

**“Wonderful Copenhagen” –
From *Olsen Bandens Store Kup* to *Pusher***

“Wonderful, wonderful, Copenhagen,” Danny Kaye sang in 1952 as he frolicked his way through the imaginary Danish setting of the musical *Hans Christian Andersen*. Millions of people recognize this melodic representation of the Danish capitol, and the song’s refrain was immortalized when it was adopted by Copenhagen’s Tourist Board and became the official slogan for the city – “Wonderful Copenhagen.” *Hans Christian Andersen* [the movie] is a good example of how popular culture assists and interferes in the representation of space – in this case, the city of Copenhagen. Films and popular culture in general are important factors in the way that we perceive and understand spaces, and therefore, it is significant to analyze and look critically at the attitudes that these films produce and pass on to the general public. We need to consider what role popular culture plays in what Arjun Appadurai refers to in *Modernity at Large* as “the production of locality” – with locality defined “(as a structure of feeling, a property of social life, and an ideology of situated community)” (189)?

In this paper, my main interest concerns the effects that globalization has had upon the representation of the city of Copenhagen, and I will address this development through a study of two Danish movies [*Olsen Bandens Store Kup* (1972) and *Pusher* (1996)] that I believe represent distinct periods in the creation of Copenhagen as imagined space. Both movies follow characters that function at the periphery of “normal” society, but they deal

with this social confrontation in radically different ways – one maintaining and strengthening the illusion of a homogeneous city, and the other emphasizing more fragmented subject-space relations.

I will connect my analysis to Appadurai’s discussion of the production of locality, which he centers around three main points: His first point concerns the nation-state and how “locality for the modern nation-state is either a site of nationally appropriated nostalgias, celebrations, and commemorations or a necessary condition of the production of nationals” (190); his second argument deals with the rise of new diasporic flows that cause a “steady erosion of the capability of [...] cities to control the means of their own self-reproduction” (193); thirdly, he mentions electronic and virtual flows, and the idea that “electronic mediation of community in the diasporic world creates a more complicated, disjunct, hybrid sense of local subjectivity” (A197).

With Appadurai’s structural framework as my inspiration, I will address the difficulties that are connected to the production and experience of locality, as the world becomes increasingly de-territorialized. How do we produce and understand locality in a transnational world where the mobility of finances, information, and people has shattered a homogeneous conception of locality? To answer this question, I will begin by turning to the not too distant past and a time when the production of locality appeared to be somewhat less complex.

Olsen Banden

Olsen Banden was a commercially successful feature length series in 13 episodes, released between 1967 and 1981. The original cast was reunited in 1998 for one last film

that became a somewhat problematic attempt to resurrect an ancient idea. The death of the director [Tom Hedegaard] during the shooting, as well as one of the original ‘gang’ members [Poul Bundgaard], further complicated the final product that never managed to bring back the old magic of the previous films. It was a commercial success due to the media hype, but the last *Olsen Banden* showed, more than anything else, that the *Olsen Banden* concept had died out a long time ago and could not be resurrected. The time of 1998 was no longer suited for *Olsen Banden*, and the box office success was more of an indication of the public’s desire for nostalgia than any real sign of quality in the movie. The audience wanted to return to the time of 1972 when the city of Copenhagen was imagined as radically different, but the film proved that Copenhagen of the present could not contain the old *Olsen Banden* discourse in any meaningful way. *Olsen Banden* was unique in its day because of its understanding of and connection to society, but it proved impossible to reestablish this connection in any important way. The stage of Copenhagen in 1998 had become too complex and diverse for the kind of social commentary that *Olsen Banden* utilized, which was centered round a pleasantly homogeneous conception of the city and nation. Essentially, *Olsen Banden’s* last endeavor did not surmount to much else than a cinematic escape back in time to a mythical Copenhagen where people only cursed in Danish and crime was harmless. The modern city that provided the backdrop for the reunion of *Olsen Banden* was no longer able to sustain the static and closed narrative pattern that was *Olsen Banden’s* trademark.

