what qualities does *Forbrydelsen* have that have allowed it to export more successfully than these examples? Re-defining ‘high-end’ hour-long drama for the context of ‘post-network’ TV (Dunleavy, 2009: 211-22) I ascribed it five characteristics:

- **Must-See Allure** – An ability, increasingly augmented by the use of serial narrative, to engender ‘addictive’ rather than merely ‘appointment’ viewing;

- **A Higher Profile for Authorship** – Encouraged at an institutional level by its contribution to the branding of cultural distinction, the identification of a single author (despite the context of collaboration that TV drama requires) recognises the increased creative autonomy given to writer-producers, who having created the conceptual ‘vision’ then lead its realisation as ‘showrunner’.

- **Generic Mixing in Concept Design** – This recognises the tendency to achieve conceptual innovation through the blending of tropes or aesthetics from different genres. As I will go on to explain, *Forbrydelsen*, like *Twin Peaks* before it, combines ‘family melodrama’ with ‘murder investigation’ elements.

- **Narrative Complexity** – The structural matrix for narrative complexity comprises the elements of serialised stories and a dense layering of interweaving storylines. Enabled by this more complex structural matrix, additional indicators of ‘narrative complexity’ include the interrogation of morally ambiguous lead characters, the creation of distinctive ‘mythologies’ as the diegetic underpinning for drama, the use of non-linear storytelling, and the juxtaposition of conflicting narrative perspectives.
• **Enhanced Visual Quality** – A multi-platform and extended ‘afterlife’ for high-end drama combining with the use of such digital video formats as Red One (which can match the sensory capacity of 35mm film), have allowed high-end TV drama to achieve what Nelson (2007: 111) describes as a “much closer approximation” to the visual/aural qualities of cinema. This is not to equate it with cinema, in that TV dramas are still produced on a considerably tighter schedule than theatrical features.

As a drama devised for a Danish audience but also shaped by Sveistrup’s ambition to create a “world-class” production (Redvall, 2013b: 165), *Forbrydelsen* exemplifies all five characteristics of contemporary high-end drama. Hence, as well as being keyed for appeal to Danish viewers, it was well-positioned to compete in its foreign markets with American and other drama product, this augmented by the new opportunities for global distribution and reception enabled by the post-network era.

**The Influence of ‘American Quality Drama’ on DR Fiction**

Having attended a 2012 ‘European Drama Series Lab’, Danish scholar Eva Redvall (2013a: 153) registered that a “recurring” topic of interest in the discussions at this event was that of “how DR has successfully implemented work practices from the American industry and managed to integrate them into a public service mind-set and local production culture”. The influence of American creative practices on DR Fiction, through changes that seemed to take effect from 2003, centres on the meta-genre of ‘American Quality Drama’ (AQD) whose examples have included *Twin Peaks, NYPD Blue, House*, among many others. Although AQD brought innovation in concept design, characterisation, narrative form, and visual style, it was the product of a new degree of creative control for writers, which had hitherto been held by executive producers and network ‘suits’. The extension of control to writers, out of which emerged ‘star’ writer-producers and later ‘showrunners’, was institutionally fuelled by the shared desire of the ‘big three’ American networks to lure what advertisers called a ‘quality audience’, for which they were prepared to pay up to 15 times more per thousand (Feuer, 1984: 26). It because star’ writer-producers (from Steven Bochco to J.J. Abrams) were considered to have particular individual powers to attract these ‘quality’ audiences, that they were given unprecedented creative control.

