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Regioscaping the Øresund through film and television

How is the transnational border-space of the Øresund region mediated and imagined through audiovisual means? What role do film and television texts play in shaping how inhabitants (and distant viewers) perceive the Øresund region? These are the questions that guided my investigation into the two audiovisual texts that locate and are located in the transnational Danish-Swedish region. This short essay offers the argument that film and television are not only shaped by material conditions of policy and production contexts in the region, but also play a particular role in producing affective and evocative imaginations of the region that, in turn, shape peoples' sense of regional space. Through the examples of the TV series *Bron/Broen* (*The Bridge*, 2011–2018) and a short film *Out* (2006), I will outline the concept of a regioscape, a conceptual lens that I introduced in my book *Transnational Screen Culture in Scandinavia: Mediating Regional Space and Identity in the Øresund Region* (Chow 2021), and suggest ways in which the two texts perform acts of regioscaping in their imaginations of transnational border-spaces in the Øresund region.

For almost the entire span of the 2010s, the moody urban landscapes in *Bron/Broen* captured the attention of Nordic Noir fans across Scandinavia, Europe, and even farther afield, casting a noir-tinged spotlight on the Øresundsbron (Øresund bridge) and the cities of Malmö and Copenhagen. What many international audiences don't immediately notice or associate with the region is the body of water that runs between Denmark and Sweden – the Øresund strait, or 'the Sound', from which the region gets its name. The marine landscape is a dynamic space that registers the region's history, politics, transnational tensions, and identities, and these complexities find some expression in the little-known

short film *Out*, which explores the question of who ‘belongs’ in this transnational space. The two audiovisual texts are, in my view, examples of how the Øresund region is mediated and imagined through popular media, both critically reflecting and refracting what the region means to ordinary inhabitants beyond the official narratives of economic and political co-operation between two Scandinavian nations.

Regions are ‘always in the process of being made, never finalised’ and are ‘constituted out of relations that stretch across the boundaries given by the administrative map-makers’ (Cochrane 2012:95). Far from the notion of a region as a fixed space, this is one of the more nuanced understandings of regions as complex, multi-layered entities that take on new forms in varying social and political contexts. As Anssi Paasi notes, ‘regions are complicated ideological and material media of power for individuals and social groups that researchers can conceptualize from different angles’ (Paasi 2002:805); he further emphasises that regions should be seen as ‘complicated constellations of agency, social relations and power’ (Paasi 2009:124). It is from this complexity of discourse around how a region is communicated that I wish to offer my own conceptual means of making sense of regions: *regioscape*.

To understand the Øresund region through the lens of regioscaping is no less complicated, as, to this day, it continues to be shaped by a mix of political, economic, and social relations that shift over time. In thinking about how *Bron/Broen* and *Out* bear and reflect traces of a transnational region in the making, I consider these films not only as artistic texts, but also as elements within a larger ecosystem of practices and relations on political, economic, and cultural levels, asserting agency in shaping attitudes about a place and geopolitical project. The Øresund project and its audiovisual articulations are thus constituents of what I call a *regioscape*, a conceptual lens in part inspired by the location studies model (Hansen and Waade 2017) and in part informed by theories of space, place, and the (trans)national as articulated in cultural geography and film and media studies. I use the concept as a way to make sense of the conditions and interrelations that underlie how individual and collective regional imaginaries intersect with audiovisual mediations, screen-cultural policy, urban policy, and geopolitics.

SCULPTING A REGIOSCAPE

My conception of a regioscape comes from an interest in the intricate processes and practices by which regions are shaped, produced, sensed, and imagined by diverse entities from the regional screen-cultural milieu, an ecosystem that includes film and television practitioners, production companies, agencies like national and regional film funds, film policy, the audiovisual productions, their corresponding (para-)texts, film locations, and so on. In other words, the regioscape emerges through the material and symbolic relations and interactions between actants that operate within and across a regional context. Take a regional film fund like the short-lived Copenhagen Film Fund (2013–2017), for example, which played an active role in fostering the growth and sustainability of the regional film

THE ØRESUND REGIOSCAPE



Figure 1: The Øresund regioscape.

industry, and through the selection process of choosing projects to fund or film talent to develop. Or the national Danish Film Institute, which supports and co-produces short and feature-length films and documentaries and has the larger remit of investing in film and television productions that boost the development of the Danish screen industry and its transnational connections with its immediate Scandinavian neighbours via the Nordic Film and TV Fund. A condition for funding from such bodies inevitably involves a territorial stipulation that the production should take place in the region and employ local workers. As an important funding entity, a national or regional film fund is thus deeply imbricated with the rest of the production ecosystem — which includes people (the various types of practitioners), material objects and spaces (e.g. equipment, studios, buildings for businesses, film locations, cinemas), policy discourse, the film texts, and the formal and informal relationships that link these entities. Each of them is of course involved with the other in the act of *regioscaping* – manifesting and shaping a sense of the regional imaginary. Such agencies are thus ultimately involved in sculpting and shaping the character of the regioscape.