In 1968 when the first *Olsen Banden* was released, the effects of the global flows of money, labor, and information to Denmark were of much less concern than they are today. More guest workers and immigrants were starting to appear, but the sight of a non-

Caucasian individual in the streets of Copenhagen had not yet become an integral part of everyday life. Yet there was an emerging public awareness of the increasing presence of ‘foreign’ elements in Denmark, which a comical moment in *Olsen Bandens Store Kup* makes reference to (in a scene that has no direct connection to the overall plot): A presumed guest worker is being questioned by the police officer. The guest worker shows the officer pictures of his *very* large family while speaking in a foreign language [not subtitled]. The only word that the officer can recognize is “arbejdstilladelse” [working permit], and it is interesting to note how this scene, before the immigration issue became a hot topic, uses of a problematic discourse that still figures among public opinion today – categorizing immigrants as laughable objects, with large families, and limited intelligence.

Denmark and Copenhagen looked and probably felt like a very homogeneous place around the time of 1972, which the first scene of *Olsen Bandens Store Kup* testifies to: A series of shots from famous places in Copenhagen show us that the city is mysteriously empty of people. We get an aerial view of *Rådhuspladsen* (the always busy main square in front of Copenhagen’s City Hall) without a soul present. The reason for this peculiar emptiness is the favorite Danish pastime – soccer. There is a national game between Denmark and its archrival Sweden on television. (National soccer games still attract large audiences, but one should keep in keep in mind that Denmark did not get another national television station until 1987, and therefore, the sense of unity must have felt even greater in 1972 when everyone watched the same shows on television.) The nation’s occupation with soccer frames the beginning of *Olsen Bandens Store Kup*, as the gang takes advantage of the empty streets to make a heist at a former soccer player’s house, while he

of course watches the game. The heist is unsuccessful and Egon – the gang’s mastermind – is thrown in jail, which is where all 14 episodes begin – Egon is let out of the great door of the jailhouse, and he is welcomed back by his cozy companions, who wave little Danish flags in his honor. The soccer intro-scene from *Olsen Bandens Store Kup* is an excellent example of the national feeling of shared community that the entire *Olsen Banden* series depicts.

In *Olsen Banden*’s Copenhagen the sun always shines, and the gang’s adventures always take place in the summer. “Copenhagen” means “Downtown Copenhagen,” or the Copenhagen that the tourist brochures try to sell as “Wonderful Copenhagen.” The locations of the city shots are selected to make visible famous and beautiful landmarks like Børsen, Gefionspringvandet, or the winding spire on top of Fredens Kirke. The people of the city are united through the national game of soccer, commentated by Gunnar “Nu” Hansen, who became synonymous with *the* voice that commentated national sports on television due to the monopoly of “DR” (Denmark’s Radio). This united and homogeneous depiction of the city (and the nation) is repeatedly used throughout the whole series. In *Olsen Bandens Store Kup*, the gang uses a typical Danish object like the hotdog stand (*pølsevogn*) as a prop in their big heist. They always plan their robberies over 3 Grønne Tuborg (traditionally, the preferred beer of the working class), and Kjeld’s son’s confirmation is approaching, which is an identity shaping milestone for the adolescent Dane within the national consciousness. In another scene, the gang evokes the imaginary Danish idyll from a famous tourist poster when they release a duck and her ducklings onto the street to delay the police, and all these national

markers attest to *Olsen Banden's* principal affirmation of the homogeneous nation and city.

Appadurai writes of nation-states, that they “have their special sites of sacredness, their special tests of loyalty and treachery, their special measures of compliance and disorder” (190), and *Olsen Banden* always remains in compliance with the order, and by doing so, it also helps maintain the centrally desired order. *Olsen Banden* was a film series for everyone in the genre of “folkekomedie” (folk comedy), which in itself is a problematic concept, as it presupposes the notion of a unified folk. *Olsen Banden's* narrative role as social outsiders is only a feeble social critique, as they always return to the same starting point. They are static characters that live on the social edge of society, but ultimately, they seem comfortable enough with the status quo. *Olsen Banden* functions at the social periphery, but they have to submit to the regulated social norms, in order not to alienate the average middleclass audience.