Although *Twin Peaks* is an important predecessor for *Forbrydelsen, NYPD Blue* (1993-2005) as the American production that DR’s Sven Clausen, visited, was influential in terms of the industrial model adopted by DR Fiction. *NYPD Blue* was an unusually successful series (21 Emmy awards) and remains one of the largest AQD series at twelve seasons and 261 episodes. *NYPD Blue* not only became the model for “organising and shooting new series” (Redvall, 2013a: 158) but also informed the inception of DR Fiction’s concept of ‘one vision’ (ibid.: 159). If any one American writer-producer was the inspiration for these changes, it was likely to be Steven Bochco, writer-producer of *Hill Street Blues*, the series that pioneered AQR, and of *NYPD Blue*. Brett Martin (2013: 30) argues that it was Bochco who institutionalised the role of “autocratic writer-showrunner”, explaining that the necessity for this role arose from the large size and unrelenting pace of creative work on AQD programmes, epitomised by *NYPD Blue*. The “autocratic writer-showrunner” was also necessitated by the increasing influence of serialisation, a characteristic of AQD that institutionalised ‘team-writing’ and ‘the writer’s room’, processes that needed to remain
under the coordinating and controlling eye of one writer-producer. Since *NYPD Blue*, this writer-producer role has come to be called ‘showrunner’ and to infer creative control by the concept creator (a writer-producer rather than a director-producer), whose ‘vision’ and ongoing leadership (from the first to last episode), makes him/her the personification of a drama’s connection with its audience, thus the key to its appeal, quality, and continuing success.

**‘Public Service’ Objectives in Drama**

Although PSB objectives apply across publicly-funded TV programming, several of these have converged to give ‘public service’ drama particular licence to take risks in ways that advertiser-funded broadcast drama has struggled to do. Important to the cultural role and creative achievements of ‘public service’ drama have been:

- competition in terms of programme quality as opposed to a potential to generate ratings points and thus advertising revenue;
- provision for the expression of national interests or concerns, and efforts to reinforce a sense of national identity; and
- the ability to create an industry climate in which innovation and artistic freedom can flourish.

DR, however, is a PSB network whose drama is philosophically driven by some additional ‘public service’ principles that are specific to the creative culture of its TV drama. Explaining these, Eva Redvall emphasized the overarching concept of “one-vision”, around which a set of fifteen ‘dogmas’ for drama production were formulated in 2003 (2013a: 154). Rather than imposing an entirely new model upon DR Fiction, Redvall (ibid.) observes that these “were originally an in-house mission statement designed to put tacit knowledge within the DR fiction department into words”. As Redvall acknowledges (2013b: 68), two important contributors to the domestic and now international repute of DR Fiction, have been the practice of ‘one vision’ and the requirement for programmes to incorporate ‘public service’ elements and values, as one that DR calls ‘double storytelling’.

At DR Fiction, ‘one vision’ provides a Danish example of an international tension in industry, audience, and scholarly understandings of TV drama creation. Whereas on the one hand, drama creation is frequently perceived in terms of ‘authorship’, this encouraged by network promotions in which the formation of what Nelson (2011) terms “authorship discourses” have been used to generate an aura of cultural distinction for it (Newman and Levine, 2012: 45-8). On the other hand, drama creation is understood as a “negotiated and collaborative” process (Caldwell, 2008: 199). This second position accepts the industrial necessity for collaboration, mitigated by TV drama’s high, unrelenting production demands, wherein the key processes of writing, shooting, editing and post-production are performed by teams of creative personnel, even if their common goal is to serve the individual ‘vision’ of a drama’s creator/showrunner.

At DR Fiction, ‘one vision’ provides a way to reconcile this tension between individual and shared creative input, in the interests of maximising experience and quality. ‘One vision’ recognises and extends creative leadership to the person whose personal ‘vision’ the series
is considered to be and places them, as Redvall (2013b: 67) puts it “‘in charge of’ rather than ‘in control of’ the processes by having the overall responsibility...” At DR Fiction, this individual control is nuanced by a tradition of dual leadership whereby writer-producer and director-producer pairs provide joint leadership, each acceding authority to the other, their creative relationship developing through their close collaboration on successive productions. This partnership for Forbrydelsen paired Sveistrup with producer Piv Bernth. Forbrydelsen is regarded as one of DR’s foremost examples of ‘one vision’, assisted by the experience and perceived “originality” of Sveistrup as a writer-producer (Bernth cited in Redvall, 2013b: 169). Important to this sense that Forbrydelsen took “one vision to a new level” at DR (ibid.: 170), is that Sveistrup’s input extended to all areas of production, in ways that closely resembled the overarching responsibility of an American-styled ‘showrunner’, as outlined earlier.