By now, what should be clear is that regioscaping is something that connects the audiovisual texts and practice with the wider material context of the region. My intention is to reflect on how a sense of the Øresund region is mediated — indeed, sculpted — through a plethora of actors that occur at not only at the textual, cinematic level, but also at the extra-textual dimensions of production practices and political discourses. Specifically, I conceptualise the Øresund region in terms of a regioscape that comprises the interrelations between **material/territorial** elements of territory (e.g. geographical features, urban landmarks, landscape), the **imagined** layers (e.g. the imagined community, policy space, geopolitical space of official designations and narratives of region-building), and **negotiated** spaces (e.g. artistic interpretations like films, everyday practice) (Figure 1). Through contestation and concord, these different dimensions of a regioscape *produce* the region.

In this web of relations, audiovisual texts play a particular role as they register the traces of as well as critically participate in the processes of regioscaping. Far from being a static and particular projection of a region, *Bron/Broen* and *Out* participate in the negotiation of a regioscape as a constructed and performative space within which notions of identity, power, and territory are signalled.

BRON/BROEN

It is *Bron/Broen* that has done the most legwork in mediating the Øresund region to an international audience, even though the region, as constructed in the fictional universe of the series, is one that is tinted by a noir lens. Across four seasons of remarkable storytelling, viewers watched intently as the binational police team criss-crossed the region in search of victims, suspects, and criminal masterminds. The media project of the bridge is the political project of the Øresund, an audiovisual tapestry of the transnational region, stitched together by the trajectories of the 'regionauts', to borrow Tom O'Dell's (2003) wonderful term, in the drama. A co-production between Swedish and Danish production houses, the series boasted a bi-national cast and crew, with everything split 50-50. Two languages, two national audiences, two cultures, two nations welded together by a televisual bridge. While the production and marketing of the series emphasised the border between two nations, the fictional narrative sought to do away with this sense of separation.

Saga Noren, the Swedish detective, and Martin Rohde, her Danish counterpart, are Øresund regionauts, traversing the region with the kind of ease and fluidity made possible by the Øresund political project and its attendant infrastructure, the bridge. They are not the only regionauts in this story, of course, as the criminals cross the border just as easily as the good guys. The fictional border is one that is porous, permeable, invisible and hardly felt nor sensed throughout the drama. While images of the Danish-Swedish border and ideas of cultural borders between the two countries are present (to comedic effect) in the first episode, it swiftly disappears from the fictional universe from the next episode onwards. The televisual medium allows for this dissolution and erasure of a border. A single crime narrative is stretched out across 10 episodes, allowing for the simultaneous expansion and compression of regional space and time. In one scene, the detectives are dissecting clues in the police headquarters at Malmö, and immediately in the next shot they are in downtown Copenhagen hunting down suspects, and in the next shot we are transported to yet another unnamed or unmarked post-industrial space somewhere in the Øresund. The entire urban landscape of the Øresund region becomes one unified space, albeit one that is unified by crime.

In yet another layer of mediation that branches out from the TV series, we see the Øresund as a media tourist's wonderland. This tourist, another kind of regionaut, seeks to immerse herself in the fictional-yet-real region by exploring the various film locations on an embedded Google Map on DR's dedicated website on the series (this unfortunately no

longer exists), zooming into Martin's designer family home in the suburbs of Copenhagen and click over to Saga's apartment in the Western Harbour (Västra Hamnen) district in Malmö. Or, she signs up for a guided tour that takes her to the actual locations where filming took place. For this viewer-tourist, both the digital and physical real-world mediations allow her to traverse the region as a leisure activity, deriving a certain pleasure from being, even at least temporarily, an Øresund citizen.