To engage the mainstream audience, *Olsen Banden* is centered around typical middleclass yearnings and grudges. The gang always steals from the rich, and the legal and fiscal authorities are presented as ridiculous and incompetent. The target audience is the average low to middle-income family unit that feels like they pay too much in tax and looks with suspicion at people in positions of authority. In *Olsen Bandens Store Kup*, the gang steals tax-return money from a money transport, which does not upset the audience because the main purpose is to expose and mock the authorities, and the audience knows that the gang's crimes never succeed. The loot from the tax heist ends up in the hands of an anonymous individual, who then leaves the country – the asocial element disappears and good riddance! *Olsen Banden* reinforces a sense of solidarity among the ‘common’

people, as well as skepticism toward the people who are better off and stand out of the egalitarian 'Danish' ideology. The characters never achieve a vertical social ascent, as that would set them apart from the crowd, and audience identification would be lost. The place of Kjeld and Yvonne's small back alley townhouse is another important fixture in this identification process, as the gang's motivation is firmly grounded in middleclass fantasies about a nice house in the suburbs and charter vacation trips to Mallorca. But, one scene from *Olsen Bandens Store Kup* stands out in connection with the idea of home and national belonging: To escape the police and rival criminals, the gang gets a temporary house close to the airport, but while they are away, their regular home is vandalized, and eventually, the house by the runway falls apart in the powerful turbulence from a passing aircraft. Symbolically, the mobility and ascent that the aircraft suggests destroys the concept of home, thus establishing change as undesirable and dangerous.

By now, I have established *Olsen Banden's* depiction of the city and nation as cemented in homogeneity and innocence. *Olsen Banden* functions within an imagined epic past that is characterized by its unity and resistance to change. Essentially, the plot of all 14 episodes never changed, and if you look at a film like *Pusher* from 1996, you get a sense of why the old *Olsen Banden* recipe did not work very well in the environment around its reunion in 1998. The question is, if *Pusher*, as a violent and gritty contrast to the tranquility and innocence of *Olsen Banden*, managed to frame Copenhagen in a more convincing way?

Pusher

Pusher's Copenhagen is spatially different from *Olsen Banden's* Copenhagen, as we move from the city center to the neighborhoods that surround the inner city. We move away from the Copenhagen of the tourist brochure to the 'real' Copenhagen where people live and shop and go about their daily business. The camera follows Frank through the streets like a silent witness and depicts a Copenhagen that is radically different from what we see in *Olsen Banden*. The background music has changed from melodic riverside jazz to loud and heavy rock music, the weather is cold and gray, and the Danish vernacular is repeatedly mixed with English utterances – *Fuck dig, etc!* Actually, the locality of Copenhagen seems to be of little importance to the plot that could have been imagined in any larger European city. It is not cinematographically emphasized, by displaying famous landmarks, that Copenhagen is the setting, and the imagined city that is "Wonderful Copenhagen" has nothing to do with the space that Frank lives in. Instead, Frank's Copenhagen seems to challenge the discourse of "Wonderful Copenhagen" by avoiding the spatial reference points that have achieved a fixed meaning in the public's consciousness over time.

Frank's city is multiethnic: His drug connection is from Yugoslavia, and Denmark is not playing Sweden in soccer, but dealing drugs to Swedes on the street. The narcotic underworld that Frank is a part of is multinational, and as opposed to *Olsen Banden*, crime is serious and has consequences that are life threatening. Frank's criminal lifestyle is not harmlessly cyclical, but continuously descending toward more violence and isolation. Frank is a hunted and haunted individual whose relations to his friends and the world in general have gone awry. He is under intense pressure from all the characters that

surround him, and ultimately, he is left alone, in the dark, with no friends to help him out. There would be no Benny and Kjeld waving Danish flags at him if he came out of prison, and the image of the city has turned from a homogeneous one, to one that aligns the city with human isolation. Frank beats his best friend to a bleeding pulp, and in the final scene, his 'girlfriend' leaves him to an inevitable violent demise. Frank has no-one to turn to, nor any place to seek refuge.