What Kind of Crime Drama is Forbrydelsen?

Forbrydelsen can be variously described as a ‘crime drama’, a ‘crime thriller’, and a ‘procedural’ serial. Following ABC’s Twin Peaks and Murder One, and with close counterparts in BBC’s The Fall and ITV’s Broadchurch, Forbrydelsen eschewed the tendency in the ‘murder investigation’ area of procedural drama to deploy the psychologically reassuring ‘episodic series’ structure, instead preferring a multi-plot serial form. Hence, even though commonly described as a ‘series’, Forbrydelsen is ‘complex serial’ (Dunleavy, 2009: 154). Increasingly prevalent in the post-network era, complex serials are known to generate addictive patterns of viewing, also being well-suited to the new consumption options for TV programming (including DD playback, DVD, EST, subscription streaming services, and ‘binge viewing’) that this era has brought.

Investigating Sveistrup’s approach to the conception of Forbrydelsen, Redvall (2013b) registers the three-plot structure that characterises each season in which the crime story is flanked by ‘political’ and ‘family’ stories. The idea, influenced by both the mix of creative and PSB objectives which Sveistrup was aiming to balance, was to use crime “as the inciting incident for interweaving a number of characters whose lives were otherwise not linked” (Redvall, 2013b: 172). So even though it is a crime drama, Sveistrup uses the crime trope as “an excuse for telling a lot of other stories”, (ibid.) bearing in mind that the DR ‘dogmas’ for drama require it to incorporate ‘public service’ elements and values. Yet in combining crime with other non-crime plots (political and family) Forbrydelsen achieves a ‘generic mix’ that is also characteristic of leading post-network American drama serials, like The Sopranos and Breaking Bad. This evidently alluring ‘generic mix’, underscored by its similarity to the one used in the American shows, helped to broaden Forbrydelsen’s international appeal.

As with serial dramas Twin Peaks, The Sopranos, and Breaking Bad, Forbrydelsen intertwines the tropes and aesthetics of ‘procedural crime drama’ and ‘family melodrama’. Independently of each other, family melodrama and crime drama have functioned as the most prolific in TV drama historically (Newcomb, 2007). Although traditionally separate genres, their blending in Twin Peaks and much later in The Sopranos and Breaking Bad yields something akin to a ‘double audience’ appeal for programmes whose genres were historically considered to be ‘gendered narratives’ (Fiske, 1987). Identifying this blending as important to the appeal of The Sopranos (the mobster who not only got put ‘on the couch’
but also had to work his mafia role around his family and domestic commitments), Horace Newcomb identified three traits that this mix of ‘procedural crime’ and ‘family melodrama’ brings to crime drama, all of which we can see in *Forbrydelsen*.

One is the ability of such hybrid concepts to develop more complex characters, whose public and private lives conflict. The result, as Newcomb (2007: 563) argues is that “we have explorations of intense personal, individual psychological states and motivations of characters”. Central to *Forbrydelsen* is that this involves and offsets DCI Sarah Lund with other core characters, notably DI Meyer, the Larsen parents, mayoral candidate Troels Hartmann, and Vagn Skaerbaek (family friend, employee, and killer). Another, is the way in which crime, as Newcomb puts it (ibid.: 564), is located in “social contexts that can best be described as beleaguered... in which ‘crime’ is but one of a number of indicators of social decay or, at best, decline”. In *Forbrydelsen*, the beleaguered context that Soren Sveistrup felt was central was the impact on Denmark of the recent financial crisis that was raging as he scripted the serial, a stressed social context in which, as he perceived it, people reacted by looking after number one. “When it opens”, as Sveistrup put it, “Sarah Lund is actually doing pretty well... not caring about the crisis” and instead “trying to make a life for herself” (Billen, 2013). But we see how this creates a conflict between her public and private lives. Even though she begins as a woman who plans to move to Sweden with her fiancé and son, she is emotionally and professionally committed to this case, cannot abandon it to her colleague Jan Meyer, and this brings personal sacrifice, which we see when Bengt, her fiancé, finally leaves without her. We also register the economic struggle of the Larsen family which reminds us of the broader societal context. Theis runs a successful business which employs a number of workers but the Larsens still have trouble funding money to fix the washing machine and struggle harder once the costs of the funeral are added. Third is that crime occurs in a notably “familial” setting, distinguished by the “extension of a sense of biological family to other groups” (Newcomb, 2007: 564). In *Forbrydelsen* we see the ‘familial’ represented across the different narrative strands, specifically by the Larsens, by Lund and the reconstituted family that she is neglecting, by the tight political circle around Troels Hartmann, and as an aspiration for ‘Uncle’ Vagn, who clearly wants to belong to the Larson family, yet whose racist outrage at Nanna’s secret love affair with an Asian boy, is so intense that Vahn rapes and kills her.

