Why Do “Crime Scenes” Fascinate Us?

• An argument about *Nightwatch*
• Background story
  – Danish Cinema
  – Ole Bornedal (1958- )
• *Nightwatch* as crime scene
  – What is a crime scene?
  – What tools can we use to figure out how films represent crime scenes?
• Using *Nightwatch* to learn to use some tools
  – Some Sources of Fascination
  – Opening sequence
  – Looking for Patterns
  – Problems
• Methodological Conclusion
Danish Cinema
Since the 1980s

Lars von Trier (1956- )
Elements of Danish Cinema Since the 1980s

- **Art**
  - Anti-narrative cinema
  - National expression

- **Success**
  - *Pelle the Conquerer*
  - *Babette’s Feast*
  - Lars von Trier

- **Money**
  - Danish Film Institute (DFI)
  - Popular Successes

- **Dogma ’95**
  - Cinema of limitations
The Idiots (von Trier, 1998)
Ole Bornedal (1959-)

- Comparative outsider
- Writer and Director of *Nattevagten*
  - 1994
  - 1998
- Bornedal’s style merges classical Hollywood narrative and elements of Danish art-film tradition
  - Plot-driven films
  - Director’s intention may explain narrative links, when plot cannot
- Bornedal’s films
  - *Charlot and Charlotte* (1996)
  - *Dybt vand* (1999)
  - *Dina* (2001)
- Combination of relative psychological depth and tight narrative helps us see how crime scenes are constructed
What is a Crime Scene?

- Representation of an “act of violence”
- “Object, manner, and means” (Aristotle)
- Act of violence is infinitely malleable through alteration of the quadrangle

Representation of act of violence

Exosed Light (Medium)

Boredal & Co.

Mean (Codes)

Steel (Object)

Manner (Communication)

Us
What Tools Can We Use?

• What is the “manner” in which a film represents the act of violence?
• By studying a film’s formal codes, we can dissect its manner to better understand its depiction of crime scenes
• Formal codes
  – Cinematography (type of shot, angle, movement, lens, composition)
  – Lighting
  – Mise-en-scene
  – Transitions (editing)
  – Sound
Nightwatch Opening Sequence
The opening shots of the film introduce the motif of *unmotivated* camera movement through hallways. (The camera’s perspective is not attributed to any character.)
After initial introduction to apartment, close-ups begin to single out details, which will reappear later in the film. The phone will become a key prop when Martin is suspected of murder.
Close-ups at the dinner table provide a quick and intimate introduction to the main characters in the film -- Martin and Jens
Kalinka and Lotta are shot in medium-long (plain américain) and medium shots, indicating they will figure less prominently in the film than Martin and Jens, who get the close-ups.
Close-up on the television featuring an interview with Inspector Peter Wörmer, indicating his future significance to the story.
The close up on spilled wine leads to a scream -- get ready for more frightening reactions
The Manner of the Crime Scene

• The film “trains us” to view it by introducing from the beginning a cluster of techniques, or, codes
• These codes will cue our expectations throughout the film -- invite hypotheses
• Modulations alter the representation of the crime scene, and we respond in various ways
• Multiple functions of these codes
Multiple Function of Crime Scenes

- Opening sequence of “worldmaking” also introduces key narrative elements
- Messy apartment’s objects introduce major themes
  - Martin’s job
  - Lotta’s job
  - Kalinka’s studies
  - Characters’ attitudes
  - Youth and responsibility
  - Class position
  - Murder of prostitutes
  - Apartment and friends
  - Rites of passage and celebrations
Patterns in the Scene

- Apartment ↔ Hospital
  - Hallways at hospital
  - Rooms at home
  - Nightwatchman’s room
- Camera movement
  - Long shots in hallways
    - Dangerous rooms
    - Steadicam in hospital rooms
  - Static cameras and overhead shots in safe rooms
    - Bedroom
    - Nightwatchman’s office
- Types of Shot
  - Long shots down hallways
    - Doors
    - Windows
  - Medium and close ups at home
- Lighting
  - Fluorescent hallways
  - Softer light in rooms
  - Natural light and candles at home

What is down the hall, behind the door?

What are those concealed objects?
Close-ups, static cameras, and warm lighting make the bedroom safe and warm, situating it in contrast to the long shots that make the hallways stark, fluorescent and frightening.
Hallways and Moving Cameras
-- With Steadicam Inside
Hypothesis and Fascination

- One way of creating fascination is to use codes that solicit hypotheses by viewers about what must happen next.
- Three codes that prompt hypothesis formation:
  - Effects in search of causes
    - Steadicam
    - Ambiguous motivation
  - Crosscutting to inform viewer
    - Wine bottle
    - Murder of Joyce
    - What must happen next?
  - Identification with characters
    - On-screen presence
    - Point of view
    - Characterization and motivation
    - Problems of identification
      - Gender
      - Misogyny

What is in that tub?

Fascinating silence - but what about the cords?
Can Overuse of A Code Undermine Its Communicative Function?
Notice the contrasts created by shot length, camera movement, composition, and lighting that work to distinguish the hallways and the nightwatchman’s room.
A Methodological Conclusion

- Examine key details—like the opening sequence
- Map key sequences
- Identify issues and patterns
  - What codes are used?
  - How do they solicit hypotheses?
- Venture some hypotheses
- Look for problems and points of criticism