The cohesion that is expressed in the depiction of the city in *Olsen Banden* has disappeared in *Pusher*, where Frank's excluded city experience prevails over the unifying city experience that frames *Olsen Banden*. In *Olsen Banden*, the gang always has the cozy comfort of Kjeld and Yvonne's home to return to. This home environment is ruled over by Yvonne – Kjeld's temperamental wife – and the gang has to submit to her whims whenever they are there. The family unit, with the woman in control, is the gang's link to normality, maintaining and reaffirming their connection to regular middleclass values. This display of community and belonging is markedly absent in *Pusher*, or substituted with dubious alternatives. Frank's only contact with his mother is characterized by the large gap that exists between their conceptions of reality, as she tries to help him out financially. His violent and abusive relationship to his 'girlfriend' is only maintained through drugs. Women are significantly non-present in *Pusher's* gangster scenario, which is another indication of the disruption of the fixed social patterns that are characteristic of *Olsen Banden*.

Unlike the televised transmissions in *Olsen Banden*, the flow of information that Frank receives only enhances his isolation – he is surrounded by information and different means of communication, but he lacks meaningful personal human contact. He

does not watch television like an engaged soccer fan, but like an indifferent and passive subject who has no opinion about the events that unfold on the screen. The cinematic diary that frames the events of the movie is a gradual intensification of Frank's isolation and stress, until he reaches his breaking point, which is where the movie leaves us. At the end, Frank seems to have no alternatives left. He is utterly alone in the darkness of the city that has gradually closed its net around him. The city has a strangling and isolating effect on Frank, who cannot keep up with the intensity of the life that he has chosen for himself.

Frank breaks down in a global city that is characterized by "spatial disjuncture" (194). At times, the Danish capitol resembles cities like Los Angeles or New York, as *Pusher* adopts and transfers the gangster genre into a Danish context. *Pusher* is a crossover film that borrows from Hollywood and a foreign tradition, and in that sense, the subjectivity of Frank is framed by the creational process of the movie – *Pusher* being a product of transnational flows that redefine the concept of locality. *Pusher* adopts a progressive hybrid form and proves how the production of locality has become increasingly complex.

In conclusion, it is evident from these two examples that it has become increasingly difficult to produce a locality tied to the notion of a homogeneous nation. Referring back to Appadurai's three main points, the journey from *Olsen Banden* to *Pusher* exemplifies how increased global flows have necessitated a new understanding of local subjectivity. *Pusher* imagines a city that is hectic and full of danger, whereas *Olsen Banden's* city is safe and static. Neither film claims to present an image of Copenhagen that is truthful, but if you look at the production of locality as a dialectical process that both "constitute

and require contexts” (186), it is interesting to note how the context has changed. The once homogeneous metropolis that gathered around soccer games and cold beer has given way to a heterogeneous city that changes rapidly and seems to create uneasiness its inhabitants. Naturally, the preoccupation with an individual’s experience of alienation within the labyrinth of the modern city is nothing new, and it has been addressed numerous times throughout history. But the generative social processes have changed and now work on a wider global level. *Pusher* is imagined in a transnational world where the traditional Danish framework of identification that *Olsen Banden* continuously refers to has become intermingled with global economic, human, and cultural flows that necessitate a new cultural discourse, determined by fluidity and openness. Frank is imagined in correspondence with the idea of a new hybrid identity, but *Pusher* does not manage to portray the intricate complexities of this new modern identity. Instead, Frank’s character ends up fixed in the degenerative role of a stereotypical American gangster. Still, his persona makes more sense to a contemporary audience because he is constructed within a modern global discourse, whereas *Olsen Banden*’s dated and closed narrative clashes with it. *Pusher* breaks down the imaginary construct of “Wonderful Copenhagen” that *Olsen Banden* played a determining part in creating. This process does not entail, as *Pusher* may seem to suggest, that Copenhagen has become less “wonderful.” It still is, but its wonderfulness does not depend on cultural homogeneity any longer.

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