*Forbrydelsen* and the International Potentials of ‘Narrative Transparency’

Explaining the international appeal of American films and TV programmes, Scott Robert Olson coined the concept of ‘narrative transparency’, arguing that this element has given American programmes “a competitive advantage in the creation and distribution of popular taste” (2004: 114). However, *Forbrydelsen* underlines that ‘narrative transparency’ is by no means exclusive to American TV drama. Olson (ibid.) defines ‘narrative transparency’ as “any textual apparatus that allows audiences to project indigenous values, beliefs, rites, and rituals into imported media”, as is evident in tropes, values, and myths with the potential to resonate universally. The key to this, as Olson suggests (ibid.) is that these tropes, values and myths can, in foreign markets, “resonate with the same meanings they might have if they were indigenous”. Two elements of ‘narrative transparency’ in *Forbrydelsen* have been important to its transnational appeal: the ‘murder investigation’ trope; and the
representation of ‘society in microcosm’ as the broader context in which the impacts of violent crime are seen to reverberate.

- **The Murder Investigation Trope**

*Forbrydelsen* is a crime thriller whose central narrative is the investigation into the kidnap, rape and murder of a 19 year-old high school student, Nanna Birk Larsen. Two elements of this murder investigation trope are important to the maximization of the narrative transparency of *Forbrydelsen*. One is the established function, within the contemporary urban imaginary, of crime narratives in general and murder investigation tropes in particular (Dunleavy, 2009: 56-60). Although not true for TV dramas in the early decades of television, the murder investigation trope has become a predominant narrative preoccupation in contemporary crime drama. Crime stories have remained prevalent in long-form TV drama because of their psychological function in massaging urban insecurities and anxieties, which are ultimately dispelled through a reassuring ending which is keyed to suggest that crime, including murder, cannot evade detection and punishment, so effective are the agents of law and order. As such, Richard Sparks (1993: 87) argues, crime stories “fold together the satisfaction of some rather deeply embedded desires and the invocation of our most unsettling anxieties”. It is through the repetition of crime stories in TV drama, Sparks suggests, that an innate audience desire for security and safety is psychologically reconciled with the understanding that violent crime is an inevitable societal presence. It is indicative of the commercial function of TV crime stories that these at their most resolvable when produced for ad-funded schedules, where the psychological reassurance that their formulas provide works to rehearse fears, lull viewers into a false sense of security, and foster consumerism. Underscoring the importance of resolution and reassurance to crime drama, is that its predominant narrative structure is episodic rather than serialized. This is a structure in which episodes are devoted to developing and resolving the ‘crime-of-the-week’, and their formula entails the efficient movement through a the same basic sequence of “transgression, pursuit, capture [and] retribution” (ibid.: 87).

Using a layered, serial structure, *Forbrydelsen* offers a narratively complex alternative to the episodic ‘crime-of-the-week’ formula. As a serial crime drama, its murder investigation is ongoing and complex, with many false leads. *Forbrydelsen* confronts audiences by probing the potentials for rape and murder to be committed in various sectors of society – by teenagers, schoolteachers, politicians, officials, and trusted family friends, and by community insiders, as opposed to the archetypal ‘outsider’. Hence the potential for it to provide psychological reassurance in the ways that episodic crime dramas do, is undermined by the tendency for the central crime to be extremely difficult to fully resolve.