OUT

But what of those who do not have the ease, freedom, and pleasure of roaming across the border region? I turn to a short film made by Daniel Dencik in 2006 called *Out*, a film about the risks taken by transnational figures who do not fit into the predominant notion of the 'Øresund community' and frames the Øresund in those terms: an open, but paradoxically exclusionary space in which the only way to survive is to risk one's life. Kim Bodnia plays a nameless character who is a warden of the nature reserve on Saltholm, the Danish island situated right in the middle of the Øresund strait. Yasmine Garbi, also the writer of the screenplay, plays a pregnant refugee, a fugitive on the run from the Danish police who are trying to deport her to Russia. She is accused of being a Chechen terrorist and the film begins with her attempting to flee to Sweden by stowing away on a small rowboat which the man, Bodnia's character, rows back to Saltholm. She begs Bodnia's character to help her escape and cross the (maritime) border into Sweden. At first, he is sceptical and wary of the woman's intentions, but eventually offers to bring her to Sweden by boat. They set off, and the film ends on an ambiguous note as the boat stops in the middle of the strait while a police helicopter approaches, and the final shot is of the refugee swimming in desperation, presumably towards the coast of Sweden.

The film highlights the 'other' spaces of the Øresund strait that have been overshadowed by the visual dominance of the bridge. In this case, the bridge excludes safe passage for those who do not fit into the prescribed ideal of the transnational citizen who makes these privileged crossings. The space of the bridge is framed as a site of power, accessible only to 'legitimate' transnationals and policed by authorities.

Occasionally, the camera catches the sunlight, blinding the viewer's perspective while, in the fuzzy distance, the bridge is just about visible (Figure 2). Visible – but out of reach to those who do not legitimately belong to the region. The artistic imagination of the island as a liminal space is emphatic in the film and acts as a mirror of the woman's uncertain identity as a fugitive/terrorist/refugee, and the man's ambivalent character. The film directly problematises the notion of the *ideal* Øresund community and criticises the repeated characterisation of the Øresund citizen as either Dane or Swede, and which excludes others of foreign origin or of different political and economic situations, as Fredrik Nilsson notes in his study of 'insiders' and 'outsiders' in the regional imaginary (2000).

THIS IMAGE CAN BE VIEWED BY [clicking here](#)

Figure 2: Screenshot from *Out* (dir. Daniel Dencik, 2006).

The framing of the woman's position is a clear and direct reference to the contemporary 'problem' of asylum seekers, refugees, and (chiefly non-Nordic) immigrants — the transnational groups of people who are part of the region, but who exist in the gaps between states and cultures. I read *Out* as a critical reflection on the suspicion, mistrust, and resentment that would have been palpable in popular discourse at the time of the film's making, considering the so-called 'refugee crisis' in Europe around 2015-16, when border controls were reinstated on the Øresund bridge to stem the flow of refugees from Denmark moving to Sweden. The Øresund imaginary is thus a problem highlighted in the film: how can a transnational region with very different national policies cooperate on and deal with the topic of asylum seekers? Does the imagined community of the region want to develop into an 'exclusionary community', as Nilsson suggests (2000:198), which privileges the notion of an idealised ethno-transnational elite while ignoring those that do not fall within the Danish-Swedish-Nordic nexus? The film *Out* thus rejects the notion of the Øresund region and its imagined community as a utopian, essentialist given.

That the film is set in the maritime centre of the Øresund region is important, as the marine imagery reflects important ideas about real and imagined borders, as well as national and social identity. Instead of a symbol of borderless collaboration and integration in a shared space, this body of water registers the exclusionary nature of the Øresund rhetoric and moral indeterminacy in particular political contexts. In the short film, there is a brief visual reference to the similar journeys made by Danish Jews who were smuggled to Sweden to escape the Nazis. The film conjures the layers of historical and imaginary border-crossings across the Sound, of people caught in the interstices between legitimacy and illegitimacy. By highlighting these real and imagined stories of risk, the film problematises the economic, political, and psychological realities of the notion of a 'borderless' Øresund region and community.

CONCLUSION

The two texts described here are but a drop in the Øresund strait when it comes to visual representations of the region. Yet, I argue that they are essential actants in the larger network of relations that form the Øresund regioscape. I have not delved into the media production contexts nor the film-political dynamics from which the two texts were produced, yet this short exploration shows how film and television are embedded in the region in material and symbolic ways. As part of the larger regioscape, they reflect and refract particular perspectives of the Øresund region and are simultaneously a product of the complex relations between different media and geopolitical entities in a transnational industrial network. Through these audiovisual texts, what is revealed through the visible and invisible traces of these relationships, are the contours of a regional space.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

The photograph on page 12 is by Thomas Arvidsson.