The international appeal of *Forbrydelsen* tells us that, even if vastly outnumbered by more conventional crime drama series, murder investigation serials couple their narrative alternative to episodic and formulaic crime dramas with universal appeals. The anxieties about social order and effective policing that are effectively unleashed by murder investigation stories, position them as an example of universal ‘myth’ which, as Olsen (2004: 123) argues, operates as “a system of signification that has authority, credibility, and a claim to truth”. This particular myth mobilizes our deepest anxieties and fears with many real-life examples, for example the disappearance and suspected murder of Madeleine McCann. In
the McCann case, as one whose international media exposure has centered on the grief of the McCann parents, resounds in *Forbrydelsen I* through its focus on the impacts of this tragic turn on Nanna’s parents, Theis and Pernille. *Forbrydelsen*’s close tracking of the shock, grief, and outrage suffered by this couple is crucial to the emotional veracity of the first season, as evident in two indicative scenes.

The climactic scene of the pilot episode sees Theis on the phone to Pernille whilst he drives around the neighbourhood in search of Nanna. Still speaking to Pernille, he is blocked by a police cordon in which a car is being pulled from the river. The action crosscuts between Theis (‘Is that my daughter?’), Pernille listening to him in disbelief and rising panic, and Lund, whose urgent attention is divided between the car (whose boot contains Nanna’s body) and whether or not to answer Theis’s reasonable question. In another example we see Pernille, still awaiting information about how Nanna died, catching a glimpse through an open door at the police station, of the photograph wall that depicts Nanna’s injuries in horrific detail. Again crosscutting between Pernille’s face and close-ups of her daughter’s battered corpse, the scene captures Pernille’s gradual realization that her daughter’s death involved brutality and most likely rape. Something viewers know at this point but Nanna’s parents do not, however, is that Nanna was raped a number of times before being chased and recaptured, and was alive when the car entered the river. The potential for ready audience identification with what Pernille and Theis are feeling, discovering, and not being told in these scenes, evidences the universality of this particular crime drama trope and its aesthetic treatment. These scenes capture the worst nightmare of every parent.

- **The Representation of Society in Microcosm**

With each of its seasons devoted to the investigation of a different murder investigation, *Forbrydelsen* “uses a crime as the inciting incident for interweaving a number of characters whose lives were otherwise not linked” (Redvall, 2013b: 172). Whilst it could be suggested that this approach was the innovation of *Twin Peaks*, *Forbrydelsen* forged an alternative and more complex approach to the challenges of this particular usage of crime. Whereas some storylines and character groups in *Twin Peaks* had no direct involvement or stake in the investigation of Laura Palmer’s murder, *Forbrydelsen*’s Copenhagen-domiciled characters and plots are all equally impacted by Nanna’s murder.

Although a multiplicity of characters and motivations fuel the serial narrative of its first season, as with later seasons, there are three main narrative strands which in order of the screen time they receive are: the police investigation by Lund and her colleagues, the impacts of the killing on Nanna’s family, and the additional ramifications of the murder on the public role and political aspirations of Troels Hartmann. The narrative is rendered all the more intriguing by the ways in which the ongoing murder investigation impacts directly on each of these narrative strands and character groups, investing them with new twists, new jeopardy and additional complexity. The complex interconnection between these strands is well-illustrated when it is revealed that Raman al Kemal, Nanna’s teacher, was possibly the last person to see her alive. The investigation of Raman impacts all three strands, allowing them to inform each other.
As a high-school teacher Raman falls under the official jurisdiction of Troels Hartmann as Schools Minister, their connection rendered all the more explosive by Hartmann’s singling out of Raman as one of the exemplars in his ‘Role Model’ initiative. Hence any hint that Raman is guilty undermines Hartmann’s electoral chances, to the point where his party stages a leadership coup against him and its cross-party alliance breaks down. Released by the police, Raman tries to return to the classroom but his students, Nanna’s friends, walk out of the lesson. Even as Theis struggles with himself to await the final results of the police investigation of Raman, his own rage (fuelled by Pernille and Vagn’s reaction to it) culminates a particularly savage beating of Raman by Theis. Having brought together the different narrative strands, Raman’s framing as the murderer (Eps. 7-9) provides a narrative vehicle through which to explore the problem of racism in this fictional society. All it takes to frame Raman as ‘guilty’ in the eyes of the police, public, and media, is the allegation of an elderly white neighbor that he saw Raman and another “like him” loading Nanna’s body into a car boot. Raman’s Arabic ethnicity is shown to be directly responsible for placing him under police suspicion, as a result of which he could have been killed, had Theis not been interrupted by police.

Although the intricacy and interconnection between these strands is also increasingly characteristic of narratively complex serial drama (we see this complexity in BBC’s The Fall) in Forbrydelsen it responds in part to the imperative for DR dramas to use ‘double storytelling’, so that their narratives can incorporate elements pursuant to their ‘public service’ role (Redvall, 2013a:154). Although we can identify such elements in all three narrative strands, the example of Raman illustrates how these ‘public service’ underpinnings inform all of them. Hence, even if the phrase “public service layer” is actively used in DR drama’s official ‘dogmas’ (Redvall, ibid.), the Raman al Kemal sub-plot demonstrates how Forbrydelsen’s ‘ethically and socially’ conscious PSB elements are integrated into and across the different narrative strands.

Conclusions

This paper has argued that Danish (DR) serial Forbrydelsen is an outstanding example of the transnational potentials of non-American and subtitled TV drama. Seeking to explain this drama’s success, this paper has highlighted key elements of the new opportunities for high end TV drama that have been mobilised by television’s post-network era, as one in which this area of drama has gained new opportunities for innovation, diversity, and international exposure. Yet these opportunities do not by themselves explain the unusual strength of Forbrydelsen’s transnational appeal, thus it has been important to examine the ways in which this drama serial is particularly well attuned to the distinctive characteristics of high-end TV drama in the post-network era.

The paper has probed Forbrydelsen’s exemplification of these characteristics through the investigation of three textual elements. First is Forbrydelsen’s close adherence to the five overarching characteristics that I identified for contemporary high-end drama: must-see allure, a higher profile for authorship, generic mixing, narrative complexity, and an enhanced visual quality (Dunleavy, 2009: 211-22). Second is the potential for an enlarged audience appeal that arises from the mixing of ‘procedural crime’ with ‘family melodrama’ tropes and aesthetics, whose three tendencies were identified by Newcomb (2007: 563-64) in relation to The Sopranos. Third, is the narrative transparency of the murder investigation
story that Forbrydelsen tells. As demonstrated by the export of this Danish drama to 120 countries, narrative transparency assisted it, to paraphrase Olson (2004: 114) to “resonate [in foreign markets] with the same meanings” [it] might have if [it] were indigenous”. This paper’s examination of narrative transparency also reveals that, even if it has been a notable feature of American TV product, as Olson argues it has, it is also achievable for non-American and subtitled TV programmes.

While its exemplification of the textual attributes has worked to strengthen and broaden Forbrydelsen’s transnational appeal, these same attributes offer a demonstration of Redvall’s acknowledgement (2013a: 153) of DR Fiction’s successful “integration” of leading American creative strategies for drama into its own PSB-infused production culture. An important instance of this, is DR Fiction’s adaptation of the American-styled “autocratic writer-showrunner” (Martin, 2013: 30) to produce the ‘one vision’ strategy that is central to its 15 production dogmas. Although DR Fiction is not alone in this achievement, with BBC drama presenting another pervasive example of this kind of integration (see Cornea, 2009), Forbrydelsen’s position as a Danish-language drama has been important in opening historically resistant English-speaking markets to subtitled drama. As such, Forbrydelsen has assisted the potential for a wider range of PSB drama product to contribute to the new diversity of TV drama available to audiences, this including opportunities for this drama to be format adapted as well as being purchased in original form.

Sources


Redvall, E.N. (2013b) Writing and Producing Television Drama in Denmark: From The Kingdom to The Killing, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.


